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BOOK REVIEWS

Neufeind M., J. O'Reilly, and F. Ranft (Eds.) (2018), *Work in The Digital Age*, London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd.

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“Work in the Digital Age” (hereinafter: WIDA) is a collective endeavor involving fifty-nine contributors that springs from the collaboration between three international think tanks, i.e. Policy Network (London), Das Progressive Zentrum (Berlin), and the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (Brussels). Edited by Max Neufeind, Jacqueline O’Reilly, and Florian Ranft, WIDA brings together the analysis of grand themes of digitalization and zooming-in country case studies.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I concentrates on macro manifestations of digitalization– e.g. mounting automation, robotization, big data, Artificial Intelligence (AI), the rise of the platform economy – and reflects on their socioeconomic implications. Part II focuses on country case studies, which apply macro elements to specific national contexts. Countries are grouped based on their degree of digitalization, i.e. low, medium and high digital density. Additionally, three non-European cases are covered, namely Canada, the USA, and India.

WIDA does not conceal its political connotation: the standpoint is progressive; the reference to social democracy explicit from the preface. The objective is to help devel-

op an effective narrative through which to communicate such values and overcome “the current frustration of social democracy” (p. xvii). The future (of work) poses challenges but brings opportunities too. This book sets out to tackle the former, seize the latter and catalyze a revival of the social democratic ethos.

To review a collection of over fifty essays is no easy task and forces the reviewer to make tough choices. Accordingly, I will not be able to cover each essay contained in WIDA. The risk of merely listing arguments without offering critical insights on them would be too high. To avoid such an inconvenience, I will identify a number of grand themes that emerge from the book and connect them to as many essays as possible. The overarching goal is to extrapolate *files rouges* from this distinctive collection of scholarly pieces and discuss them critically.

Five grand themes related to work in the digital age and, more broadly, digitalization emerge from WIDA: i) The debate over the revolutionary purview of digitalization ii) Automation and robotization processes; iii) The rise of platform/gig work; iv) The centrality of data; and v) The role of trade unions in the digital age. The entire discussion rests on a shared conception of the present phase of technological change, i.e. digitalization is not a force of nature; society and, more narrowly, politics can shape its impact.

A point first worth raising that emerges from WIDA concerns the revolutionary (or not) purview of the present phase of technological change. Schwab (2016) famously coined the term “Fourth Industrial Revolution” to depict transformations occurring across industries, shaping societal relations, and impacting on political institutions with unprecedented size, speed, and scope. Such a “fourth industrialism” generates unjustified techno panic in two respects, Atkinson contends. Firstly, the next technological revolution (which will be the sixth, not the fourth) has not yet commenced; it is to come in the next decade and will be grounded in AI, robotics, nanotechnology and biotechnology. In the meantime, the global economy is doomed to stagnation. Secondly, there is no evidence, Atkinson maintains, to argue that the current technological transformations are occurring at a faster speed than in the past. Like previous ones, the next technological revolution will take at least three decades to produce transformative effects. Atkinson’s point discourages applying too strict a definition on digitalization, as a rapidly developing phenomenon may likely depart from rigid categorizations thereby rendering them misleading, or simply flawed.

Whilst not concerned with the label Revolution, other authors invoke a cautious approach to digitalization. Arnold and colleagues openly refrain from sharing apocalyptic scenarios; Petropoulos warns against the risks of adopting rushed policy solutions based on premature understanding of the phenomenon. Soete (p.35), furthermore,

notes that “there seems to be a tendency to overestimate both the speed and the impact of the new technologies associated with the fourth industrial revolution”. On the other hand, he underlines risks stemming from global digital platforms fostering winners-take-all dynamics that result in de-facto monopolies (Parker et al. 2016; Srnicek, 2016; Haskel and Westlake, 2017). Such dynamics, Soete (p.37) states, open up “dramatic, near endless, opportunities ‘for creative destruction’ by potentially reducing significantly barriers to entry”. Digital capitalism, he argues, both leans towards monopoly and diminishes barriers to entry. This proves quite contradictory in fact. While barriers to entry do decrease in non-dominated market spaces, winners-take-all dynamics make them skyrocket in established market segments. Thus, room for “creative destruction” only improves when a dominant player is absent. Soete’s piece overlooks this important distinction.

Automation and robotization of production processes is a second theme of WIDA. Discussions on these matters have been intense and at times divisive in the literature. Optimistic accounts (e.g. Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014) have emerged in parallel to less rosy pictures underlining risks of soaring unemployment (Frey and Osborne, 2017). WIDA seeks to make its way in this cornucopia of studies. Following a general line running through the whole volume, Arnold and colleagues distance themselves from apocalyptic views that depict automation – and, by extension, digitalization - as a force of nature humans will succumb to. By contrast, they stress that effects of the digital transformation will depend on how profits from it will be distributed and deployed. Digitalization, in this vein, will not deterministically lead to any specific outcome. One should be routinely cautious assessing the impact of automation and robotization on employment. As all tasks in a job description are not subject to the same degree of automation, the job description approach (Frey and Osborne, 2017) risks overestimating the amount of job losses. The task-based approach captures such nuances and indeed finds less troubling evidence in terms of job losses (Arntz, Gregory, and Zierahn, 2016). Moreover, the job-creating – as opposed to job-saving - effects of technology should be taken in due account as well.

In terms of automation processes, Arnold and colleagues point to two upcoming structural changes. First, jobs in education and IT will become increasingly valuable, while manufacturing jobs where machines are more widely employed will suffer the most. Second, and correspondingly, changes in skills requirements and qualifications will occur (Degryse, 2017). Transferable, interdisciplinary and social skills will take the lion’s share. Skill formation, especially in the form of education and lifelong learning is a well-documented question throughout the volume (see Bailey and Harrop; O’Riain and Healy; Vicente). Importantly, such a focus on education and training does however

not mean we are going towards an across-the-board upskilled labor market structure. Rather, marked polarizing dynamics are at play, meaning that the low-end of the workforce will not be able to access nor even need lifelong training, while middling-job workers that have seen their occupations automatized would require re-skilling programs to re-enter the labor market. As Palier puts it (p.251), “polarization of jobs is constructing a new form of class divide, and the emergence of a widening gap between winners and losers in the knowledge-based economy” (see also Autor and Dorn, 2013; Goos, Manning, and Salomons, 2014). Kremer and Went put forward an “Inclusive robot agenda” to counter such adverse socioeconomic impacts of digitalization. Their agenda centers on a humans-with-machines – instead of human-vs.-machines – approach. Accordingly, work must be organized so that humans and machines are mutually complementary. First, the development of robot applications should be rendered more collaborative, overcoming the current approach where technicians envision and create robots for people that then have to use them. Secondly, typically human skills (e.g. relational capacities) will become more crucial and, therefore, will have to be fostered. In fact this point remains quite nebulous as the authors do not elucidate how exactly this would take place. A third item concerns the so-called ownership of the work, in essence: autonomy or “ownership” arguably boosts productivity. “The question we must ask”, they claim, “is how we can get people and technology working together, and how people can become or continue to be masters of their own work (and of the robot)” (p.148). A final element regards distributional problems that will arise as robots and AI will increasingly be used. Social impacts of the latter must be mitigated through social policy measures addressing workers that would either lose their jobs and/or have to find a new one at a lower income level.

A third building block of WIDA regards new forms of work spawned from digitalization. Here, the discussion revolves around: i) the nature of these allegedly new forms of work, ii) the need for reforming employment regulation, labor law, and social security systems.

Discussions around the newness (or not) of recently emerged digital work have been intense. The question arises: Is digital capitalism disruptive in essence or does it follow well-established and long-lasting trends in the development of capitalism? More precisely, to what extent is it disruptive and to what extent is it a new manifestation of already established trends? Unsurprisingly, answers to such queries differ. The mainstream narrative presents platform work as a job opportunity for flexibility-seeking entrepreneurs willing to manage their (working) life autonomously (Pasquale, 2016). This perspective insists on the innovativeness of platforms. Critics, on the other hand, highlight tight labor controls and deplorable working conditions behind this so-called free-

dom and argue that platforms epitomize longer-lasting trends in capitalist economies such as the mounting flexibilization/precarization of employment contracts, workplace 'fissurization' (Weil, 2014) and workforce casualization and demutualization of responsibilities and risks (De Stefano, 2016; Prassl, 2018). Berg and De Stefano embrace the latter view. According to them, the rise of digital platforms should not be seen as part of a fourth industrial revolution, but, instead, as a form of "21st century work rebranded". "'Gig work'", the authors state, "needs to be considered along with trends of casualization of the labour market in developed countries such as the spread of zero-hour contracts and on-call work [...] These forms of work – in turn – closely resemble casual labour arrangements that were typical at the outset of industrialization and are still a prominent feature of labour markets in developing countries" (p. 180). Such perspective conceives of platform capitalism as a new form of pre-existing trends in capitalism.

While both perspectives offer strengths and weaknesses, framing the debate dichotomously is constrictive in that it risks obfuscating nuances that exist between the two extreme poles (new and old). On the one hand, the mainstream narrative tends to overemphasize the newness of such phenomenon thereby leading to incorrect (policy) interpretations of it. On the other, Berg and De Stefano argument is of great help in putting current transformations into perspective, yet it tends to downplay disruptive elements in platform capitalism. The platforms' reliance on the Internet is, I submit, one of them. As Soete points out, the Internet has caused a stark reduction in transactional costs enabling (not only) platform companies to develop quasi-monopolistic market strategies. This comes at a price for workers. As platforms' market power rises, it becomes increasingly difficult to regulate their activity and to ensure the provision of labor and social rights to their workers. Thus, the newness of platform capitalism lies in the means - rather than in the end, i.e. profit - which enables the virtually borderless expansion of such platforms.

A second dimension falling under the present theme pertains to challenges posed by digitalization to employment regulation, labor law and social policy. In his essay, Crouch points to the extensive use of non-employment contracts and the consequent "erosion and perhaps collapse of the concept of the employee as a figure with associated rights and duties" (p.191). He aptly observes that to counteract such tendency "the key concept needs to become the use that an organisation makes of labour, rather than its formal relationship to it" (p.193). To make such a transformation happen, Crouch advocates for a per capita tax on 'the use of labour' – on top of social insurance contributions. Such a tax would aim to minimize firms' incentives to use non-employment contracts to circumvent responsibilities. To this end, firms providing actual formal employment contracts would be fully exempt from paying this tax. Firms us-

ing non-employment contracts but providing benefits to workers such as training and health and safety would be exempt too.

In their chapters, Huws and colleagues, and Palier reflect upon challenges for social security systems (see also Emmenegger et al. 2012) As other authors have noted (Crouch; Berg and De Stefano), platform workers do not fit rigidly defined categories such as employees and the self-employed, often being left in institutional limbos which exacerbate socioeconomic inequality. As a result, current social security systems are in urgent need of reform, bogus self-employment being one of the most pressing issues. Palier identifies three potential, rather classical adaptive paths: Universal Basic Income (UBI) and similar measures (Liberal), Reforming the existing social contribution mechanisms (Bismarckian), and Flexicurity (Scandinavian). While such scenarios are no more than expectations, they suggest the importance of national institutional specificities in shaping policy responses to digitalization.

A fourth theme springing from WIDA is the centrality of data. In his chapter, Hofheinz concentrates on what he calls “the data-driven economy”, namely an economic system where data play an ever-larger role both in the logic of production and selling. Data will trigger, he argues, profound social and political consequences, which will likely lead to winners and losers of digitalization. To ward this gloomy picture off, Hofheinz maintains that data should be increasingly shared through the creation of ever-larger pools that would serve as a catalyzer for social and economic innovations. In this vein, sharing data would increasingly be a common-interest matter driven by positive incentives. The State should be playing a critical role in fostering such data-sharing mechanisms and make them socially rewarding. This would entail, in Hofheinz’s words (p.97), “greater state-led social protection rather than greater requirements for social commitments from private-sector companies”, which have to face too high non-wage labor costs that fundamentally hinder their competitiveness. On the other hand, however, Hofheinz (p.95) notes that “the current wave of post-truth politics is a dangerous lurch backwards” in this respect. In light of this, one wonders how a data-sharing-oriented future can be assumed. International politics is going anywhere but sharing, and the creation of large-scale data pools – of which the author does not provide tangible examples - requires political will as a necessary condition. Even where there are no marked protectionist policies in place, State cooperation on innovation-generating data remains minimal. Gomez and Gomez, focusing on Canada, offer food for thought in this regard. In order for it to keep riding the wave of digitalization, they argue, a “pragmatic nationalism” should be espoused, namely an approach “that keeps Canada open to the world while at the same time seeking to preserve what is good and unique about the

country” (p.508). The question to be explored is to what extent a pragmatic nationalistic approach can be reconciled with Hofheinz’s data-sharing future.

The issue of trade union amounts to a unifying theme in WIDA. A renewed unionism is invoked throughout the book as a tool to guarantee a socially just transition towards new technological frontiers (Crouch; Doellgast; Jolly). Growing power asymmetries between employers and workers fostered by digitalization call, according to Crouch, for a revived unionism. With managerial control constantly rising on a par with the mounting use of non-employment work arrangements, unions need to redefine their role to remain significantly representative. As well as bargaining working conditions and wage increases, unions will also have to improve their ability to i) accommodate collective and individual members’ grievances, and ii) represent non-employees’ interests. In essence, they will have to transcend the distinction between employees and other workers. An important step in this direction, Crouch argues, would be to resume the old craft unions’ mode of town organization, at least partly leaving behind the Fordist heritage of large-workplace-based unionism (see also Zanoni). With a view to reinvigorating unions, Doellgast supports the extension of collective agreements “not only within traditional industries, but across companies, their subcontractors and staffing agencies” (p.206). Such an extension towards previously omitted work categories amounts to a necessary condition for unions to build the kind of wide-ranging solidarity that enhances unions’ power. In a similar vein, Jolly calls for a “new form of social dialogue” (p. 210), which instead of focusing on specific topics and following rigid timelines, would be able to increasingly deal with “a number of cross-cutting issues such as jobs, skills, quality of working life and personal data” (p. 210). In this regard, Söderqvist proposes “the creation of a social-partner-owned institution where digital regulatory standards can be developed with more holistic perspectives, closer to market forces, so platform unions and national regulators develop novel digital regulatory standards in cooperation” (p.302).

All in all, WIDA promotes an active and positive role for unions in the digital age. Under current circumstances, however, there is a risk that this remains a line in the social democratic wish list. With trade unions having lost thousands of members across western democracies (as well as substantial portions of social legitimacy as a result) and with radical change having taken place in labor markets and regulation, it is unlikely that unions will be able to play an active and positive role in the digital economy, all other factors held constant. It is precisely because unions have substantially weakened that it is hard to see them playing a central role in the future unless broader transformations i.e. beyond-unions shifts that concern the current form of capitalism, occur. Only an improved equilibrium between capital and labor could pave the way for unions

to become game changers. At present, it is difficult to imagine unions re-calibrating the relationship between capital and labor. Such far-reaching changes, however, would unlikely arise in the short term and would need strong triggers to be activated. With its critical stance of the existing capitalist growth model, the environmental issue could conceivably act as a catalyzer for broader reconsideration of the relation between capital and labor thereby fostering (re)new(ed) societal arrangements where unions could play a more central role.

Nevertheless, the relation between the environment and digital transformation remains a second-order matter in WIDA. In her chapter, Schor deals with digital capitalism's carbon footprint by showing that the so-called platform economy is no more environmentally friendly than traditional industries. In fact, as lower prices create more demand, cheap accommodation, for instance, increase mileage traveled and quantity of trips. Similarly, evidence shows that in the US ride-hailing platforms are actually moving people away from lower-carbon modes of transportation. Such scant consideration of the environment represents a shortcoming in a book devoted to socioeconomic implications of work in the digital age. Recently, the environmental matter has emerged as a salient societal and political issue. Major public demonstrations have demanded radical reform of the current profit-at-all-costs economic growth model. As the rethinking of capitalism has huge implications for work and welfare, the study of the environmental consequences of digitalization merits more attention in a volume such as WIDA. Furthermore, gender in the digital age is another key issue that WIDA glaringly overlooks. In their piece, Howcroft and Rubery problematize the relation between gender and the digital transformation, identifying potential gender effects of digitalization and putting forward several policy solutions. The topic, however, remains insufficiently explored throughout the volume, which amounts to a significant limitation, given that (digital) technology intersects with gender-imbalanced societal relations.

In conclusion, I have explored five *filis rouges* crosscutting WIDA: i) The debate over the revolutionary purview of digitalization ii) Automation and robotization processes; iii) The rise of platform/gig work; iv) The centrality of data; and v) The role of trade unions in the digital age. Discussion on gender as well as environment in the digital age remains problematically marginal. Nonetheless, overall, WIDA remarkably broadens and deepens the debate on the future of work and, more broadly, digitalization. By weaving together grand themes and country cases, WIDA successfully sheds light on the interrelatedness between structural challenges and national socioeconomic and institutional specificities. Such an interaction leads to varieties of digitalization, which amount to a veritable gold mine for social scientists keen to investigate the present

version of the long-standing relation between technology and society. From a sociological perspective, there are several research paths to enter such a mine: the grand themes springing from WIDA are arguably some of the most promising among them.

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