

# THE FUTURE OF WORK

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Prof. Shestakofsky  
University of Pennsylvania

Sociology 041-303  
Spring 2021

## Seminar

Wednesdays, 2:00-5:00pm

## Student Office Hours

Mondays, 3:00-5:00pm

Sign up at: <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/gqrru/>

## **This course will meet online via Zoom**

Zoom link for seminar sessions available on your Canvas Calendar

Zoom link for student office hours available on our course's Canvas homepage

## COURSE OVERVIEW

“Computers and automation have captured man’s imagination. That is to say, like the psychiatrist’s ink blot, they serve the imagination as symbols for all that is mysterious, potential, portentous. For when man is faced with ambiguity, with complex shadows he only partly understands, he rejects that ambiguity and reads meanings into the shadows. And when he lacks the knowledge and technical means to find the real meanings of the shadows, he reads them into the meanings in his own heart and mind, uses them to give external shape to his private hopes and fears. So the ambiguous stimulus, the ink blot, becomes a mirror. When man describes it, he depicts not some external reality, but himself.”

- Herbert Simon, *The Shape of Automation* (1965)

Technological change is a fundamental feature of capitalist economies. The introduction of new machinery transforms production processes; technology influences how employers control workers and how workers evade managerial directives; and innovative products generate new consumer demand.

Throughout the history of industrial capitalism, technology has been an “ink blot”—or, more recently, a “black box”—onto which people project their hopes and fears about how we work and live. To some, technological innovations hold the promise of liberating us from painful or tedious toil, leveling inequalities, elevating our skills, and helping us realize our potential as human beings. To others, technology promises to degrade our experiences of work, alienate us from ourselves and nature, increase inequality, and rob us of our livelihoods.

Today, questions surrounding the relationship between work and technology remain as vital as ever. Software companies are creating new ways of connecting buyers and sellers of labor online. The rise of “big data” and “machine learning” underlie new forms of artificial intelligence and robotics that could have implications for nearly every aspect of work and employment. How do software algorithms affect how employers hire and monitor their workforces? How are technology companies like Uber changing what it means to be an

employee? Or will these questions soon be irrelevant when smart machines take over all of our jobs—a process that could accelerate in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis?

This course draws on sociological research and other perspectives from the social sciences to conceptualize the complex and dynamic relationship between work and technology, in order to shed light on the future of work. Rather than viewing technology as an immutable force that sweeps across societies and leaves social change in its wake, we will examine how the design, implementation, and outcomes of technological change are imbricated in political, economic, and social forces. Using this perspective, we will interrogate distinctions between analytic categories that we often take for granted, such as the “old” and “new” economies, and the “local” and the “global.”

We will begin by examining sociological theories of the labor process and of the social contexts in which work is performed. We will then consider the role of technology in the workplace, building dialogues between our theoretical groundwork and empirical evidence to trace continuities and disjunctures.

### *Course Goals*

- By the end of the course, you will be equipped to interrogate the role of technology in capitalism’s past, understand its relation to our present age of digital disruption, and imagine the possibilities for our uncertain future.
- You will learn how to think sociologically about the power of social context to shape the behavior of individuals.
- Through reading, writing, and speaking with colleagues, you will develop your analytic skills so that you can critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of an intellectual position. You will work to synthesize a variety of research evidence to support a coherent intellectual position.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

This course is organized around close readings of texts, analytic writing, and deliberate thought and discussion. Each of the topics that we study will offer a new lens—indeed, a new language—for viewing and describing the world around us. Just like learning any language, it is impossible to fully grasp the vocabularies of sociology without speaking them! Our seminar setting affords us the opportunity to build our fluency in the texts and concepts covered in the readings through dialogue with one another.

Our general goals for class meetings are threefold. First, we will solidify our comprehension of the core concepts of the course and the arguments presented in our readings. Second, we will hone our skills as critical thinkers, analytical writers, and active discussants. And third, we will develop our sociological imaginations to bring sociology to life in our world and our own lives.

## **Course Texts**

You will find all of our readings in a course reader, available for purchase at Campus Copy Center (3907 Walnut Street). In case they are out of pre-printed course readers when you arrive, please be aware that they may need a little extra time to print and bind your copy on demand.

If you are not on campus or are otherwise unable to visit Campus Copy Center in person, please call Ronald Shapiro, the owner of Campus Copy Center, to have your reader printed and shipped to you. You can reach him directly at (215) 416-6216. Please have a credit card ready to place your order. You can let me know if you have any issues with this arrangement and I will be happy to help.

If for any reason your financial situation makes it difficult for you to purchase a course reader, I urge you to contact [Student Financial Services](#) immediately to find out what support you may be eligible to receive to cover course costs. If they are not able to help you, please contact me and I will make sure that you are able to access the materials you need.

Please note that our reading list may be subject to change as the semester proceeds. This will allow us to modify our readings to adapt to our ongoing discussions to your interests and to track new developments. I will inform you at least a week in advance of any changes to the reading list.

## **Grade Breakdown**

- Classroom Contribution: 20%
- Reading Responses: 20%
- Essay #1: 20%
- Essay #2: 20%
- Essay #3: 20%

Final grades will be calculated on the following basis: Grades ending with a 0-2.99 will be assigned a “minus” grade (e.g. 80-82.99 = B-). Grades ending with a 3-6.99 will be assigned an unmodified letter grade (e.g. 83-86.99 = B). Grades ending with a 7-9.99 will be assigned a “plus” grade (e.g. 87-89.99 = B+). Please note that final grades will not be “rounded” to the nearest whole number.

## **Classroom Contribution**

Our class meetings will be conducted online via Zoom. Attending class and contributing to our discussions are vital components of your experience in this course. Your questions, comments, and ideas are what will bring our course materials to life.

Your contribution in our class meetings begins with coming to class having carefully completed and annotated the readings. Because our discussions will be grounded in these texts, it is imperative that you bring the assigned readings to each class session. I encourage you to briefly browse through the text and your notes immediately before class to ensure that you are ready to participate in a discussion of our course materials. We will begin each class with an opportunity

for everybody to share a question pertaining to the reading that they are most interested in discussing.

To receive a high classroom contribution grade, you need to demonstrate your engagement with course materials. There are many of ways to do this, including: sharing thoughts during discussions and small-group activities, active listening, thoughtful preparation, helping a classmate understand a concept, bringing a relevant news article or example to the class' attention, or attending student office hours to discuss content in a more individualized setting.

### *Attendance*

It won't be possible for you to actively contribute if you aren't in class. *For each unexcused absence, your final classroom contribution grade will decrease by 10 percent, equivalent to two points of your total grade.* In order for an absence to be considered excused, I require prior notification of your absence and a clear explanation as to why you are not able to attend class. Note that while this is necessary, it does not guarantee that your absence will be counted as excused.

Attendance will be taken during each class; students who repeatedly arrive late to class may be considered absent. If you anticipate any scheduling conflicts that may affect your attendance, please discuss these with me at the beginning of the semester. In these exceptional times, I plan to balance concerns about accountability with a commitment to equity. For example, I am mindful that students may have differential access to technology, may be living in different time zones, and in different home and study conditions.

### *Discussion Guidelines*

Some students will already feel comfortable speaking in class. For others, it will require courage. My hope is that, regardless of where you start, this class will challenge you to push yourself beyond your comfort zone, whether that means speaking more, becoming a more active listener, or both. The sooner you speak out in class, the easier it will be for you to continue to thoughtfully participate in our discussions. I encourage you to speak with me in office hours so that I can help support your participation goals.

Our course materials may be open to a variety of interpretations, and yours may differ from those of your colleagues or your instructor. *There are no "wrong" comments or questions in our seminar,* so long as they are respectfully offered and contribute to a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere for all participants. We are here to learn from each other and to support one another's learning. During our first class meeting, we will collectively develop specific discussion guidelines to which we can hold each other accountable throughout the semester.

### *Electronic Etiquette Policy*

In a seminar, much of our learning occurs through thoughtful and respectful engagement with each other via listening and speaking. Please switch off your phone before class begins. Aside from your use of the Zoom platform, I urge you to resist the temptation to use your electronic devices, except when medically or situationally necessary. I highly recommend investing in an

app such as [Freedom](#) that will allow you to limit your access to distracting apps and websites during our course sessions.

### **Reading Responses**

Writing is thinking! Each week, you will be expected to complete a brief reading response essay of 250 words (and no more!). You must cite or (very briefly) quote one or more of our texts, including page number(s), in your response. Please use parenthetical citation, e.g. (Smith 4) to cite page 4 of the text by Smith. Questions will be provided to guide your responses. These essays will help you synthesize, analyze, assess, and engage with the arguments and evidence presented in the readings. Developing these skills will help you successfully complete your longer essay assignments. Your reading responses must be submitted via the Assignments page on Canvas by 10:00 am Wednesday mornings before class. You will be credited 1.5 points for each satisfactory response.

### **Take-Home Essay Assignments**

You will also complete three short essays (1,000-1,500 words each) over the course of the semester. These essays will ask you to synthesize course materials and/or to place them into dialogue with experiences and events in the social world. Late assignments will be penalized one letter grade per day.

#### *Essay Grading Guidelines*

Essays in the “B” range of grades will specify a clear argument, provide persuasive and logical evidence in support of that argument, maintain clear links between the topic and relevant course materials, and include relevant and proper citations, bibliography, and page length. The student has thought analytically and systematically, beyond perfunctory treatment of the question.

An “A” or “A-” accomplishes the goals outlined above while also demonstrating outstanding performance. This work is interesting, lucid, nuanced, and above and beyond both my expectations and the work of your peers. It knows what it is examining, how it is going about examining it, what it wants to argue, and why the argument is important to make.

A “C” indicates an adequate delineation of a thesis, but the argument does not succeed because it does not fully develop the issue. There may be some notable lapses in logic, a sparseness of detailed examples and a noticeable lack of illustrative demonstration of the major points. Often a “C” paper is competent enough, but its paragraphs are not structured by the argument and instead either make the same point, or may not make any point at all until the end.

## **RESOURCES**

### **Student Office Hours**

Each member of the class is required to visit me for a quick, ten-minute Zoom meeting during the first two weeks of class so that we can get to know each other and I can learn more about your interests, and about how I might help you with aspects of the course or your particular remote learning circumstances that you anticipate finding most challenging. This will be

especially useful for all of us given that we will be meeting online this semester. After that, I *strongly* encourage everybody to attend student office hours as frequently as possible, either individually or in small groups. This means you! These meetings can be to clarify topics from readings or discussion, for help with writing, or to discuss anything else related to the course topic. Even if you don't have anything pressing to discuss, a quick chat will help me get to know you better, will improve my understanding of how you're finding the course material, and will allow me to give you feedback on how you're doing in the course. Just as important, student office hours provide me with an invaluable opportunity to get feedback from you about how our class is going, and how well I'm doing with helping you meet our course goals.

I use a signup system for student office hours so that we can all schedule our time more effectively. To attend, please sign up for a time slot *before office hours have begun* here: <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/gqrru/>. At the specified time, you will log into my Zoom office hours page (URL to be announced). I will announce any "open" student office hours that will not require signups. If you are unable to attend regularly scheduled student office hours, please contact me to make alternative arrangements.

If you need to reach me regarding setting up appointments or other administrative matters, you may e-mail me at [bshesta@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:bshesta@sas.upenn.edu). I will respond to you in as timely a manner as possible. Please allow up to 24 hours for my response on weekdays and up to 48 hours on weekends or during breaks.

In addition to meeting with me, I also encourage you to meet with you colleagues for study groups and conversation. Zoom information for students is available at <https://computing.sas.upenn.edu/remote-teaching/students>.

### **Academic Integrity**

Please read and familiarize yourself with Penn's Code of Student Conduct and Code of Academic Integrity: <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/>. Regarding academic dishonesty, please note that plagiarism is not limited to copying an entire paper. Using quotes without properly citing them or using ideas without acknowledging their source also constitute plagiarism. Any form of cheating or plagiarism will result in disciplinary action.

### **Student Disabilities Services and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

The University of Pennsylvania provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who have self-identified and been approved by the office of Student Disabilities Services (SDS): <https://www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc/sds/>. Please make an appointment to meet with me as soon as possible in order to discuss your accommodations and your needs. If you have not yet contacted SDS, and would like to request accommodations or have questions, you can make an appointment by calling (215) 573-9235. The office is located in the Weingarten Learning Resources Center at Stouffer Commons 3702 Spruce Street, Suite 300. All services are confidential.

### *Other Accommodations*

Student athletes, parents and caregivers, and others whose commitments might affect their ability to attend class or complete assignments on time should also speak with me at the beginning of the semester about potential conflicts. You should also speak with me as soon as possible if religious holidays that occur during the semester will require you to miss class. If you unexpectedly experience a life event that presents you with academic difficulties, I can refer you to CaseNet to ensure that you get the support you need: <https://www.college.upenn.edu/casenet>.

## **Academic Resources**

Penn students are extremely fortunate to have access to an extensive network of academic resources. A majority of Penn students take advantage of one or more of these resources during their college careers, and I strongly encourage you to do so as well. The Office of Learning Resources provides professional consultation services in university relevant skills such as academic reading, writing, study strategies, and time management. PENNCAP supports the success of a diverse group of academically-talented students, many from low-income and first-generation backgrounds. The Tutoring Center offers Penn undergraduate students free, accessible, and convenient options to supplement their academic experience. For more information, visit <https://www.upenn.edu/programs/acadsupport>.

### *Additional Writing Resources*

The Marks Family Writing Center operates under the assumption that all writers, regardless of their experience and abilities, benefit from informed, individualized, and personal feedback on their writing. The program's professional staff and trained peer specialists work with writers engaged in any stage of the writing process—from brainstorming paper topics, to formulating and organizing arguments, to developing editing skills. Appointments and drop-in hours are available. For more information, visit <http://writing.upenn.edu/critical/wc/>. (You will find navigation options when you mouse over the “Marks Family Writing Center” heading on the menu bar at the top of the page.)

Additionally, the UC Berkeley Department of Sociology has published a writing guide to promote sociologically informed college writing. It includes useful tips for composing strong and effective analytic papers and for improving your general writing skills. A free online version is available at:

[http://sociology.berkeley.edu/documents/student\\_services/Writing%20for%20Sociology%20Guide%20Second%20Edition.pdf](http://sociology.berkeley.edu/documents/student_services/Writing%20for%20Sociology%20Guide%20Second%20Edition.pdf).

## **Well-Being, Stress Management, & Mental Health**

If you (or someone you know) are experiencing personal, academic, or relationship problems and would like someone to talk to, reach out to Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) on campus. For more information about CAPS services, visit:

<https://www.vpul.upenn.edu/caps/about.php>.

## COURSE OVERVIEW

### **PART I: INTERROGATING WORK**

#### **January 20**

##### **Introductions**

#### **January 27**

##### **Theorizing Work Under Capitalism**

- Adam Smith. 1776. *The Wealth of Nations*. Vol. I, Book I, Chapters 1-3 and excerpts from Vol II, Book V, Chapter 1. Pp. 4-19 and 263-266.
- Karl Marx. 1891[1849]. "Wage Labour and Capital." Pp. 203-217 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

#### **February 3**

##### **Transformations in Workplace Control, Part I: Industrial Work and its Legacy**

- Harry Braverman. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Pp. 85-123.
- Richard Edwards. 1979. *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century*. Excerpts from Chapter 1, pp. 73-83.

#### **February 10**

##### **Transformations in Workplace Control, Part II: Working in the Service Sector**

- Arlie Russell Hochschild. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Pp. 3-23 and 89-136.
- Leidner, Robin. 1993. *Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life*. Pp. 24-43.

#### **February 17**

##### **Labor-Market Institutions and How They Matter**

- Paul Osterman. 2000. *Securing Prosperity: The American Labor Market: How It Has Changed and What to Do About It*. Pp. 20-70.
- Neil Irwin. 2017. "To Understand Rising Inequality, Consider the Janitors at Two Top Companies, Then and Now." *The New York Times*.
- Enobong Hannah Branch. 2011. *Opportunity Denied: Limiting Black Women to Devalued Work*. Pp. 1-7, 127-154.
- Lowrey, Annie. 2020. "Don't Blame Econ 101 for the Plight of Essential Workers." *The Atlantic*.

#### **Essay #1 Due: February 19<sup>th</sup> at 5pm**



## **PART II: TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY WORLDS OF WORK**

### **February 24**

#### **Theorizing the Relationship Between Work and Technology**

- Langdon Winner. 1980. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109(1): 121-36.
- Diane Bailey and Paul Leonardi. 2015. "Explaining Technology Choices in the Workplace: Proposing an Occupational Perspective." Chapter 1 in *Technology Choices*, pp. 19-42.

### **March 3**

#### **Technology and the Intensification and Acceleration of Work-Time**

- Erin L. Kelly and Phyllis Moen. 2020. *Overload: How Good Jobs Went Bad and What We Can Do About It*. Pp. 3-74.

**\*\*NO CLASS ON MARCH 10\*\***

### **March 17**

#### **Finding Work in the Age of Social Media**

- Brooke Erin Duffy. 2017. *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. Pp. 1-11 and 45-97.
- Ilana Gershon. 2017. *Down and Out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don't Find) Work Today*. Pp. 121-158.

### **March 24**

#### **Algorithmic Society: Accountability, Bias, and Resistance**

- Tarleton Gillespie. 2016. "Algorithm." Pp. 18-28 in *Digital Keywords*.
- Cathy O'Neil. 2016. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Pp. 15-31 and 105-140.

### **March 31**

#### **The Platform Economy and the "Uber-ization" of Work: New Efficiencies, Hidden Costs**

- Arun Sundararajan. 2016. *The Sharing Economy: The End of Employment and the Rise of Crowd-Based Capitalism*. Chapter 1. Pp. 1-19.
- Alex Rosenblat and Luke Stark. 2016. "Algorithmic Labor and Information Asymmetries: A Case Study of Uber's Drivers." *International Journal of Communication*. Pp. 3758-3784.
- Sam Harnett. 2020a. "Prop. 22 Explained: Why Gig Companies Are Spending Huge Money on an Unprecedented Measure." *KQED News*.

- Sam Harnett. 2020b. "Proposition 22 Passes, Locking In Sub-Employee Status for Gig Workers." *KQED News*.
- Veena Dubal and Meredith Whittaker. 2020. "Those in Power Won't Give Up Willingly": Veena Dubal and Meredith Whittaker on the Future of Organizing Under Prop 22." *Medium*.

### **April 7**

#### **Globalization and Materiality in a Digital Economy**

- Miriam Posner. 2018. "See No Evil." *Logic*.
- Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler. 2018. "Anatomy of an AI System." *SHARE Lab and The AI Now Institute*.
- A. Aneesh. 2006. *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization*. Pp. 67-99.

### **Essay #2 Due: April 9<sup>th</sup> at 5pm**

## **PART III: THE FUTURE OF WORK**

### **April 14**

#### **Artificial Intelligence and the End of Work?**

- Karl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne. 2017. "The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerisation?" *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 114: 254-280.
- Jerry Jacobs and Rachel Karen. 2019. "Technology-Driven Task Replacement and the Future of Employment." *Research in the Sociology of Work* 33: 43-60.

### **April 21**

#### **Digital Labor and Automation's Last Mile**

- Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri. 2019. *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley From Building a New Global Underclass*. Pp. ix-xxxi, 1-37, and 166-194.

### **April 28**

#### **Social Policy and Reimagining Worlds of Work**

- Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee. 2014. *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*. Pp. 205-228.
- Peter S. Goodman. 2017. "The Robots Are Coming, and Sweden Is Fine." *The New York Times*.
- Annette Bernhardt. 2017. "Beyond Basic Income: Claiming Our Right to Govern Technology." *Boston Review*. Pp. 1-5.
- Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. 2015. *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. Pp. 107-127.

**Essay #3 Due: May 10<sup>th</sup> at 5pm**