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# Hybrid areas of labour. Challenging traditional dichotomies to represent work, workers, and working trajectories

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## Hybrid areas of labour

### Challenging traditional dichotomies to represent work, workers, and working trajectories

by VALERIA PIRO, ANNALISA MURGIA, CHRISTIAN AZAÏS

#### 1. *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

The concept of hybrid refers to the result of combining two or more different elements. The history of the etymology of «hybrid» is itself ambiguous and the result of a conjunction of influences. The origin can be traced back to the Latin term *hybrida*, meaning «the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar» (Young 1995), i.e. an animal whose parents belong to different species, one more docile, locked-up, and subordinate, the other outdoors and free from any form of control. Moreover, according to classicists, development of the term through various Western languages is also connected with the Greek word *hubris*, which means «outrage», in terms of surpassing one's position, which can result in excessive pride or overconfidence. Even considering its etymological development, therefore, the term «hybrid» carries with it a sense of transgression of established limits and categories regarded as «natural», showing how the interconnection of different elements embodies a potential for experimentation, and emphasising the idea that boundaries between categories (as well as between identities or different statuses) are not fixed or static, but rather constantly changing.

Probably because of its ability to describe both a condition and a movement beyond established categories, the concepts of hybrid and hybridity have also been widely adopted in various academic disciplines, from its origins in biology and botany (see Callender 1988) to the social sciences, particularly in the

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fields of post-colonial and science and technology studies (STS). Postcolonial theorists have mainly focused on the hybridity of cultures and identities and on how they can disrupt dominant power structures. In this perspective, Homi Bhabha (1994, 162) made clear that hybridity «is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures», but rather «the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white», which can open up «the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy» (*ibidem*, 5). In his work, as in that of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and others, cultures and identities are considered as constantly changing through a process of hybridisation, and the hybrid thus assumes an explicitly critical political value, being conceptualised as a force able to challenge or subvert historically dominant categories. In the STS too, the hybrid is at the centre of the political vision proposed by feminist theorist Donna Haraway (1985; 1991). In this case under explicit attack – through the metaphor of the cyborg – are the dichotomies human/animal, animal/machine, physical/non-physical. Indeed, the figure of the cyborg problematises how we think about agency, which is no longer conceived as only human, and is also an encouragement to adopt partial and situated perspectives (Johnson 2020). In the same direction, Bruno Latour (1993) defined modernity as a «proliferation of hybrids» and pioneered the conceptualisation of novel situations beyond the «modern divisions» between nature and culture, technical and social. In this approach, the metaphor of the hybrid network allows for the development of a relational understanding of ethical agency and community, also abandoning the traditional conception of the social as a dialectical articulation of agency and structure or local and global.

In this Special Issue, we propose to explore the concept of hybrid in labour studies, with the aim of advancing our understanding of how hybrid areas of labour are articulated in both the Global North and the Global South, and of moving forward a theoretical rethinking of the existing analytical and interpretative categories. This requires questioning the historical binary opposition between employment and self-employment, standard and non-standard, formal and informal, productive and reproductive, paid and unpaid labour. In dialogue with the debate on «grey» zones of work and employment and with studies focused on the blurring of the employment relationship boundaries (Azaïs

*et al.* 2017; Bureau *et al.* 2019; Bureau, Corsani 2015; Corsani 2020; D'Amours *et al.* 2017; Supiot 1999), we propose to use the concept of hybrid to capture the co-existence of multiple features that cannot be represented in a binary way (Armano, Murgia 2017; Azaïs 2019; Murgia *et al.* 2020). Framed in these terms, hybridisation is a process that characterises the fragmented nature of contemporary labour, which is affecting, on the one hand, working conditions and the level of social protection and collective representation, and on the other hand, the representations of subjects and their individual and collective agency.

## 2. *On the hybridisation of work, work trajectories, and workers' agency*

Scholarly debate has long focused on how processes of flexibilization have eroded the «standard employment relationship» traditionally embodied in a (white, western, male) salaried employee in the formal economy, with an open-ended and full-time contract, and who enjoys the full protection of labour law and the welfare system. However, several authors (for example, Lambert, Herod 2016; Routh, Borghi 2016) have pointed out that this definition is based on a situated labour model, which is the result of a historical process at a particular time and place, namely post-World War II western Europe. In fact, in many contexts, including western European countries, the mutually exclusive use of the categories «informal» and «precarious» overshadows the multiple ways of participating in the current labour market. Deregulated neo-liberalism and labour fragmentation, accompanied by the diffusion of insecure work arrangements – increasingly mediated by digital platforms – are indeed rapidly multiplying, at the global level, the risks to which ever-growing groups of workers are currently exposed (Choonara *et al.* 2022; Kalleberg, Vallas 2017; Lorey 2015). Such labour transformations are fostering an unequal integration into the labour market that not only undermines labour's rights and working conditions as a whole, but also exacerbates traditional gender, class, age, and ethnicity divisions (Banks, Milestone 2011; van Doorn 2017), worsening the crisis of social reproduction in neoliberal capitalism (Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2016).

Moreover, such changes have also prompted debates on old and new configurations of workers' resistance. Prominent in these debates is the question of how to engage workers who have long been considered «un-organisable» in the political struggle (Holgate *et al.* 2018; Keune, Pedaci 2019). In particular, trade unions are required to leave their comfort zone, and recognise and leverage their common interests with multiple constituencies. At the same time, fewer institutionalised forms of collective mobilisation and labour community coalitions are opening new possibilities of collective organising and enacting novel processes that foster collective identity and political engagement (Atzeni, Ness 2016; Hyman, Gumbrell-McCormick 2017; Rich 2020; Webster 2021).

This Special Issue proposes to address the hybridisation of work in order to overcome the binary approach that has historically characterised the academic debate on work and employment. On the one hand, there are studies focused on the processes of precarisation, especially with regard to bad jobs, which tend to be grouped into two subsets: research on work in the informal economy, often focused on the Global South and understood through the lens of informality (Bhattacharya, Kesar 2020), and research on precarious employment, mainly shaped by the experiences of the Global North, which focuses mainly on fixed-term contracts, temp-agency work, zero-hour contracts, bogus self-employment, platform work, and other novel forms of employment relations under the heading of insecurity (Alberti *et al.* 2018; Kalleberg 2009). On the other hand, there are studies that have mainly addressed highly skilled, creative, cognitive, or entrepreneurial work, and the possibilities opened up by the fall of the Fordist era. Within this debate, however, critical scholars soon pointed out that – despite forecasts that creativity and entrepreneurship will be the salvation of future economies and an opportunity for increased social mobility – many workers continue to experience severe financial insecurity and precarious working and living conditions (McRobbie 2002; Hesmondalgh, Baker 2011; Sommer 2017; Tse 2022). Moreover, with this collection, we want to emphasise that labour inequalities do not simply refer to polarisation in the distribution of supposedly «good» and «bad» jobs, income levels, and access to rights and social protection, but to how they are represented and legitimised in the present social imaginary, currently permeated by principles of individualisation and meritocracy that are different

from those in the past and inclined to transform individuals into self-entrepreneurial subjects (Foucault 2008).

The processes that encourage the transformation of citizens into entrepreneurs of their own human capital are not only the result of whether they work in the formal or informal economy or the type of employment relationship (fixed-term or open-ended, self-employed, or salaried), «but, more generally, the *hybrid* set of situations which push the single person to take on risk and invest totally in the production of their subjectivity» (Armano *et al.* 2022, 32-33). Indeed, in neoliberalism, both companies and institutions tend to promote management discourses and rhetoric centred on autonomy, freedom, merit, and excellence, de facto inscribing not only working life, but also social and public life, in an imaginary centred on reward dynamics, the self-activation of individual resources, risk-taking, and a sense of guilt and inadequacy. In this logic, individuals are required to actively participate in their own exploitation: workers are thus no longer exploited, but rather willing to invent, risk, put themselves at risk, and even go into debt for their own fulfilment (Gorz 2001; Ross 2009). This makes the forms of labour exploitation become at times more intense than in the past, precisely because they are based on the «radical responsabilisation» of individuals (Fleming 2017), who are persuaded that they are the creators and causes of their own success or failure, becoming on the one hand capable of self-exploitation and on the other incapable of reading the constraints of the system. It is thanks to this mechanism that risk has been transferred from the system to individuals' capabilities, and that they have been pushed to blame themselves rather than social structures, perceiving themselves as being solely responsible for their successes as well as their defeats (Beck 2000). At the same time, while such transformations have intensified the structures of domination, they have also prompted new forms of disruptive agency, or disruptive subjectivities (Neilson, Rossiter 2008; Bailey *et al.* 2018), confirming the fact that there are always possibilities for resistance, even by those in an asymmetrical power position.

In this context, the concept of the hybrid is in our view effective for grasping the changes mentioned above, even though it has been adopted in the literature from very different perspectives. In work and employment studies, and in particular within the economics debate, the idea of hybridisation has been used specifically to identify self-employed workers who

have additional sources of income as employees or from work in the informal economy (Bögenhold, Klinglmair 2017; Folta *et al.* 2010). This can happen either simultaneously, in terms of multiple working activities, or sequentially, thus moving from one statute to another throughout a person's working trajectory. In this Special Issue, our proposal is to consider not only the possible combinations of informal, self-employed, and salaried work, but above all to question the current essentialisation of social categories and recognise the multiplicity of experiences lived by subjects. The development of very different debates (and academic journals) – which have scarcely dialogued with each other over the years – has in fact resulted in the experiences of the subjects being fragmented as well. If, on the one hand, the extent to which passion for work often goes hand in hand with poor working conditions has been widely explored (Alacovska, Gill 2019; Huws 2007), on the other hand, the condition of those who, despite having a safe, salaried, and permanent job, experience poor working conditions with no reward in terms of identity, for example, has been much less investigated. Similarly, while the concept of dependency and subordination has been extensively studied in both employment and self-employment, the same cannot be claimed for the concept of autonomy (Appay 2005; Rosenfield Lerrer 2004). At the centre of the Italian autonomist tradition – which based its analysis of the relations between labour and capital on labour's resistance and search for autonomy – autonomy and independence seem at present to be mainly investigated among knowledge workers and independent professionals, but little explored in the case of other working conditions. Moreover, the fact that workers enjoy autonomy should not overshadow existing power dynamics, as «the fact that there is asymmetry does not mean that there is no more autonomy» (Bologna 2023 in this Special Issue).

In this framework, a further piece to reassemble the puzzle is to highlight that autonomous and desired hybrid conditions are very different from coercive heteronomous ones (Canclini 2015), and that inequalities in hybrid labour trajectories are mainly related to workers' positions in power hierarchies. This also means focusing on workers' agency and on the leeway for action that the various structural dimensions have left open to workers to challenge the current binary conceptualisations of labour, such as employment/self-employment, standard/non-standard, formal/

informal, or productive/reproductive. Exploring the processes of hybridisation thus encourages the problematisation of workers' agency – which in the literature on employment and industrial relations is mainly explored in its collective and organised forms – by also showcasing the experiences of workers who exercise their agency in various but not necessarily declared and sometimes invisible ways (McNay 2000; Piro 2021; Rogaly 2009). In adopting this approach, it is actually the binary conceptualisation of the individual and the collective itself that is challenged, since individuals, drawing on the Latourian interpretation, exist only as actors embedded in a set of relationships and networks (Harman 2009).

Finally, questioning the definitions of «non-standard» or «atypical» in work and employment – still anchored to the categories created ad hoc to interpret the Fordist model and which create a hierarchical interdependence between the emerging work arrangements and what has been defined as the «standard» employment relationship – allows avoidance of the opposition between «the One and the Other» (Derrida 1971) and for an analysis of the different hybridisations that characterise each specific working experience and condition. In this sense, the hybrid is also promising in epistemological and methodological terms, encouraging us to recognise the partial and situated character of any form of knowledge (Haraway 1991), and to blur the distinction between «researcher» and «researched» by promoting research practices more oriented towards the co-construction of knowledge.

### 3. *Papers in this Special Issue*

Capturing the transformations of work at a time when the categories inherited from the «Fordist compromise» are no longer operative – because they leave out a whole series of situations described in this Special Issue on hybrid areas of labour – is the challenge that the authors of the articles have faced, each in their own way. The diversity of the fields covered is an asset in showing that it is neither specific geographical contexts that are experiencing changes that researchers and policymakers often find difficult to identify, nor is it only certain categories of workers who are affected, such as the less qualified, women, migrants or young people, but the entire working-age population.



The articles selected for this Special Issue have been chosen because they are intended to pave the way for further research. Thus, these contributions do not confine themselves to describing, analysing or theorising situations provided by the field, but take a stand on the major issues facing societies and which are characteristic of contemporary capitalism and its consequences for workers, on the way in which work is conceived today, both in the Global South and in the Global North. Among the themes addressed, we have highlighted a number that emphasise the irrelevance of any dichotomy between the categories of formal and informal, employment and self-employment, standard and non-standard, productive and reproductive, which are part of the same dynamic and are inseparable from each other. Even though these questions were being asked as early as the 1970s by researchers working in the Global South (e.g. Oliveira 1972) and shortly afterwards in the North (e.g. Lautier *et al.* 1991), they seem to us to be essential if we are to understand the world of labour today. In particular, the studies presented in this Special Issue engage with the concept of hybridity in work and employment and develop it in several directions, by merging it with different theoretical debates, and using it as a prism to empirically investigate various types of labour in several countries.

In the first paper, Martine D'Amour defines the hybrid forms of labour as those «extending along a continuum between wage employment and self-employment as they have been classically defined» for what concerns the organisation of work and the distribution of work-related risks. At the same time, she proposes to broaden the gaze, go beyond legal statutes (such as employed/self-employed), and take into consideration what she calls the «Social Labour Relation» (SLR), defined as the relationship between workers and all the other actors likely to structure and control their employment situation (such as the state, the courts, or the unions). By providing a socio-historical analysis on the SLR in the home childcare sector in Quebec (Canada) from 1979 onwards, she shows how the characteristics of this hybrid area of work have changed over time for what concerns workers' (more or less controlled) autonomy and (more or less guaranteed) social protections. Her analysis, therefore, brings to the fore the centrality of state regulation (through legislation and court judgments), as well as the importance of collective actors such as trade unions (that in Quebec gained the possibility to

bargain collectively for home educational childcare providers), to dynamically construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the SLR in which workers are embedded.

Together with the childcare sector, the imperatives of New Public Management also involve other areas of work, fostering a growth of outsourcing through procurements, as well as an increase in the share of solo self-employment, multiple job holdings and, ultimately, precarious employment in the public sector. These processes are further investigated in the article by Alexandra Manske, focusing on the field of performing arts in Germany, which is characterised by an increase in hybrid work, here considered as the specific status of workers combining different jobs, both waged and self-employed, within and outside the field of performing arts. In particular, the author proposes a typology of hybrid work emerging at the interplay between the field (labour) conditions and workers' individual strategies to navigate them. By adopting a Bourdieusian approach, the field of performing arts is described as consisting of two subfields, public theatre and independent scene, progressively converging into a new «hybrid area of work in which a fair portion of artists increasingly commute between different fields of cultural production», due to both the increasing volume of project work in the field of public theatre and the revival of the symbolic recognition of the independent scene. Within this scenario, the author gives room to the pivotal role of agency, and thus illustrates how artists engage in a positional struggle developing different strategies, such as the «reputation winner», the «position defender», and the «position seeker», enacted to improve, hold, or establish a position in the performing arts scene.

The role of agency within a neoliberal scenario is also central to the paper authored by Daniela Damion, Cinara Lerrer Rosenfield, and Cecília Severo Guimarães. The authors propose a thorough analysis that thematises the tensions, contradictions, and potentialities of the spread of self-entrepreneurship in Brazil. From their perspective, self-entrepreneurship, although embedded in a neoliberal spirit, represents the frame within which several women, organised in a grassroots collective named *Empreendedoras da Restinga*, found their way to eschew precariousness in the labour market, subordination in the private sphere, and a peripheral position within their city. *Empreendedoras da Restinga* are hairdressers, pet sitters, tour guides, artisans, and

accountants, who – instead of working in isolation – decided to cooperate in a network aimed at promoting their image and fostering a sense of belonging to a group and to a territorial community. The construction of this collective identity boosts *Empreendedoras*' self-esteem, creativity, capacity to share a sense of solidarity, representing an expression of feminist *potencia* (Gago 2018; 2020). This case exemplifies how in a hybrid area at the boundary of «formal and informal, popular and neoliberal» is possible to «seek alternatives and find satisfactory solutions», therefore building autonomy without individualisation, and being embedded in the neoliberal logic while at the same time bending it through cooperation.

A feminist perspective is also a starting point for the contribution by Lena Schürmann and Jeannette Trenkmann, aimed at employing the concept of hybrid as a tool to question the very epistemological understandings of labour and unravel the fictitious distinction between production and social reproduction. Digitally mediated labour, they argue, accentuates the blurring boundaries between production and reproduction, not only by flexibilising working time and space, but also by removing the division between public and private, and extracting value from life and leisure time. The metaphor of the cyborg by Donna Haraway is, therefore, used as an epitome of hybridity that merges human and machine in the so-called digital capitalism, where «technology and algorithms have captured our subjectivity, structured our desire». In this context, the cyborg is inscribed with the «ambivalence, the overlapping of self-determination and heteronomy, of autonomy and control in the work process, the simultaneity of subordination and agency, but also of the production of surplus and use value, without losing sight of the embedding in societal hierarchies of domination». This metaphor, according to the authors, helps us in challenging the «epistemic exclusions» that fail to recognise the importance of invisible, reproductive labour when considering work categories and, ultimately, the deep-seated divides between workers.

The Special Issue continues with two contributions focused on platform work. Julieta Longo and Mariana Fernández Massi delve into the everyday life of freelance designers in Argentina, who increasingly work through online platforms that mediate between them and a pool of clients located mainly in the Global North. Through a rich set of data, the authors show how the

freelance designers are hybrid workers in a twofold sense. First, they combine characteristics of employment and self-employment, since they experience both economic dependence and the freedom to manage assignments and time and set prices. These possibilities, however, are challenged by the standardisation of tasks to be carried out through the platform and by the globalisation of the client base, which has extended the availability of workers indefinitely while also exerting downward pressure on prices. Second, many of the designers interviewed by Longo and Massi define themselves as hybrid, because they tend to adopt different modalities of work, both as employees and freelancers and sometimes moonlighting, with the aim of creating what they consider as «a good job». This allows them to pursue their desire for autonomy in organising their work in a way that is compatible with their care and leisure activities, but also with their need for financial stability in the long run.

Platform workers and their ability to create their jobs by also playing with informality is further explored in the contribution of Vando Borghi and Gianmarco Peterlongo, which looks at platform-based last mile logistics in Italy and Argentina by discussing the main findings of a multi-sited ethnography. In their perspective, in the era of «capitalism of infrastructures», the success of platforms for food-delivering (such as Glovo) and ride-hailing (such as Uber) relies on their ability to operate at the boundary of formal and informal dimensions of the economy. «On the one hand – the authors explain – platforms have proliferated in sectors traditionally driven by informal urban economies, extracting value from economic areas previously excluded from financial and capitalist accumulation», a process defined as *formalisation of informality*. «On the other hand, platforms operate in the hybrid/grey areas of work, i.e., at the boundary between dependent and independent work», a process called *informalisation of formality*, since «the platform economy represents a formal labour market with informal labour conditions». In particular, the authors highlight the intertwining of formal and informal dimensions of work by deploying the notion of «baroque» (Echeverría 1998), which describes the platform economy as a *mélange* or juxtaposition of different elements.

In a similar vein, the contribution by Francesco Bagnardi deals with the process of hybridisation between formal and informal dimensions of work, focusing on the critical case of the

construction sector in Italy. In particular, he considers institutional and structural drivers of informalisation, while at the same time – in continuity with D'Amour's work – shedding light on the role of the regulatory actors (such as state bodies, trade unions, and management networks) in shaping informal labour arrangements. By drawing on labour process theory and a regulatory space approach, the author shows how such processes remain «deeply embedded in economic and socio-institutional contexts but [are] ultimately shaped at the workplace level». In this perspective, looking at contentious workplace processes allows for an explanation of the persistence of informality. The construction workers interviewed are indeed often hired through a handshake agreement, a «verbal employment agreement that establishes a fixed daily remuneration and an approximate number of working hours per day», and forced to daily or long-term commuting, relying for transport on their intermediaries. Therefore, the study shows that informality can be conceived as a tool available to firms to enhance control over workers, and hybrid areas of work as regulatory spaces «where formal and informal actors cooperate to stabilise over-exploitative employment relations».

The Special Issue concludes with two further contributions on the processes of hybridisation in work and employment: an Interview with Sergio Bologna conducted by Andrea Bottalico; and a Critical Notes authored by Paolo Borghi. In their interview, Bologna and Bottalico bring the reader into the backstage of the current debate on hybrid areas of labour to which Bologna has contributed throughout the years with his pioneering intuitions, spotlighting phenomena such as the «domestication of work», the rise of a «second generation of self-employment», which he defines as *knowledge workers*, the (necessary) transformations of welfare systems and of collective forms of workers' representations and organising. By tracing Bologna's professional as well as biographical trajectory, the interview is able to encourage the reader to reflect not only on the hybridisation of self-employment and salaried work, but more generally on the changes taking place in the world of work from a transformative perspective.

Workers' representation and organising is also at the core of Borghi's Critical Notes, aimed at providing an updated and articulated review of one of the most lively and animated debates in the field of labour studies and industrial relations in the last decade: the growth of the platform economy. The

books that the author selects offer a broader picture of what platform economy is, what it promised to workers, the material and symbolic conditions that digital labour platforms are actually reproducing, and what are the future perspectives. On the last point in particular, the author argues that «organising platform workers and regulating platform work are indeed two core challenges for trade unions, political representatives, and collective actors focused on alternative work arrangements». The collective representation of workers and the regulation of emerging forms of work, including access to social and labour rights, are indeed the main challenges to be faced not only regarding digital labour platforms, but more generally in coping with an ever-changing world of work.

In conclusion, the aim of this Special Issue is to contribute to the ongoing debate on labour transformations at the boundary of employment and self-employment, autonomy and dependence, formal and informal economy, production and reproduction, digital labour and «body work», bringing in perspectives from both the Global North and the Global South. The contributions in this collection illustrate the economic and political frameworks shaping these global transformations, while at the same time spotlighting workers' desires, subjectivities, and forms of agency, without overlooking ongoing tensions and contradictions. Indeed, all the articles provide a fine-grained description of the role of several actors in the formal and informal labour markets, delving into the everyday lives of workers and their grassroots networks, as well as the realm of firms and public employers, regulatory bodies (such as states and courts) and actors engaged in workers' collective representation (i.e. trade unions and other organisations). By collecting essays from different theoretical traditions and authors' positionalities, this Special Issue aims to provide an analytical toolbox for studying the processes of hybridisation of labour and their transformations, inviting readers to adopt a socio-historical gaze, and to expand it beyond Italy and Europe, therefore providing food for thoughts for scholars, activists, trade unionists, and policymakers interested in labour changes and in the improvement of working conditions and workers' rights worldwide.

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### **Hybrid areas of labour. Challenging traditional dichotomies to represent work, workers, and working trajectories**

This contribution proposes to adopt «hybridity» as a theoretical lens and heuristic tool to analyse and explore ongoing labour transformations. After providing a definition of the concept of hybrid throughout time and disciplines, the focus then shifts more specifically to the processes of hybridisation of labour, with the aim of advancing our understanding of the heterogeneous articulations of hybrid areas of work and employment in both the Global North and South. By paying special attention to workers' agency and subjective trajectories, the article shows how the concept of hybridity paves the way to question deep-seated dichotomies hitherto used to interpret labour transformations, such as employment/self-employment, standard/non-standard, formal/informal, productive/reproductive, and paid/unpaid. Finally, the contributions included in this Special Issue on *Hybrid areas of labour* are introduced. They represent a collection of selected studies focused on the different forms of hybridisation that characterise each specific working experience and condition, in both high and low-skilled sectors, digital and 'on-site' work environments, paid and unpaid care and reproductive forms of labour.

*Keywords:* hybridity, precarious labour, informal labour, reproductive labour, self-employment, workers' agency, work trajectories.

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