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The Labor Economy as Fractured Infrastructure

Abstract

While many perceive the stock market as an indicator of the health of the national economy, substituting precision for validity (Kirk and Kutchins 1992), the actual labor economy is the infrastructure that makes it possible. Since the formal introduction of neoliberalism as a matter of governance and the failure of social policy to adapt to changing norms like inflation, an entire generation has come of age with lived experience incongruent with the master narrative of hard work being enough to support a family – let alone themselves. Following the dimensions of infrastructure outlined by Susan Star (1999) in which the often-invisible role of infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks down despite embodying its standards, the labor economy represents a social order on the verge of reconfiguration (Harvey et al. 2016). As social movements are often behind infrastructural adjustment (Bowker and Star 2000), an underlying social current alternatively known as the Great Resignation and Antiwork has emerged tying together numerous strikes and boycotts demanding a more humanistic labor infrastructure.

The assemblages of this movement have grown into what Boyer calls a “revolutionary infrastructure” (2016) given the exigency of one system purposed toward overhauling another. A 1.6M-member Reddit community known as r/Antiwork has emerged as a knowledge infrastructure (Bowker 2016) to share information and organize protests for better labor conditions. Garnering both media and political attention, r/Antiwork has been recognized as a formidable force in the labor movement that has successfully contributed to better labor outcomes at the corporate level. In this project, using digital ethnography and content analysis, I will trace organizational efforts in r/Antiwork and media coverage of how American companies and the government respond to its growing influence. Doing so will illuminate the qualities of specific efforts in an online community – itself a revolutionary infrastructure – that yield effective infrastructural reform.

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