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The Labor Economy as Fractured Infrastructure

The economic system of a country provides the infrastructure for organizing and distributing resources and services to its citizens. Likewise, infrastructures are designed to favor those with resources to access them, having profound impacts on distributions of agency and empowerment (Edwards et al., 2009). When a country's citizens are left wanting of these resources – in which many who previously enjoyed access are no longer able to experience a basic quality of life – the infrastructure becomes visible as fundamentally broken (Star, 1999) and its governance in need of change. While economists and politicians often abstract the issues facing citizens in terms of market forces, doing so overshadows the labor economy by which citizens commodify their labor in exchange for said services broadly construed as compensation (Postone et al., 1995). Further, social policies inform the political economy and how openly its citizens can challenge the economic system (Greene, 2010). Since the beginning of 2020, a phenomenon has emerged labeled the Great Resignation in which individuals have been leaving their jobs in record numbers (Gittleman, 2022). The experiences of these individuals and others sympathetic to their exploitative and toxic work conditions have funneled to a rapidly growing anti-capitalist community on Reddit called *r/Antiwork* that has been constructively challenging the economic status quo. In this position paper, I will address arguments that the labor economy is working as intended, that the Great Resignation as a blip in market forces, and that those speaking out against capitalist domination are simply lazy.

The most sweeping and dismissive argument against the labor economy being fractured infrastructure is that neoliberalism does not guarantee the welfare of anyone and therefore the system is not fractured (Duménil and Lévy, 2011). Neoliberalism as a form of unfettered capitalism advocates for self-regulating markets, social Darwinism, and minimal government responsibility in providing a safety net for its citizens (Monbiot, 2016). According to those who espouse neoliberalism, as famously done by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, if a citizen does not commodify their labor to serve the interests of economy growth, they have no value to the system and therefore should not be a parasite on it (Harvey, 2007). In this way, it can be argued, neoliberalism was never meant to provide welfare opportunities to those unable to effectively compete with market forces. This would not be a false argument, just an inhumane one that evidences a selfish moral economy. If a government cares about its people, it will enact policies to ensure their welfare and not just opportunities for them to earn their right to live.

A second counterargument pertains to the Great Resignation itself, dismissing it as alarmism and little more than temporary market forces. As one global law firm opined, the Great Resignation represents “a spike in labor turnover that had been suppressed during the pandemic” (Noakes and Landmann, 2021). This neoliberal approach once again asserts the self-correcting nature of capitalist markets and overlooks the human experiences that collectively gave rise to the phenomenon. However, even the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics acknowledges more than structural market factors at play and encourages future research of “alternative explanations” for the Great Resignation (Gittleman, 2022). When looking past the numbers to the human level, they one finds stories of burnout, exploitation, and existentialism (Pirnay, 2021) – feelings that have had very real consequences and suggest a systemic issue given their scale.

The third counterargument makes light of the Reddit community on which jaded individuals air their grievances and discuss tactics and strategy to usher in economic justice. Conservative naysayers such as Fox News dismiss the *r/Antiwork* community (Koebler, 2022) as little more than an echo chamber of lazy people who don't want to work. Indeed, the name of the community would seem to betray that perspective to any who fail to take the time to investigate what actually happens therein and it is fair to say as a result that the community is misbranded. But upon spending time in *r/Antiwork*, one not only notices patterns of social support of navigating individual toxic work situations, but tangible collective efforts in supporting strikes, protests, and unionization at the ground level. More than just those who have taken part in or are considering being part of the Great Resignation, *r/Antiwork* is largely comprised of members who cannot afford to resign and must continue to toil indignant of their working conditions and lack of opportunities for emancipation given socioeconomic constraints. In this sense, while some members of

r/Antiwork may identify as lazy, most seem to want labor reform more than some hyperbolic abolition of labor as with Aaron Bastani's imaginary of fully automated luxury communism (2019).

Taken together, the above counterarguments can be summarized as not taking present economic issues seriously. They suggest a lack of empathy given their abstracting approach to human suffering and dismissive stance on the economic woes of others. Also at play is the false consciousness in which individuals who would benefit from economic reform do not support it due to their enculturation of capitalist values and malign those who represent threats to their value system. As an example, many people who not only do not support a 'living wage' whereby workers could live more comfortably rather than austere, but reject raising the minimum wage despite rising costs of living and inflation because it would mean higher prices for them (Karjanen, 2010). They believe that what they deem unskilled labor is unworthy of a living wage, as raising such compensation would seem to devalue their own and social stature as better than the underclass. Such an ideology is not just captive of capitalist values, but is egotistical to the core.

While the rising numbers of monthly employees who quit alone may not be cause for alarm, as with any proverbial canary in the coal mine, the bigger picture in the data suggests something fundamentally wrong with current labor economy. On the less privileged side of the socioeconomic spectrum, as of June 2022, 61% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck (New Reality Check, 2022). A recent Gallup workplace report found that employee stress is at an all-time high (Gallup 2022). These are not marginal figures suggesting a blip in the market, but substantial statistics pointing to underlying issues negatively impacting the ability of Americans to live a quality life. The American labor economy is fundamentally fractured and until its governance adapts to enact policies encouraging the welfare of its citizens, the situation will not improve.

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