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Low-skill no more! essential workers, social reproduction and the legitimacy-crisis of the division of labour

Sara R. Farris and Mark Bergfeld

ABSTRACT

Workers in the realm of social reproduction – e.g. nurses, carers, cleaners, food preparation workers etc. – are considered low-skill and are poorly remunerated. During the Covid-19 crisis they have been recast as ‘essential’, leading to unprecedented praise and attention in public discourse. Nonetheless, public praise for these ‘essential’ workers so far has not translated into a commitment for higher wages and improved working conditions. In this article, we argue that skills hierarchies continue to determine labour market outcomes and social inequalities. We pinpoint that these are embedded into the logic of capitalist social relations, rather than being an expression of the features of jobs themselves. We also show how some socially reproductive sectors resist the tendency to automation precisely because of the prevalence therein of a workforce which is portrayed as un-skilled. By focussing on low-skilled workers’ engagement in various forms of labour unrest and their demands for long overdue recognition and wage rises, the article puts into question the inherited skills-lexicon according to which low-wage jobs are unproductive and lacking in skills and competence. The authors conclude that these workers’ fights for the recognition of the dignity and importance of their jobs and professions can facilitate a rethinking of the division of labour in our societies.

KEYWORDS

Social reproduction; skills; essential workers; division of labour

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the wider usage of remote working, or ‘Working From Home’ (WFH) particularly amongst white-collars. This phenomenon has gone hand in hand with discussions about the importance of increasing the levels of automation and the use of Artificial Intelligence in key economic industries. Even though the labour sectors most invested by these new technological developments do not represent the majority of workers, scholars and commentators have recently forecasted that such developments constitute the most important innovations that will invest the world of work in the future (Lund et al. 2020; Lund et al. 2021; Goldin 2021).

Grounded as they are in a kind of ‘technological fetishism’ (Dale 2020) that leads them to over-emphasise the saviour role of new technologies, such analyses and predictions, however, have overlooked one of the most important phenomena that has occurred in

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the Pandemic labour landscape: the newly acquired prominence of professions that are usually classified as un-skilled or low-skill and that are the least susceptible to technological innovations such as automation or WFH, but which during the Pandemic have nonetheless been labelled ‘essential’ jobs.

From healthcare and care workers, agricultural labourers, workers in food factories, waste collectors and cleaners (Handel 2020; Bergfeld 2020) as well as supermarket employees, warehouse and logistics workers, their recasting as ‘essential’ has led to unprecedented praise and attention given the irreplaceable and indispensable role these workers play in maintaining the functioning and well-being of our societies and communities.

These newly branded ‘essential workers’ have also been at the forefront of recent labour unrest, seeking to reclaim the long overdue recognition for their key role and to fight against impossible working conditions. Data suggests that low-wage essential workers have in fact disproportionately borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide as they have had to continue working despite the risks of catching the virus. Overworked, many have also experienced work-related mental health issues (Brown 2021).

Many of these essential occupations belong to what scholars call the socially reproductive economy, or social reproduction (SR), which describes all those ‘activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally.’ (Laslett and Brenner 1989, 382). Social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided as well as the care of the infirm and elderly.

Many of the activities that belong to the realm of social reproduction – e.g. nursing, caring, cleaning, food preparation etc. – are considered low-skill and are poorly remunerated, a fact SR scholars explain by outlining the contradictory relationship that these activities entertain with the capitalist profit-making logic. On the one hand, many socially reproductive activities are considered labour-intensive and low in productivity, which means that wages are independent of productivity rates and that profit margins are low (Baumol 1967; Yeates 2004). On the other hand, many social reproductive sectors have become more profitable over the last thirty years as private companies have increasingly invested in previously state-owned sectors (as in the case of health care and social care), or resorted to migrant workers in order to reduce labour costs (as in the case of agribusiness, food-preparation factories etc.) (Ungerson 2003; Farris and Marchetti 2017).

SR scholarship, thus, maintains that the stigmatization and devaluation of those activities that are indispensable for the reproduction of our daily life and society is not due to these activities’ poor skill-set or societal contribution. On the contrary, it is due both to their ambivalent relationship with the capitalist drive for profit, and to their historical identification with women’s so-called ‘unproductive’ and ‘unskilled’ labour as well as with racialised populations’ subsistence economies (Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2019). As Stevano et al. (2021) emphasise, feminist literature has argued for a long time that ‘jobs which are overwhelmingly performed by women and minority groups are seen as low-skilled not because they fail to meet some objective requirement of skill, but because skill has been constructed in exclusionary and discriminatory ways’ (p. 12).

Against this background, the sudden and generalized re-evaluation of many of these activities as ‘essential’ during the pandemic vindicates – at least to an extent and

contradictorily as we will argue below – SR scholars’ emphasis upon the key role these occupations play in our economies and lives.

But what could the implications be of this new recognition of many socially reproductive jobs as essential?

In this paper we argue that, by highlighting the ‘essential’ nature of much socially reproductive labour, the Covid-19 crisis could be unsettling the legitimacy of that skills-hierarchy that places at the bottom all those skills and jobs that are necessary for the reproduction of life and society. That is, the legitimacy crisis of the traditional hierarchy of labour the pandemic has (at least momentarily) brought about, is forcing us to interrogate the underpinnings of so-called low-skilled work. To be clear, we do not argue that all the jobs that have been labelled essential during the Covid-19 Pandemic belong to the realm of social reproduction. Our point is that *many* of them do, which is a development that enables a conversation on the nature of these occupations and the precarious, contradictory equilibrium in which they stand vis-à-vis capitalism. However, we also recognize that unpaid socially reproductive labour mostly performed by women within households has not received any mention of ‘essentiality’, even though research shows that lockdowns have multiplied the number of hours that members of households (particularly women) have spent on that (Stevano et al 2021).

In what follows, we will first discuss the origins of the distinction between low-skilled and high-skilled jobs and how such a distinction has allowed capital’s advocates to legitimise wage inequalities as well as to stigmatize and devalue social reproduction. We will then show how the low-skill, low-wage economy since the 1970s has become increasingly reliant on a racialised and gendered labour force. This observation will allow us to interrogate, and enter in dialogue with, the received wisdom within some Marxist literature according to which capitalism’s tendency towards automation will bring about the deskilling of the workforce. As we will show, in some socially reproductive sectors it is less, rather than more automation, which allows employers to relay upon a de-skilled workforce. Finally, we discuss how social reproductive occupations that have historically been considered as low-skill have recently become the hub of new organized labour unrest.

The skills hierarchy

To understand the recent shift that has led governments the world over to promote ‘low-skill’ jobs to the status of ‘essential,’ it is necessary to acknowledge how the figure of the ‘low-skilled worker’ has been socially constructed. The OECD defines low-skilled workers on the basis of their educational attainment rather than in relation to the job they perform (Zwart and Baker 2018). Organizations such as the OECD, the European Union’s Eurostat or the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in Britain use these definitions to calculate the so-called ‘skills mismatches’,¹ which they consider as market inefficiencies. For an individual worker, these inefficiencies are more often to the bottom, which means that they work in a job below their skills-level and thus receive lower wages. For capital, these types of skill-mismatches to the bottom can result in labour shortages (if skilled workers refuse to accept lower-skilled jobs), which can place pressure on labour costs and increase workers’ bargaining power. According to the OECD, 80 million workers in Europe are mismatched by qualifications – a sign that our labour markets are completely dysfunctional (Compas 2016).

The British ONS calculates workers' skills-levels in terms of how long it takes someone to acquire the necessary skills to perform a certain job.² This explicitly creates a hierarchy of skills, which inflates Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) skills and directly devalues non-STEM, or other invisible, heterogenous and non-quantifiable skills such as inter-personal and relational skills, as well as competences acquired through work experience. This situation also helps explain why those economic sectors that employ mostly female workers – who tend to have non-STEM skills in higher percentages as compared to men – remain undervalued and underpaid compared to traditional male occupations, even if the degree of qualification is comparable. For instance, work with elderly, disabled or ill patients in the care and healthcare sectors requires complex and highly skilled emotional labour, which greatly determines the quality of the care provided, but that nonetheless remains unrecognized by these classifications (Stevano et al. 2021; Bolton, 2004; Bolton et al., 2004; Kessler et al., 2015).

According to McGovern (2020) 'there are no universal units of skill in which one quality can be objectively compared with another'. Economists solve this conundrum by putting a market value on the output produced, which doesn't however say anything about the social value of a job. Moreover, McGovern suggests that those workers with university degrees are not necessarily better at performing their tasks, as nearly all occupations involve a high degree of learning 'on the job'.

The distinction between low and high skills thus has been presented as one based on educational levels, with a narrow understanding of education as one that does not include vocational training or other inter-personal skills. At a fundamental level, it is based on the distinction between manual and intellectual labour. Consequently, the skills hierarchy has served to present wages as meritocratic rewards for those who achieve high-levels of tertiary education, in particular in the STEM subjects. University education in the social sciences or humanities has thus been refitted to teach transferable skills with the goal of creating employable graduates for whom the old trade union slogan of 'lifelong learning' has become the nightmare of perpetual self-optimisation through skills acquisition.

There was an understandable reason why the trade union movement of the twentieth century demanded life-long learning and up-skilling for the workforce (ETUI 2009). This was to create a company or sector-wide internal labour market, which would strengthen the bargaining position of the union and the workers who had worked within the same company or sector for a long time. Eventually up-skilling would also lead to productivity gains, which would translate into higher wages and improved terms and conditions for workers. The trade union movement was successful in establishing this for a small section of mostly highly trained male workers in industry and manufacturing. With the breakdown of the post-WWII consensus, the onset of neoliberal economic and labour policies, and a shift towards a service-based employment, this model of economic and social integration through lifelong learning and up-skilling of the workforce vanished.

Since the 1970s onwards, a large portion of those employed in the lower rungs of the labour market and paid low wages have increasingly been migrants, racialised workers and/or female (and feminized) workers (Burawoy 1976; Ruhs and Anderson 2010). Yet, the mostly migrant, racialised and female workers that are employed in social-reproductive sectors and have been categorised as 'essential' during the COVID-19 crisis were never part of this economic set-up of Keynesian capitalism. Then and now, if they receive

any training at all, it is nothing more than a glorified on-boarding, or company-run training scheme, to enable them to do their job. Most of these training schemes are non-certified, meaning that workers who have completed hours of training do not have these recognized when they move to other companies within or outside the sector. The European Union's Joint Employment Report 2020 evidences that only four per cent of low-skilled workers are currently enrolled in any educational programme for adults across the EU (European Commission 2020). This is one of the ways capital is empowered over labour, as workers are less mobile, or confident to try switch jobs and thus achieve higher wages.

Besides the dubious efficacy of training schemes, statistical evidence reveals that race and ethnicity shape labour market outcomes in significant ways. Research has consistently shown that migrants from the Global South are often treated as less skilled in Western countries and find hard to have their formal qualifications and work experience recognized. Such a misrecognition forces them to accept low-paid jobs below their skill-levels (Cuban, 2013; Siar, 2013). Migrant and racialised workers in general frequently receive lower wages than workers without a migration background even though they are equally qualified or perform the same job (Reitz et al., 2014). For instance, a study on New York City workers has shown that Black and Latinx migrants earn between 20 and 30 per cent less than a white worker with the same educational degree (Dyssegaard Kallick, 2013). One of the largest migrant groups, Dominicans, have the poorest socio-economic outcomes as they find themselves in low-end manufacturing and service jobs (Torres-Saillant & Hernández, 2013). Furthermore, most poor migrants entering the labour market find themselves in low-pay and low-skill 'ethnic niches.' Three-fourths of those working in construction in New York City are newly arrived migrants, while nursing aides are often Haitian, while Mexicans are centred in food preparation services (Foner, 2013).

But alongside the growth of the low-skills sector, as companies have tried to circumvent the low-productivity rates of the service economy through the hyper-exploitation of low-wage racialized workers, the high-skills sector has grown sharply too, creating a phenomenon that some have called 'skills polarization' (Martinaitis et al. 2021). This skills polarization is a by-product of the increased use of technology and proliferation of STEM skills in certain sectors. In many ways, the low-skill and high-skill economies have also become inter-dependent as professionals have increasingly relied on so-called low-skills workers such as cleaners, carers, beauticians, food deliveries etc. to accommodate their lifestyles and consumption patterns (Sassen 2008).

Racialization and feminization of low-skill, social reproductive jobs

As we briefly mentioned in the section above, so-called low-skill economies particularly in the realm of social reproduction have increasingly relied on feminized and racialised workers to make services more profitable. To be sure, labour markets in the Global North have always been segmented along racial and gendered lines. At the onset of the industrial revolution while women's factory work was generally considered unskilled, migrant labourers filled the reserve armies of labour of under-employed manual workers and were usually placed at the bottom of the labour rank. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century migrant 'low-skill' workers were either rural labourers, who

were forced to move to the industrial cities due to land dispossession, or foreigners from third countries who were often attracted by state policies aimed at providing labour power for the growing urban manufacturing industries (Burawoy 1976; Brox 2006).

However, the late 1960s and 1970s mark a sea change in the ways in which the racial and gendered segmentation of the labour market and social reproduction are organized. With the progressive de-industrialisation of the Global North, the growing service economy attracted more and more women for paid jobs, thereby opening up the space for the increasing commodification of social reproductive activities that women used to undertake at home for free (domestic work, caring, cleaning, food preparation and delivery, etc.) (Parreñas 2001; Lutz 2011). Migrants and ethnic minority workers in particular have been employed in the social reproductive industry, which has been considered low-skill and low-pay. Furthermore, the historical defeats of the labour movement in the 1980s and the consequent erosion of labour standards, led to a reclassification of many jobs as low-skill and precarious (Gesthuizen et al. 2011). As such, they have been condemned to long-term or permanent insecurity and fewer bargaining margins (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Since the 1980s the world of labour has thus increasingly undergone what has been commonly described as a process of feminization and racialization (Standing 1999; Carter et al. 1996). These processes do not indicate only that the rates of participation in the labour market of women, migrants and ethnic minority/racialised workers have grown significantly, but above all that the low wages and bad working conditions that have been historically reserved for feminized and racialised subjects have now been extended to an ever larger proportion of the working class through various forms of precarious and low-pay contracts.

The segmentation of the labour market along gender and racial lines is thus strictly connected both to the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, which has attracted more and more women to the job market, and to the reorganization of transnational mobilities, which has seen millions of migrants worldwide on the move, in spite of growing bordering operations.

On the one hand, the transition to the post-Fordist accumulation regime that began in the early 1970s has been accompanied by, as well as given rise to, a number of new developments: the relocation of numerous industries to so-called 'developing' countries where labour costs are lower; the casting of labour rights as a cost of production to be reduced to enhance competitiveness; the technological revolution, which has permitted a wider range of technological-managerial options in working arrangements; the general erosion of the welfare state and protective labour regulations; the decentralization of wage determination and the erosion of employment security alongside a trend to market regulation rather than statutory regulation of the labour market; and finally the commodification of many socially reproductive activities that under Fordism were performed by many (mostly White) women for free.

All of these developments have shaped the new gender division of labour, whereby greater emphasis on labour costs has been followed by the greater use of alternative forms of employment as compared to the full-time wage contract, bringing to an end the male breadwinner model (Mcdowell 1991).

On the other hand, the racialization of the lower echelons of the skills hierarchy is linked to what Alessandro De Giorgi calls the simultaneous process of de- and re-bordering of richer nations after the 1973 oil crisis (De Giorgi 2010). This means that while the

so-called stoppage policies of the mid 1970s in Northern Europe and the USA were meant to send non-nationals the message that they were no longer welcome – at least rhetorically – those same borders were selectively left open to enough migrants to meet the growing demand for cheap labour (Papadopolous 2008). As a consequence, an increasing number of occupations at the bottom of the socially reproductive labour market in the so-called DDD (Dirty, Dangerous and Demanding) and CCC (Caring, Cooking and Cleaning) jobs have been reserved for racialised and disposable populations in particular as these jobs are deemed unskilled and tend to pay abysmally low wages. The processes of de-bordering and re-bordering that have been put in place by the richer countries in the last forty years are thus meant for nothing but to control, select and govern labour mobility and create reserve armies of labour (De Giorgi 2010). Whether the European Union's 'freedom of movement', the points-based immigration systems in countries like Australia or Canada, the *de facto* toleration of nearly 12 million undocumented migrants in the USA, these policies lock migrants into a subordinate position, spoil them of political rights, and make them instantly disposable or deportable (De Genova 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). This type of flexible and instrumental process of de- and re-bordering parallels the increased flexibilisation of the labour market, which capitalists deem necessary to accumulate profits in times of sluggish growth and low profitability. ONS data (ONS 2017) on EU A8 migrants underlined how they are concentrated in some of the lowest paying economic sectors such as agriculture, wholesale, retail, hotels and restaurants, care and domestic work, arguably creating socially reproductive 'ethnic niches.'

Some of the jobs at the bottom of the segmented racialised and feminized labour markets we described above include those in the agricultural and care sectors. Jobs in these sectors are amongst the lowest paid and lowest regarded in our societies. And yet – following on Tithi Batthacharya's definition – they should be better described as 'life-making jobs, or activities', for without them the reproduction of life, simply stated, is not possible (Batthacharya 2017). It is not surprising then, that in the midst of a pandemic these jobs are now being categorised as 'key, or essential' (De Camargo and Whiley 2020; Stevano et al. 2021), thereby turning the skills hierarchy on its head. As mentioned above, international institutions such as the OECD, World Bank, and IMF argue that workers in agriculture, care work and other 'life-making'-sectors cannot be granted higher wages because productivity gains are difficult to achieve. Meanwhile, 'bullshit jobs' – to borrow David Graeber's apt definition³ – such as project, training and sales managers, private equity CEOs, lobbyists, telemarketers and actuaries lie on the other end of the polarization and have seen salary increases beyond belief, contributing to rising income inequality (Helpman 2016; Botwinick 2018) And this is not because they are jobs that require high skills, but only because they allow companies to multiply their profit margins. The on-going crisis thus has made at least crystal clear that humanity will probably do just fine without the bullshit jobs. But it is also making increasingly clear that the reason why life-making workers such as nurses, carers, agricultural workers and so forth receive low wages is not because they do not possess important skills. Instead, it is because our capitalist driven economies find that profits are higher when the majority of life-making professions are devalued to second-rate ranking and remain reliant upon feminized, racialised and other categories of 'more disposable' workers, as these workers have less bargaining power and are thus 'forced' to accept

low-wages. Furthermore, capitalists understand all too well that some life-making sectors serve profit-making better if they remain, at least in part, non-mechanised. In this latter respect, it need be reassessed Braverman's and, partly Marx's, prediction that the capitalist growing investment in mechanization will bring about the deskilling of workers.

Skilling and automation: a non-linear process

Marxist scholars in particular have long regarded the construction of 'skills' as functional to the deepening of the division between manual and non-manual workers, and thus, as the root cause of social inequalities and workers' alienation (Rattansi 1982). In *Capital* Volume I Marx argued that capitalism's tendency towards mechanization would lead to the increasing de-skilling of workers, an idea later embraced by Henry Braverman in the 1970s in his pioneering work on monopoly capitalism (Braverman 1974). For Braverman, technological advancement in capitalist societies created the conditions in which 'the more science is incorporated into the labour process, the less the worker understands of the process; the more sophisticated an intellectual product the machine becomes, the less control and comprehension of the machine the worker has' (Braverman 1974, 295).

Braverman's diagnosis was referring to a Fordist world in which the majority of workers in the Global North were employed in manufacturing and industrial production. With the growing relocation of many factories to the Global South and the expansion of tertiary economies in the Global North from the late 1970s onwards,⁴ some of his hypotheses required correction as tumultuous economic development have led to the re-organisation of work.

Instead of a linear process of 'de-skilling' of the workforce through constant automation, what we have witnessed since the 1970s instead is a rather heterogenous process of patch-worked mechanization within the same sector, and an increasing polarization and segmentation of skills, occupations and economic branches between high-skill and low-skill (Alabdulkareem et al. 2018). Unlike the situation predicted by Braverman, not only have important economic sectors with low levels of mechanization (such as health and social care and agriculture for instance) resorted to a workforce defined as low-skilled, but also the conditions of possibility for introducing more automation and mechanization into these sectors seems to be to recruit higher-skilled rather than low-skilled workers, at least in the near future (Borrett 2021).

The lack of (or low resort to) mechanization in some key sectors has been even used as a justification to either prevent workers' up-skilling, or to treat such low-automated sectors as too labour intensive and too low in productivity to be entitled high wages (Strauss 2018).

Agricultural work, particularly in Europe, is a chief example of a social reproductive industry which has mostly maintained very low levels of mechanization in order not to up-skill but rather de-skill workers. While various forms of agricultural mechanization in the Global South have focused mostly on land cultivation technology or are employed in monoculture crops, in Europe in particular the sector has remained in large part reliant upon migrant day labourers whose hands and arms are still the only reliable 'tools' to pick fruit and vegetables (Borrett 2021). These agricultural workers are a prime example of skills mismatch, as they often hold degrees or vocational training from

their home countries, which are not recognized in the European Union (Visintin et al. 2015). The large availability of migrant workers is the main reason why the sector in the richer parts of Europe has remained largely un-mechanised. Employing workers from poorer countries is in fact cheaper than buying costly machinery, insofar as initial investment is high and needs to be managed and maintained by highly skilled engineers and technical staff. Migrants working in the agricultural sector are often undocumented or else recruited as seasonal workers with visas only allowing them to remain within a country for the given harvest. It is precisely this situation of illegality and/or extreme precariousness of the agricultural migrant workforce that allows employers to depress wages, keep labourers politically disenfranchised and in a constant state of fear. Moreover, employers cash in considerably by providing migrant workers with food and lodging, and thus paying them abysmally low wages (even though the housing they provide are mostly made of barracks below ILO standards) (Apostolidis 2019). As discussed above, the combination between the skills hierarchy and migration regimes has allowed agribusiness to save on labour costs and rake in massive profits. Life-making activities such as agriculture thus, are belittled and remain unrecognized in times of relative capitalist stability. Yet, it is in times of crisis such as the one we are living that their essential role is revealed for what it is.

Another social reproductive sector, which has moved centre stage in recent weeks is care work. Whether healthcare, social care or childcare, care work is exemplary of a sector, which cannot be easily automated. Attempts at automating some parts of care using ‘nursebots’ in care homes, for instance, have mostly failed (Folbre 2011; Fegitz 2021).

Care workers cannot be replaced by machines precisely because care tasks require inter-personal and relational skills (Folbre 2011; Federici 2014). Thus, one of capital’s strategies to reduce the labour costs in the care sector has been that of recruiting (again) migrant workers from various parts of the Global South or comparatively poorer areas, or ethnic minority workers with fewer bargaining powers. And like the agricultural sector, the care sector too is one in which most job profiles – from nurses, to elderly carers to day-care teachers – are considered low-skill, even though many of the (predominantly female) migrant and racialised workers in the sector tend to have high degrees (Kofman 2020). This results in workers being under-paid and employers being able to save on labour costs. In recent years employers have opted for different strategies to devalue and under-pay care work. In particular, they have attempted to standardize and segment the care work process, which is facilitated by the growing corporatization of large sections of childcare and elderly care in many EU countries (Farris and Marchetti 2017; Farris 2020). This has been increasingly made possible by the fact that for-profit companies are investing in care, taking advantage both of the growing demand for elderly care brought about by the ageing of the population and by the state’s subsidy of private care services.

All in all, the reason why agricultural work and care are mostly (and increasingly) low pay is not because of their skills requirements, but exclusively because these are life-making sectors that capitalists deem too low in productivity and too labour intensive, to the extent that profit-making is possible only through the squeezing of low-waged workers. As Social Reproduction Theory well explains, capitalist production needs social reproduction in order to thrive, but capitalists want to pay as little as possible

for it, if at all (Batthacharya 2017). That is why many life-making workers such as waste collectors, healthcare or utilities workers are either incorporated into state services (which provide increasingly less jobs security and pay given the dominance of New Public Management), or else employed through private organizations which compete with each other by reducing labour costs.

Low-skill, social reproduction jobs are the protagonists of new organized labour

Since March 2020 we have witnessed not only the re-labelling of so-called low-skill workers (in social reproduction and other areas) as ‘essential’, but also a public glorification of these often low-paid workers. Alongside the well-known weekly clap for carers, essential workers’ stories have been featured in high-profile, high-audience media outlets, from the BBC’s series of ‘portraits of NHS frontline ‘heroes’⁵ through *Vogue* UK’s cover page images of ‘essential workers’⁶ to the proliferation of homemade posters ‘thanking key-workers as heroes’ in public and private spaces. The appreciation of these workers as ‘essential’ has certainly helped give rise to a newfound visibility and has led to a call— from left to right—for a reassessment of their salaries and working conditions, or at least for rewarding their efforts in the fight against the pandemic (De Camargo and Whiley 2020; Wood and Skeggs 2020; Farris et al. 2021; Stevano et al. 2021).

In late 2020, for instance, *The Financial Times* carried a number of articles suggesting the need to compensate key workers through higher wages and more secure contracts.⁷ On the political scene, the Liberal Democrats have called for frontline health staff to receive the same £29-a-day ‘active duty’ bonus as the armed forces, whilst Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has called for a ‘reckoning’ for keyworkers once the crisis has passed, claiming that keyworkers have ‘often been overlooked [and] underpaid’.⁸ Even more conservative-leaning media venues, such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*, have called for the government to reward essential workers with cash bonuses or similar one-off rewards to thank them for their life-saving work during the pandemic. As we write on the eve of what looks like a new stage of the pandemic in late 2021, the public call for improving essential workers’ conditions has not been followed through with concrete actions. In the space of a months, the UK government has gone from offering a maigre 1% increase for NHS staff, to rising up to 3% after growing pressure. And yet, NHS staff have overwhelmingly rejected the offer and are on the brink of undertaking strike action or leaving for better paid jobs in other sectors.⁹ Since January 2021, care workers at the Sage care home in North London went through a series of strike actions demanding wage increases and parity with NHS staff in terms of work entitlements.¹⁰ Porters, cleaners, caterers, refuse collectors and other social reproduction workers in hospitals, schools and councils have all engaged in various forms of labour unrest to ask for better pay and working conditions.¹¹ Drivers and logistics workers have equally undertaken strike action or initiated labour unrest protesting against their low pay and working treatment.¹² The sudden recognition these social reproduction workers received during the pandemic when they have been called essential seems to have something to do with their recent embrace of strike action and other forms of labour unrest. As one of the school cleaners who went on

strike in a Glasgow school well recognized, ‘the clapping has not translated into a ‘*respectful*’ new pay deal’.¹³ The lack of respect the government and employers have shown for these life-making and life-saving workers is felt more than ever, as it contradicts their newly acquired status of key workers whose skills are vital to our well-being. Indeed, as many of these workers increasingly recognize, ‘as carers we are doing a skilled job’.¹⁴

The strikes and various forms of labour unrest by social reproductive so-called low-skill workers have raised eyebrows in many corners of the mainstream press with the NY Mag even featuring a story titled: ‘The Coronavirus is radicalizing workers’ (Jones 2020). Many of these strikes and protests are in fact also an indication that union organizing is coming back.

Countering a trend that began in the mid 1980s, when trade union membership began to decline sharply across OECD countries, the crisis engendered by the Covid-19 pandemic seems to be pushing workers, particularly essential workers in social reproductive sectors, to join unions.

The worker campaign platform *Organize*, had fewer than 100,000 members in 2019, at the end of 2021 it counts more than one million. In April 2020 UNITE, one of the largest unions in the UK stated that more than 16,000 workers joined the union since the beginning of the lockdown in March the same year.¹⁵ Similar trends have been seen in other unions and countries such as Sweden (Kjellberg 2021) and the USA¹⁶ where the growth of membership within existing unions is going hand in hand with attempts at unionizing by workers who are employed by more recent, not unionized industries.¹⁷

At a time when the link between productivity, skills and wages is clearly broken down across the whole of our economies, these forms of labour unrest by so-called low-skill workers in general, and social-reproduction workers in particular can open up new conversations about the nature of skilled labour and the roots of the division of labour more generally.

Foregrounding the demands for higher wages and improved conditions for social reproduction, life-making workers might thus prove strategically key for the contemporary labour movement at this conjuncture. That is the case not only because life-making workers continue to be on the frontline in a time of a pandemic (Farris et al. 2021), but also because their struggles shed light in the clearest possible way on the unsustainability and life-threatening nature of capitalism. Social reproduction sectors could thus become the new hubs of organized labour. As life-making labourers stand in an insoluble contradiction with profit-making rationality, their work can speak of an alternative way of conceiving the economy and wealth, one which puts human lives and public health first.

Conclusions

In this paper we depart from the acknowledgement that the Covid-19 Pandemic has forced governments the world over to recognize many socially reproductive jobs as ‘essential’. The status of essentiality, however, brings to the fore the deep contradictions entailed in addressing the key role of work which is essential for reproducing life, while continuing to treat it as low-skill and low wage. Building upon this contradiction, our key points are that: first, classifications based on ‘skills’ are not fit for purpose as they are based on problematic measures of training-time, do not acknowledge emotional and relational skills which are indispensable for the delivery of certain services, and are

based on gender and racial biases which tend to portray as ‘low-skills’ occupations in which women and racialised people are over-represented. Second, we argued that a closer look at some socially reproductive industries, which have been under the spotlight during the Pandemic, reveals the complex interplay between skills and automation. Rather than a linear tendency towards de-skilling due to automation, we see that socially reproductive activities such as caring and agriculture have maintained low levels of mechanization also due to the availability of a largely feminized and racialised workforce treated as low-skill. This consideration should constitute the basis for a deep rethinking on the usefulness of maintaining a lexicon of skills and the current division of labour more generally. Finally, we have argued that one of the most interesting, albeit contradictory, developments connected to the official recognition of many socially reproductive jobs as ‘essential’ has been the new wave of unionization and labour unrest amongst these workers. While it is too early to assess the potential of these labour struggles, we argue that they are, at least to an extent, the result of the paradoxes brought about by the glorification of many essential workers as life-makers and life-savers coupled with their continuing devaluation and low-wages.

Although these are all important developments, we would like to emphasise their contradictory nature and conclude with some brief considerations that we believe should shape our future scholarly and political agendas. In particular, we claim that we should be very wary of the traps hidden behind the sudden appreciation of social reproduction jobs as ‘essential’.

The labelling of life-making and life-saving jobs as ‘essential’ risks to lead to assume a mode of thinking that demands a distinction between ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’ occupations. As we live in a world dominated by neoliberal narratives, such a distinction can be easily employed to reinforcing capitalist prejudice and tactics rather than challenging them. Jobs considered as ‘non-essential’ are in fact often those that belong to the art, creative and cultural industries, which have experienced severe cuts over many years, as they are deemed non-profitable (Preston 2015). Jobs that are based in sectors that are experiencing a lowering, or lack of demand in the present or foreseeable future (e.g. hotels and hospitality industry, airports and air-companies etc.) also risk to be labelled as ‘non-essential’. This is leading to widespread redundancies, or ‘short-time work’ contracts. Furthermore, reports begin to suggest that professionals, for instance, are facing increased workloads because of the move to home-work online (Hayes et al. 2020). As the EY’s latest study suggests, the current pandemic is being used to automate numerous industries that employ white-collars.¹⁸ Furthermore, new information systems technologies and internal HR systems have increased workplace surveillance.¹⁹ Swathes of professionals are now being digitally monitored in the same way as a Deliveroo driver, with some groups of them now experiencing the precariousness, insecure pay and the feeling of worthlessness that so many now called ‘essential workers’ have experienced on a day-to-day basis for a long time. The binary ‘essential/non-essential’ can thus be a dangerous terrain for workers’ rights as it can provide the ‘moral’ justification for new skills-hierarchies and unemployment as some kind of deserved outcome.

We also agree with Stevano et al. (2021) when they claim that classifications of jobs based on essentiality are not fit to overcome the antinomies at the heart of the capitalist relation between production and reproduction. This is particularly clear in the case of the many socially reproductive activities which have continued to be treated as unskilled and

poorly remunerated in spite of the recognition of their importance. Furthermore, the problematic measure and status of essentiality become apparent when we consider that much unpaid socially reproductive work has not been granted such a status.

All in all, the arguments presented in this article speak of the need to be wary of the skills-lexicon we have inherited according to which low-pay jobs that are deemed unprofitable are lacking in skills and competence. Contra this widespread narrative we tried to demonstrate, instead, that the skills paradigm and hierarchies that continue to determine huge social inequalities are embedded into the logic of capitalist social relations, rather than being an expression of the features of jobs themselves. As so-called low-skill workers are now praised as ‘essential’ and also particularly active in the labour movement, their fight for the recognition of the dignity and importance of their jobs and professions can open up new grounds for rethinking the division of labour in our societies.

Notes

1. See the European Economic and Social Committee: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/skills-mismatches-impediment-competitiveness-eu-businesses>
2. See ONS definitions of job profiles: https://onsdigital.github.io/dp-classification-tools/standard-occupational-classification/ONS_SOC_hierarchy_view.html
3. See interview with David Graeber at this link: <https://www.vox.com/2018/5/8/17308744/bullshit-jobs-book-david-graeber-occupy-wall-street-karl-marx> (Last accessed 11 November 2021).
4. See figure 4 at this link: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/output/articles/changesintheeconomysincethe1970s/2019-09-02> (Last accessed 11 November 2021).
5. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-52664628> (accessed February 14, 2021)
6. See <https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/keyworkers-july-2020-issue-british-vogue> (accessed February 14, 2021)
7. See, for example <https://www.ft.com/content/6c7b59ad-be4f-46b3-8386-072f106a1960>; <https://www.ft.com/content/2b34269a-73f8-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>; and <https://www.ft.com/content/d31e6627-1cc3-4f10-b96e-2b9e2670aaac> (accessed February 14, 2021).
8. See, for example, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52342511> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52169648> (accessed February 14, 2021)
9. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/sep/20/most-nhs-staff-vote-to-oppose-3-pay-rise-as-union-warns-workers-fed-up>
10. <https://www.uvwunion.org.uk/en/campaigns/sage-nursing-home/>
11. See news covering strike action by hospital workers (<https://www.gmb.org.uk/news/gmb-yorkshire-hospital-strike-after-massive-pay-win-workers>); park cleaners: <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/cleaners-royal-parks-begin-strike-action/management/article/1724910>; refuse collectors (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-56726087>); school cleaners (<https://www.twinkl.com/article/school-cleaners-win-wage-increase-and-sick-pay-after-strike>);
12. Delivery workers on strike: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/aug/25/yodel-drivers-begin-strike-vote-raising-fears-for-uk-supply-chains>) Deliveroo drivers strike: <https://www.businessinsider.com/deliveroo-riders-strike-pay-working-conditions-uk-ipo-2021-4?r=US&IR=T>) Tesco Drivers: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/money/1500-stores-face-more-empty-24795909>)
13. <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/school-cleaners-face-disgusting-conditions-as-strike-action-looms?top>

14. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/care-home-workers-strike-b1788070.html>
15. UniteLive, Tuesday, April 7th, 2020, Unite will leave no worker behind, source: <https://unitelive.org/unite-will-leave-no-worker-behind/> (Similar trends have been seen in other unions and countries such as Sweden, Belgium and the USA where the growth of membership within existing unions is going hand in hand with attempts at unionising by workers who are employed by more recent, not unionised industries, such as domestic work, coffee chain workers and delivery riders)
16. See: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/29/support-of-labor-unions-is-at-65percentheres-whats-behind-the-rise.html>
17. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/09/us-workers-amazon-unions>
18. 'Bosses speed up automation as virus keeps workers home,' 30 Mar 2020, *The Guardian*, source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/bosses-speed-up-automation-as-virus-keeps-workers-home>
19. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/30/work-from-home-surveillance/>

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