Seminar Description

Where will the coming generation of Americans (say, today’s 18-year-olds) find jobs? And will the jobs be worth having?

People have worried about losing their jobs to technology at least since the Luddites 200 years ago. In the aggregate, they have been wrong. The automobile put lots of stable boys and saddle makers out of work, but it created vastly more jobs making cars, and fueling them and repairing them, and it opened the way for whole new industries like roadside motels and restaurants. With robots increasingly performing the tasks once done by blue-collar labor, however, and computers and artificial intelligence now eliminating the need for many workers once thought to be immune because of their cognitive skills, today’s technological threat seems different. It is no longer just the unskilled and undereducated whose jobs are at risk. Moreover, the challenge may be especially acute in America, where wages are far higher than in many other countries and an ever greater share of what we consume and invest not only can be provided from overseas but often is.

Does the next generation of Americans, then, face a genuine threat from advancing workplace technology? If so, what are the dangers – not just economic, but social, political, even moral – to the country as a whole? Most important, what can we do about it?

Weekly Syllabus

September 5. What is the economic and social policy question, and why does it matter?

Jeremy Rifkin, The End of Work (1995), Ch. 1

September 12. How work in America changed in earlier times

Robert J. Gordon, The Rise and Fall of American Growth (2016), Ch. 8
September 19. The social and psychological value of work

Note: This meeting will be rescheduled to a different day.

N. Gregory Mankiw, *Principles of Economics* (8\textsuperscript{th} edn., 2018), pp. 368-369
Alan Krueger, “Where Have All the Workers Gone? An Inquiry into the Decline of the U.S. Labor Force participation Rate” (2017), Sections IV, VI
*World Happiness Report* (2017), Ch. 6 (examine the charts, but no need to read carefully)

September 26. The moral value of work

*Genesis*, Ch. 1, 2 (v. 1-3), 6 (v. 5-22)
Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address” (1933)

October 3. Early concerns over automation and technological unemployment

Lord Byron (yes, it’s the poet), “Speech on the Frame Breaking Act” (1812)
John Maynard Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren” (1930)

October 10. Today’s technological optimists

Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age* (2014), Ch. 2, 3, 6-8
Luke Dormehl, *Thinking Machines* (2017), Ch. 5, 6

October 17. Today’s technological pessimists

Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* (2016), Ch. 17

October 24. Recent empirical assessments


October 31. Education as a solution?

Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race Between Education and Technology* (2008), Ch. 3, 9
Alan B. Krueger, “Inequality, Too Much of a Good Thing” (2003), pp. 21-55
November 7. Job sharing as a solution?

Alexandre Mas and Amanda Pallais, “Valuing Alternative Work Arrangements” (2017), Sections 1, 2, 4-7


Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborcht, Basic Income (2017), Ch. 1, 2 and pp. 82-93

Note: No meeting on November 21

November 28. Other potential solutions?

Joseph Blasi, Richard Freeman and Douglas Kruse, The Citizen’s Share (2013), Introduction and Ch. 3, 6
Benjamin Austin, Edward Glaeser and Lawrence H. Summers, “Saving the Heartland: Place-Based Policies in 21st Century America” (2018), Sections I, II, VI, VII

December 5. What do we think?

No assigned readings for the final meeting – only discussion

Readings

Students should read the materials designated for each week before that week’s class meeting. Informed participation in discussion is what a seminar is all about. Readings for each meeting will be available as pdf’s on the course website. There are no books or course packs to buy.

Discussion Questions

Two or three specific questions for discussion will be posted in advance of each meeting (except the first one). Students should think about these questions in advance and come to class prepared to articulate their views.

Assignments

Paper #1 (2-3 pages, due Friday, September 28): What’s wrong with economists’ standard thinking about work and jobs?
Paper #2 (4-5 pages, due Friday, October 26): How serious is the problem America is likely to face?

Paper #3 (5-7 pages, due Friday, December 7): What should we do?

Statement on Academic Integrity

Discussing ideas and work-in-progress with others is a natural and healthy part of the intellectual process. It is what professors do, it is what other researchers do, and it is both expected and desirable that students do so as well. But in the end a student’s work – in this case the papers each student submits for the course – must be his or her own effort, written by the student him- or herself, and ultimately based on his or her own thinking. Discussing ideas with others is certainly not prohibited. Turning in someone else’s work certainly is.

Office Hours

I want each student in the seminar to come by for an informal “get acquainted” conversation as soon as possible once the semester begins. I also hope students will feel free, throughout the term, to visit during office hours or to make additional appointments if office hours are insufficient. My regularly scheduled office hours are on Mondays, 4:00-5:30, in Littauer 127. (For any week in which Monday is not available, my office hours will be on Wednesday, 5:00-6:30.) But I am always glad to find another time to meet if Monday afternoon doesn’t work for someone’s schedule. Remember that one-on-one conversation is an important part of the learning process – for both students and professors.

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