

How Nature Works

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How Nature Works

RETHINKING LABOR
ON A TROUBLED PLANET

Edited by Sarah Besky and Alex Blanchette

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The world I thought I knew has fallen to pieces, shattered beyond repair. Despair grabs me in its clutch whenever this grim realization presses down on me, driving me to distraction, cynicism, or, in my better moments, to closing ranks with kin and kindred spirits.

I can't help but feel myself glimmering with hope, though, after reading the collection of essays you hold in your hand and recalling the livening few days I spent with the editors and authors at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2016.

I am not an anthropologist, but I have long turned to anthropology for inspiration. As a historian who has worked for more than two decades to make sense of the fraught intersections between capitalists and workers, culture and nature, Indigenous peoples and settler-colonial societies, and, most recently, human and more-than-human beings, I continually come back to anthropology when I need to find questions I should ask, bodies of theory I should get to know, and methods worth adapting to my studies of the past.

The field of anthropology has always struck me as endlessly rich. And yet it is not where I usually turn when I need a pick-me-up.

Who would?

And this is what makes *How Nature Works: Rethinking Labor on a Troubled Planet* so exceptional: the book you are about to read offers an unexpected exercise in hope. These essays are subtle rather than shrill, purposeful but never programmatic, simultaneously heady and heartfelt. They sound no unitary call for reform or revolution.

Instead, they point in many directions. Urgently yet tentatively, with genuine humility and the freshest of thinking, they explore questions that everyone who cares about this fragile world of ours should be asking.

They ask us to trouble work as well as to refuse it—to tear down categories while probing the multifarious, deeply fraught ways in which human and other-than-human beings and entities collaborate to make both nature and culture. They implore us to reserve wonder and resist so many of the ontological and political snarls in which we have simultaneously limited ourselves and enmeshed ever-widening circles of “others,” thus jeopardizing our collective existence.

None of us can say for certain whether these invitations to rethink work

and nature can help us—the collective, superhuman *US* encompassed by Buddhist invocations to extend consideration to all sentient beings as well as Lakota teachings to consider the impact of our actions on everyone and everything to whom we are—find the resilience required to survive these dark days of exhaustion and extinction on a warming planet that is overworked and undervalued.¹

At the very least, these essays light some of the paths we would do well to search out if we are to foster needful ways of knowing and being, working and enduring.

The world I thought I knew has been rent asunder. The book you hold in your hands, though, gives me hope that perhaps a world I want to know might still remain possible.

There is so much work yet to do—and even more that would be better undone.

—Thomas G. Andrews

Note

1. I do not use the Lakota phrase because of the critique of it offered by Francis White Bird, “Levels of Lakota Language: Part Two,” *Lakota Country Times*, February 24, 2018, <https://www.lakotacountrytimes.com/articles/lakota-country-times-344/>. Accessed November 27, 2018. I am reminded here of Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

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The dialogue that led to this volume was first initiated at the 2014 Society for Cultural Anthropology Biennial Meeting in Detroit on “The Ends of Work.” Thanks to John Hartigan and Cori Hayden for organizing that truly remarkable and generative meeting. Early drafts of this volume were discussed in a fall 2016 graduate seminar on “Labor and Social Life” at Brown University. Multiple chapters were also workshopped in March 2017 at Brown, where the sharp critiques and guidance of all participants strengthened this book. We offer our heartfelt thanks especially to Jane Collins, Naisargi Dave, Amelia Moore, Jason Moore, Michelle Murphy, Alex Nading, and Bhri Gupta Singh. At Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute, a writing group on critical food studies helped us polish the book’s introduction. For their incisive comments, we thank Julie Guthman, Lisa Haushofer, Susanne Friedberg, Allison-Marie Loconto, and Wythe Marschall.

We were fortunate to be able to organize three panels around this book’s themes at the 116th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 2017. This offered an opportunity to put chapters from this volume into dialogue with other scholars’ pursuits at the intersection of labor and nature. In addition to various people whose work constitutes the chapters of this volume, we thank Danielle DiNovelli-Lang, Radhika Govindrajan, Karen Hébert, Cymene Howe, Marcel LaFlamme, Amelia Moore, Heather Paxson, Lesley Sharp, and Amy Zhang. Jessica Cattelino, Naisargi Dave, Shiho Satsuka, and

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The Fragility of Work

SARAH BESKY AND ALEX BLANCHETTE

In Paraguay, expanding fields of fast-growing soy plants displace prior generations of crops and peoples. In Malaysia, captive orangutans are forced to learn how to earn their meals, trained by dispossessed farmers whose own survival is now tied to rehabilitating endangered primates. In the United States, honeybees' bodies and life cycles are reshaped to service sprawling almond monocultures. In India, farmers become suspicious that their own labor is morally fraught and exploitative after a prized and prolific dairy cow suddenly refuses to give them any more milk.

These scenes, drawn from this book, could be taken to exemplify a familiar story of how capitalist production sweeps planetary ecologies like an autonomous and unstoppable force. They are certainly testaments to the unplanned consequences and feedback loops that are ever more quickly passing across human and nonhuman lifeways: the production of more feed for factory farms, more species displaced at the edges of rainforests, more farmers stripped of land, more peoples left with little to sell but their labor. This book, however, argues that these cases also allow us to reflect on how relationships between nature and labor are changing. They raise questions about the shifting participants, values, and rhythms underlying capitalist work; they lead us to ask who (or what) should be included as a protagonist in the critical study of labor today. Moreover, they also suggest an underexplored paradox: practices of labor in service to capitalism are expanding—in the sense of being performed by more diverse kinds of bodies and beings—at the exact moment that (human) work's capacity to underpin and organize society seems to be waning.

How Nature Works: Rethinking Labor on a Troubled Planet is intended as an invitation for thought at a moment of conjoined economic and ecological precarity. As a divergent collection of ethnographic writings, it asks how anthropologists

and allied scholars might best conceptualize the productive activity of diverse human and nonhuman beings in contemporary global capitalism. Some chapters in this volume address both the potentials and pitfalls of more-than-human labor studies, asking what it would mean to analyze industrial grains and animals as “workers.” Others raise new questions about the shifting meaning of human work amid rising automation and technological inputs, as the actions of nonhumans—from tractor trailers, to breeding animals, to pesticides—increasingly condition the terms and rhythms of production. The chapters all debate the changing possibilities and limits of labor today, as both an analytical category and a historically privileged basis for fomenting political transformation.

Since the Enlightenment, the ability to do productive work has been framed as an exclusively human capacity—albeit one that has just as often functioned to justify hierarchies between peoples (see also Wynter 2003). Work has been a key means through which the aspirational European category of “Man” was formed and given flesh. John Locke (1980) argued that labor and the improvement of “nature” justified individuals’ claims to land as private property. The displacement and murder of Native peoples deemed incapable of durable and transformative work was often underwritten by such ideologies (see Braun 2002). Karl Marx (1976) argued that while human beings plan their laboring endeavors, creatures such as honeybees or spiders do not. Human beings consciously make new worlds, leaving open the hopeful possibility for radical transformations in how they live together, while nonhuman others largely react to those changes (Marx 1976, 284). Both Marx’s and Locke’s understandings of work depend on fixed categorical divisions: nonhuman and human action, instinct and intention, objects and subjects, nature and culture.

Yet these philosophical divisions have come to feel tenuous—perhaps ironically right at their late industrial apotheosis when traces of human laboring activity suffuse every inch of the planet. The rapid instabilities wrought by climate change (Barnes and Dove 2015; Crate and Nuttall 2009), zoonotic disease (Nading 2015b; Porter 2013), species extinction (Van Dooren 2014; Rose 2013), oil and gas extraction (Appel 2012; Weszkalnys 2015), runaway toxic chemical and pesticide exposure (Graeter 2017; Guthman 2016; Shapiro 2015), nuclear radiation and fallout (Masco 2017), and landslides and environmental risk (Choi 2015; Kockelman 2016; Zeiderman 2016) all make evident that the strict conceptual division of the world into active working (human) subjects and passive worked-upon (nonhuman) objects is becoming more difficult to sustain. While many have considered how the end of pristine “nature” marks a new planetary epoch, the Anthropocene, what this

means for the concept and practice of labor remains underexplored. In response, this book is motivated by the idea that ongoing planetary transformations require a critical reconsideration of labor as a key measure of human uniqueness, value, and social merit. If we accept that climate change and similar mutations are largely irreversible, then we might also take seriously the capacity of the nonhuman world to work upon us, against us, and perhaps with us.

These are more than just scholarly concerns. As we write, environmental instabilities are being actively linked in public discourse to a crisis in capitalist work. On the right wing, politicians tend to place environmental protection at absolute odds with the protection of wage labor. In the 2016 US general election, the slogan “Make America Great Again” indexed a call to unmake society in a host of different ways—from the overtly racist to the economically isolationist. But a core promise was a so-called return of manufacturing jobs from the Global South, and even the creation of new ones. Such economic growth, however, was to be fueled by the rollback of the environmental safeguards that were said to hold these jobs at bay. Across Europe and North America, people have witnessed a slow attrition of industrial jobs due to neoliberal outsourcing and the automation of manufacturing (Rifkin 1995; Kolbert 2016). Factories and mills have shut down (Dudley 1994; Collins 2003; Lamphere 1987), leaving those who once inhabited them constantly looking for work in an economy of zero-hour contracts, part-time shifts, and poorly paid food, hospitality, and service jobs (Walley 2013; Ehrenreich 2001; Jayaraman 2014; see also Graeber 2018). This change did not happen in the distant and forgotten past. Memories of past work loom large, while traces of industrial labor linger in landscapes and on bodies (Walley 2013; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012). Yet the environmental consequences of fossil-fueled production aside, the fact is that many of those (often nostalgically) longed-for industrial jobs appear to be permanently gone. Embodied human labor has been supplanted, in part, by the actions of automated machines, microchips, herbicides, and genetically engineered life forms.

At first glance, the liberal response to twinned environmental and economic crises seems distinct. In the decade preceding the 2016 US elections, American center-left politicians vocally supported the creation of green jobs, the untapped potential of sustainably managed “ecosystem services,” and even the promise of nuclear energy. The growth of the organic food movement and tax incentives for the purchase of solar panels, for instance, aim to confront environmental crisis through market mechanisms. These liberal responses may reject the conservative premise that the environment and the economy are at

absolute odds, but they all have one thing in common: the unquestioned value of work. What is unsettling about even some of the most progressive policy approaches is that they rely on the assumption that the only way to solve planetary crisis is to put more and more human bodies to work. Residents of tropical islands, for example, must become eco-entrepreneurs, selling tourist experiences to make ends meet (A. Moore 2015). Others must put ideas of nature and ecological harmony to work in the sale of organic or fair-trade certified coffee, tea, and sugar in extremely competitive markets (Besky 2014; P. West 2012). Geo-engineering schemes that were unthinkable even a couple of decades ago, such as climate and solar management via injecting aerosols into the stratosphere, are now being seriously debated (McLaren 2015). Such projects promise a return to a pre-crisis planetary state through laboring innovation and will. Or, even more cynically, they use concern about ecological degradation to generate new futures of unending work (DiNovelli-Lang and Hébert 2018).

Across mainstream American political discourse, there is an enduring—and even intensifying—faith in the value of human labor at the exact moment when its capacity to organize society and mitigate environmental ills has never been more in question. In the face of robotics, rising unemployment, and “surplus” populations, more radical thinkers have started claiming that the end of (human) work is looming. They call for us to prepare for a postwork society that will require new ways of distributing time and resources, as well as new aspirations, values, and ideas of what it means to be human (Srnicek and Williams 2015; Harari 2017; McDermott Hughes 2017; Graeber 2018; see also Collins [2017] and Appel [2014] on projects to reimagine the economy). This book is therefore written at a moment of apparent global transition when the meaning and value of work is in flux—and with it, perhaps, long-standing interpretations of what it means to lead a life well lived. It is not at all clear, however, what a future world without work might entail (Atanasoski and Vora 2015; Federici 2018). Rather than forecasting fixed futures of work (or worklessness), then, we take utopian visions of abundance and stories of looming ecological disaster themselves as objects of analysis. The chapters of this volume describe fragile present-day worlds of work where no one certain end is inevitable.