

PLENARY PANEL

AI, Digitalisation, and Labour in the Polycrisis: Global and Institutional Perspectives

Mohammed Amir Anwar, *University of Edinburgh*

Valeria Pulignano, *Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven*

WEDNESDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2026

13:30-14:30

LECTURE THEATRE 0.17

Labour in the Age of AI: Writing from the Global South

Contemporary debates on AI and work often present diverse forms of digital labour as unprecedented. This talk problematises that assumption. From the slave plantations of the eighteenth century to the farms and mines of the twentieth, and now to the data work underpinning AI value chains, the Global South has consistently sustained the accumulation imperatives of European colonialism and global capitalism. Yet theories of work and employment remain disproportionately shaped by the historical experiences of the Global North, relegating the Majority World to a site of mere empirical observation. Drawing on fifteen years of research on digital transformation across Africa, South America, and India, I argue that the political economy of AI is best understood as a continuation—not a rupture—of colonial and racialised labour regimes, extractive relations, and uneven development. I contend that theorising labour from the Global South is essential not only for understanding the contemporary reorganisation of work under capitalism, but also for rethinking the conceptual foundations of labour scholarship.



Mohammad Amir Anwar is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) at the University of Edinburgh and a Senior Research Associate, University of Johannesburg. He is an expert on work, labour markets, livelihoods and economic change within the context of digital revolutions in the Global South. Particularly, his work examines value chains of AI and their implications on labour markets, inequalities, and precarity in an AI-centred world. He is the co-author of 'The Digital Continent' (Oxford University Press, 2022), a co-editor of 'African Labour Studies' (edited volume, Bristol University Press, 2026), and a co-editor of 'Datafied Development' (special issue, Big Data and Society, 2026).

Connecting AI to Work: Implications for Employment Relations and the Reconfiguration of Work

Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies are often framed as external technological forces producing uniform effects on work, including automation, efficiency gains, and organisational transformation. This framing obscures a more fundamental process, such as AI does not act on work from the outside but becomes embedded in it through situated organisational and political processes that shape how it is designed, procured, and used.

The central analytical challenge is therefore not to determine whether AI changes work, but to explain how it reorganises the conditions under which employment relations, the division of labour, and workplace authority are governed, enforced, and contested. This requires tracing how AI becomes connected to work in practice and how this connection reshapes employment relations and labour

processes. To address this, a framework is developed that links production regimes and production logics. Production logics refer to the control- or autonomy-oriented principles embedded in technologies and managerial practices that structure how work is organised, allocated, and evaluated. Production regimes refer to the distribution of power between labour, management, and other actors that determines how such logics are implemented, resisted, or reshaped in practice.

The argument is that AI has no stable or universal effects. Instead, its implications are produced through the interaction between production logics and production regimes. Through this interaction, AI becomes a mechanism that reorganises labour processes and employment relations within specific configurations of power: in management-dominated regimes it tends to reinforce hierarchical control through task decomposition, standardisation, and intensified monitoring, while in more balanced regimes its implementation is more contested, opening negotiated space for autonomy, constraint-setting, and worker participation.

Valeria Pulignano, Professor of Sociology and Francqui Research Professor at KU Leuven's Centre for Sociological Research (CESO), member of KU Leuven.AI Institute and Associate Fellow at the ESRC Digital Futures at Work Research Centre (Digit), Weizenbaum Institute (Germany), LISER (Luxembourg), and IRRU at Warwick University (UK). Valeria is Coordinator of RN17 Work, Employment and Industrial Relations at the European Sociological Association (ESA), Editor of *Work, Employment and Society*, Associate Editor at *Journal of Industrial Relations*. Her research focuses on work, employment, industrial relations, labour markets, with emphasis on dualization, inequality, unpaid labour, precarious work, workers' voice, and job quality. Valeria is awarded Research Excellence through two ERC Grants, AdG ResPecTMe and PoC ResTLess on inequality, class and unpaid labour.

