



Research Article

WORK, KNOWLEDGE AND POWER IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY: A CRITICAL CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The transition from an industrial to a knowledge-intensive economy has transformed the organisation of production, the meaning of work and the relationship between workers and capital. This article asks how the knowledge economy reorganises work, managerial control and worker subjectivity, and who bears its benefits and risks. It develops a critical conceptual analysis that brings together Susan Strange's concept of the knowledge structure, Powell and Snellman's account of the knowledge economy, David Harvey's analysis of flexible accumulation, Michael Peters's distinction between learning, creative and open knowledge economies, and labour process theory. The article argues that the knowledge economy is best

understood not as a new sector or a post-industrial stage, but as a reorganisation of capitalism in which knowledge becomes at once a productive resource, a commodity, a source of power and a means of organising labour. This reorganisation produces six linked contradictions: between knowledge as a shared resource and as private property, autonomy and control, innovation and insecurity, creativity and commodification, global integration and geographical inequality, and individual empowerment and the individualisation of risk. The article shows how these contradictions shape the self-managing "global worker" and extends the argument to algorithmic management and to India's information technology sector. It concludes by identifying an agenda for empirical research on knowledge work in India.

KEYWORDS: [knowledge economy](#) [knowledge structure](#) [flexible accumulation](#) [labour process](#)
[algorithmic management](#) [Indian IT sector](#).

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global economy is increasingly organised around knowledge, information, communication technologies and intellectual capabilities. Economic activity that once depended heavily on physical resources, machinery and standardised industrial production now depends increasingly upon data, research, technological expertise, intellectual property, professional skills and networks of communication (Castells, 2010). The expansion of information technology and digitally mediated production has therefore transformed the organisation of economic and social life.

The expression "knowledge economy" captures an important dimension of this transformation. Powell and Snellman (2004) define it as production and services based on knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technical and scientific advance, as well as rapid obsolescence. Its distinctive feature is a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources.

The knowledge economy should not, however, be understood as a neutral technological transition. Decisions about who produces knowledge, who controls its circulation, who owns intellectual property and who has access to information have

political and economic consequences. Drawing on Strange's (1988) concept of structural power, Haggart (2017a) argues that knowledge and its governance have become central to the exercise of power in the global political economy.

This perspective raises three questions that guide the article. First, does technological change expand worker autonomy, or does it create new forms of managerial control? Second, does flexible work free workers from rigid industrial organisation, or does it transfer risk to them? Third, does the emphasis on creativity and continuous learning expand human potential, or does it turn human capacities into marketable resources?

The article addresses these questions through a critical conceptual analysis. It does not report new empirical data. Instead, it brings together five bodies of work: international political economy, through Strange and Haggart; the sociology of the knowledge economy, through Powell and Snellman and Peters; Harvey's political economy of flexible accumulation; labour process theory; and empirical studies of work, including Berton's (2012) study of French workers and studies of the Indian information technology (IT) sector. These sources were selected because each explains a different level of the same transformation: the governance of knowledge, the organisation of production, and the experience of work.

The article makes two contributions. First, it shows that these perspectives, usually read separately, together reveal a set of linked contradictions at the heart of the knowledge economy, summarised in Table 1. Second, it connects these contradictions to the formation of the self-managing "global worker" and to the position of India's IT sector in the global division of knowledge work, and from this it derives an agenda for empirical research.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 conceptualises the knowledge economy and knowledge as a source of structural power. Section 3 traces the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation and examines the productivity question. Section 4 analyses flexibility, control and inequality, including algorithmic management. Section 5 examines learning, creativity and the self-managing worker. Section 6 situates the Indian IT sector in the global division of knowledge work.

Section 7 discusses the central contradictions and the politics of labour, and Section 8 concludes.

2. CONCEPTUALISING THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

2.1 From knowledge industries to knowledge-based production

The idea of a knowledge economy has a long history. Machlup (1962) first attempted to measure the production and distribution of knowledge in the United States, Drucker (1969) described the rise of the "knowledge worker", and Bell (1973) argued that theoretical knowledge was becoming the axial principle of a post-industrial society. Later accounts shifted attention from knowledge industries to networks and information flows across the whole economy (Castells, 2010).

Powell and Snellman (2004) identify knowledge-intensive sectors such as information technology, biotechnology, telecommunications and pharmaceuticals, together with advanced professional services. Yet the knowledge economy cannot be reduced to a list of industries. Manufacturing, banking, education, retail, transport and public administration have all incorporated digital technologies and information-based systems. Berton (2012) similarly argues that the knowledge economy should not be restricted to information technology or to workers in data-related occupations, because the diffusion of information technologies changes the organisational and relational capacities expected of employees across many activities.

Knowledge has therefore become embedded in production at several levels. Research and development generate new knowledge; organisations turn it into products and services; employees apply specialised knowledge; communication technologies circulate it; and intellectual-property regimes establish ownership over it.

2.2 Knowledge as a source of structural power

A critical account must move beyond treating knowledge as an economic input. Strange (1988) identified four structures through which power operates in the global political economy: security, production, finance and knowledge. The knowledge structure concerns how knowledge is created, interpreted, communicated and regulated, and who decides on these matters. Haggart (2017a) argues

that this structure deserves greater attention in international political economy, because control over knowledge and its communication has become a foundation of economic and political power. Applying the approach to trade agreements, Haggart (2017b) shows that attention to knowledge governance reveals power relations that remain hidden when such agreements are read only through conventional trade categories.

The political economy of knowledge therefore has two interconnected dimensions. The first is knowledge production, carried out by universities, research institutions, corporations, governments and professional communities. The second is knowledge regulation: the laws, standards, intellectual-property regimes and institutional practices that determine how knowledge can be accessed, transferred, owned and used. The organisation of knowledge production is shaped by the expectation that knowledge can generate economic value, while regulatory systems attempt to secure returns on knowledge-intensive investment.

The implications extend beyond markets. The collection and processing of information can facilitate surveillance and the prediction and modification of behaviour, a process that Zuboff (2019) calls surveillance capitalism. The expansion of the knowledge economy thus creates both greater possibilities for access to information and new questions about privacy, ownership and power.

2.3 Knowledge as shared resource and private property

Knowledge differs from ordinary commodities. Once produced, it can often be reproduced and shared at low marginal cost without being used up. Peters (2010) identifies an “open knowledge economy” built on these properties, in which knowledge circulates through collaborative and non-proprietary arrangements.

At the same time, capitalist economies have developed powerful institutions for enclosing knowledge. Patents, copyright, trademarks and trade secrets turn knowledge and creativity into property, creating scarcity by restricting access to what could otherwise be widely reproduced. The tension is sharpest in pharmaceuticals. The Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health affirmed that patent rules should be interpreted in ways that

support access to medicines (World Trade Organization, 2001), and the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (2020) have jointly recognised that intellectual-property protection affects both innovation and access to medical technologies. India’s experience is instructive: Section 3(d) of the Patents Act, upheld by the Supreme Court in *Novartis AG v. Union of India* (2013), limits patents on new forms of known substances that do not show enhanced efficacy. The knowledge economy therefore cannot be understood only through the language of innovation; questions of ownership and access are equally central.

3. FROM FORDISM TO FLEXIBLE ACCUMULATION

3.1 The rise of flexible accumulation

The rise of the knowledge economy is closely associated with the transformation of capitalist production after the crisis of the Fordist model. The post-war industrial economy was characterised by standardised mass production, large organisations, relatively stable employment and clear divisions of labour. From the 1970s onwards, restructuring increasingly involved flexibility in production, labour arrangements, consumption and investment. Harvey (1989) calls this new regime “flexible accumulation” and links it to changes in labour processes, consumption patterns and the spatial organisation of capital; he had earlier traced the same shift in the restructuring of cities (Harvey, 1987).

Flexible accumulation involved several interconnected developments: the growth of service employment, outsourcing and subcontracting, technological restructuring, more fluid labour arrangements and greater geographical mobility of capital. Information technology made this possible. Digital communication reduced the importance of distance in economic coordination, so that firms could distribute stages of production across locations while keeping them integrated through communication networks (Castells, 2010).

The transition also altered the meaning of employment. The industrial worker could be understood through a relatively stable occupational identity tied to a workplace and an organisation. The knowledge economy increasingly requires workers

to manage changing employment relationships, acquire new skills and adapt to organisational restructuring. Flexibility therefore has an ambiguous meaning: it can offer greater autonomy over time, place and method of work, but it can also shift risk from employers to workers (Beck, 1992; Standing, 2011).

3.2 Technology and the productivity question

The expansion of information technology raised high expectations of productivity growth. Yet in the 1980s substantial investment in computers did not translate into proportional gains, prompting Solow's (1987) remark that computers could be seen everywhere except in the productivity statistics. Brynjolfsson (1993) named this the "productivity paradox" and pointed to problems of measurement, time lags and mismanagement.

Powell and Snellman (2004) note that the relationship between information technology and productivity became more positive in the late 1990s, but they stress that investment alone does not produce gains. As a general-purpose technology, information technology yields benefits only when organisations reorganise production around it. This optimism should itself be qualified: productivity growth in advanced economies slowed again after the mid-2000s despite continued digitalisation (Gordon, 2016).

The productivity question therefore cannot be reduced to a simple relationship between technological investment and output. The effects of computers, networks and digital systems depend upon management practices, organisational structures, employee skills and institutional arrangements. This also explains why technological change has contradictory effects for workers. The same technology may remove repetitive tasks while raising the volume of work expected; give employees more information while enabling closer monitoring; and make working from home possible while making employees continuously reachable (Mazmanian et al., 2013).

4. FLEXIBILITY, CONTROL AND INEQUALITY IN KNOWLEDGE WORK

4.1 Flexible work and the question of autonomy

One of the most significant changes in the knowledge economy is the spread of flexible work

practices. Teamwork, job rotation, broader job descriptions and quality-oriented production systems have become common in technologically intensive organisations, and are often presented as alternatives to hierarchical and bureaucratic management (Berton, 2012). Employees are expected to exercise discretion, take part in problem-solving and take responsibility for organisational outcomes.

The apparent expansion of autonomy raises a critical question: does flexibility redistribute organisational power? Labour process theory offers a sceptical answer. Braverman (1974) showed how management sought to control work by separating its conception from its execution, and Burawoy (1979) showed how workers can come to consent to their own exploitation through the organisation of work itself. In knowledge work, control increasingly operates not through direct supervision but through targets, evaluations, performance indicators, project deadlines and employability requirements. When employees are given responsibility for meeting targets without matching resources or rewards, responsibility itself becomes a mechanism of discipline, and workers internalise organisational expectations.

The consequence may be an intensification of work. Studies of knowledge professionals show an "autonomy paradox": mobile email gave professionals more control over when and where they worked, yet collectively led them to work everywhere and all the time (Mazmanian et al., 2013). The boundary between working and non-working time becomes less distinct, and the worker may enjoy greater temporal autonomy while becoming more available to the organisation. Flexibility should therefore not be read automatically as emancipation; its effects depend upon how responsibility, rewards and risks are distributed.

4.2 Algorithmic management and platform work

Digital platforms extend these dynamics. Platform capitalism organises economic activity through digital infrastructures that extract and control data (Srnicek, 2017). In platform-based and remote work, tasks are allocated, monitored and evaluated by algorithms. Kellogg et al. (2020) describe algorithmic control as a new "contested terrain" in which algorithms direct, evaluate and discipline workers more comprehensively than earlier forms of technical control. Studies of the global gig economy

show the same duality found in flexible work more generally: workers value flexibility and autonomy in choosing tasks, but algorithmic control produces low pay, social isolation, overwork, sleep deprivation and exhaustion (Wood et al., 2019). Algorithmic management thus intensifies both sides of the autonomy–control contradiction.

4.3 Labour-market polarisation and inequality

Technological change does not affect all workers equally. Powell and Snellman (2004) identify growing differentiation between highly skilled workers who benefit from technological change and workers whose tasks can be automated, outsourced or reorganised. Research on routine-biased technological change shows why: computers substitute for routine tasks, both manual and cognitive, while complementing non-routine analytical and interpersonal work (Autor et al., 2003). The result has been a polarisation of employment, with growth in well-paid professional jobs and in low-paid service jobs, and decline in the middle (Goos & Manning, 2007).

Advantages also accumulate. Workers, firms and regions with early advantages in technological development are better placed to capture later benefits, a mechanism that Merton (1968) called the “Matthew effect” and that DiPrete and Eirich (2006) describe as cumulative advantage. The geographical organisation of knowledge production therefore matters. A country or region may participate extensively in the knowledge economy without controlling its most valuable parts.

5. LEARNING, CREATIVITY AND THE SELF-MANAGING WORKER

5.1 Three forms of the knowledge economy

The knowledge economy places unusual emphasis on learning, innovation and creativity, capacities long understood as aspects of human development. Peters (2010) distinguishes three related forms: the learning economy, the creative economy and the open knowledge economy. The learning economy, a concept developed by Lundvall and Johnson (1994), treats the capacity to acquire and update knowledge as the key economic resource. The creative economy places individual creativity and talent at the centre of value creation, as in Florida’s (2002) account of the “creative class”. The open knowledge economy, as

discussed in Section 2.3, highlights collaborative and non-proprietary forms of knowledge production.

When creativity and learning become economic requirements, the distinction between work and self-development becomes less clear. Theorists of immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism argue that capital increasingly draws value from workers’ communicative, affective and cognitive capacities (Lazzarato, 1996; Moulrier Boutang, 2011). Learning is valued because it improves employability, creativity because it produces innovation, and communication because it improves organisational performance. The problem is not that these capacities have economic value, but that their economic usefulness can become the main criterion by which their worth is judged.

5.2 The global worker

These changes are accompanied by a new ideal of the worker, which this article calls the “global worker”: a professional who must continuously update technical knowledge, adapt to changing organisational requirements, manage employment relationships, work across locations and maintain professional networks. The global worker is expected to combine five capacities: continuous skill development, as technical knowledge becomes obsolete quickly; adaptability to restructuring and changing markets; the self-management of time, tasks and employment relationships; professional networking; and communication across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Berton’s (2012) interview study of 30 French workers who left their jobs in 2006 supports this picture. Workers more fully integrated into the knowledge economy showed flexibility in working time and location, an ability to manage complex employment relationships and the capacity to maintain professional networks; those who withdrew or were excluded were less able or less willing to meet these expectations. Employability, in other words, depends on organisational and relational capacities as well as technical expertise. Because Berton’s evidence comes from a small sample in one national labour market, however, its wider application should be tested, including in India.

5.3 From employee to entrepreneur of the self

These expectations change worker subjectivity. In the industrial model, identity was often tied to a

stable occupation, workplace and collective organisation. In the knowledge economy, workers are encouraged to see themselves as continuously developing projects. Foucault (2008) identified this figure in neoliberal thought as the “entrepreneur of himself”, and Bröckling (2016) traces how the “entrepreneurial self” has become a model for working lives. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) show how a “new spirit of capitalism” built around projects, networks and employability replaced the security of the career.

The worker thus becomes both producer and manager of their own employability. Training becomes a personal investment, networking becomes an individual resource, and career development becomes a continuous personal responsibility. Such processes can be empowering for those with valued skills, but they shift the burden of managing structural economic uncertainty onto individuals (Beck, 1992). A worker who loses employment may be encouraged to interpret the loss as a failure to learn, network or adapt, even when wider structural changes are the main causes. This is one of the key contradictions of the knowledge economy: structural transformations produce individualised expectations.

6. KNOWLEDGE WORK IN THE GLOBAL DIVISION OF LABOUR: THE INDIAN IT SECTOR

The geographical distribution of knowledge-intensive work provides a framework for examining India’s IT sector. Participation in the global knowledge economy does not mean equal participation in the production of value. Global production networks distribute tasks according to differences in labour costs, expertise, infrastructure and market access. Through outsourcing, firms relocate selected activities to places where skilled labour is available at lower cost, so that workers in these places are integrated into global production while remaining positioned within unequal international structures.

Research on India’s IT and IT-enabled services industry illustrates this position. Upadhyaya and Vasavi (2008) show how Indian software work is organised around the requirements of offshore clients, with long hours, time-zone shifts, close monitoring and project-based employment. Upadhyaya

(2016) argues that the offshore model has reengineered work, capital and class in India, producing a new middle class whose security depends on global demand. Fuller and Narasimhan (2007) show how IT professionals in Chennai became part of a “new-rich” middle class. In call centres, Taylor and Bain (2005) document a labour process of standardised scripts and intensive monitoring, and Noronha and D’Cruz (2009) show how management uses the discourse of professionalism to secure employee commitment while discouraging collective organisation.

These studies suggest that the Indian IT sector is best understood not only as a domestic technological success story but as part of a global reorganisation of labour. The contradictions identified in this article appear in sharp form: flexibility alongside long hours, professional identity alongside weak collective voice, and integration into global networks alongside dependence on decisions taken elsewhere. Regional differences within India remain understudied. Cities such as Kolkata, whose IT sector is smaller than those of Bengaluru, Hyderabad or Chennai, offer a valuable setting for testing these arguments empirically, as Section 8 sets out.

7. DISCUSSION: THE CENTRAL CONTRADICTIONS OF THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The analysis suggests that the knowledge economy should be understood through a set of contradictions rather than a simple narrative of technological progress. Table 1 summarises six contradictions, the processes behind them and the perspectives that illuminate them.

Table 1. Six contradictions of the knowledge economy

Contradiction	Underlying process	Key perspectives
Knowledge as shared resource vs. private property	Intellectual-property regimes enclose knowledge that could be freely reproduced	Strange (1988); Peters (2010); WHO, WIPO & WTO (2020)
Autonomy vs. control	Control shifts to targets, self-management and algorithms	Burawoy (1979); Mazmanian et al. (2013); Kellogg et al. (2020)
Innovation vs. insecurity	Technological change makes skills obsolete and polarises employment	Powell & Snellman (2004); Autor et al. (2003); Goos & Manning (2007)

Contradiction	Underlying process	Key perspectives
Creativity vs. commodification	Learning and creativity become economic requirements	Peters (2010); Lazzarato (1996); Florida (2002)
Global integration vs. geographical inequality	Outsourcing places workers in unequal global production networks	Harvey (1989); Taylor & Bain (2005); Upadhyaya (2016)
Individual empowerment vs. individualisation of risk	Employability becomes a personal responsibility	Beck (1992); Boltanski & Chiapello (2005); Berton (2012)

Source: Author.

Read together, the frameworks explain more than any one of them alone. The knowledge-structure approach shows that control over knowledge is itself a form of power (Strange, 1988; Haggart, 2017a). Harvey's (1989) analysis of flexible accumulation shows that the transformation concerns the organisation of production, not only technology. Powell and Snellman (2004) and the polarisation literature show how these changes are distributed unequally. Labour process theory and studies of the entrepreneurial self show how control is relocated into workers' own conduct. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that the knowledge economy is not a post-industrial stage that replaces industrial capitalism, but a reorganisation of economic power, labour relations and subjectivity within capitalism.

These contradictions also reshape the politics of labour. Industrial workers developed collective organisations partly because they shared workplaces, conditions and employment relations. The knowledge economy fragments these conditions: workers are spread across locations, teams and projects, some are permanent while others work through contracts or outsourcing, and professional identities can become more salient than class identities (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). Yet the same communication infrastructures that support managerial coordination can also support worker organisation, allowing workers to share information and build networks without sharing a workplace. Technologies are not inherently instruments of control or of liberation; their consequences depend on how they are organised, governed and contested (Kellogg et al., 2020).

8. CONCLUSION

The knowledge economy is one of the most significant transformations in contemporary capitalism. Its defining characteristic is not simply the use of digital technologies but the growing centrality of knowledge, information, intellectual capabilities and communication to the production of value. This transformation creates real opportunities: it can raise productivity, create new industries and give skilled workers more discretion. But it also produces the contradictions summarised in Table 1, in which knowledge becomes private power, flexibility becomes self-discipline, innovation produces insecurity and learning and creativity become market resources.

The article's central argument is that the most productive question is not whether the knowledge economy is beneficial or harmful in itself, but how its benefits, risks and forms of power are distributed. Who owns knowledge? Who controls its circulation? Who benefits from innovation? Who bears the risks of technological restructuring? Who has access to continuous learning? And how can workers respond collectively to changing conditions of employment? Answering these questions requires an approach that combines political economy with the sociology of work.

The article has limitations. It is conceptual and does not present new data, and some of the empirical work it draws on, notably Berton (2012), comes from a single national context. These limitations point to an agenda for research in India: comparative studies of IT work in established and emerging centres, including Kolkata; studies of how Indian IT workers experience algorithmic management and remote work; and research on how professional identity and collective organisation are changing in the sector. The future of work in the knowledge economy will depend not only on technological innovation, but on the institutions through which knowledge, productivity, employment and social protection are governed. The challenge is to build forms of economic organisation in which knowledge and technological progress expand human capabilities without reducing learning, creativity and human potential to instruments of market value.

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