

Automation in the Global South, is it as bad as it seems?

The London School of Economics have recently produced an article titled, 'Is Automation Stealing Manufacturing Jobs, Evidence from South Africa's Apparel Industry' (Hauge and Parschau, 2020), which questions the prediction that automation will lead to high levels of redundancies in the global south. Jostein Hauge and Christian Parschau in their critical review argue that redundancies will not reach the forecasted levels, and they give three reasons why this is the case. Firstly, they argue that automation has not added to unemployment in South Africa, but in fact reduced it. Secondly, they state that there are barriers, which has slowed the adoption of automation to South Africa's apparel market. Finally, the challenges with automating sewing work are underestimated, especially when handling fabric (Hauge and Parschau, 2020). The authors also give a brief history of the 'literature discourse' surrounding automation, as a basis to why automation is predicted a high threat to South Africa.

The article gives key insights into a specific industry facing automation, and depicts an image of economic progress, rather than economic downfall. Firstly, I want to reflect on why there are predictions pointing towards increased levels of unemployment. Hauge and Parschau refer to the history of automation, as a point of origin for these predictions and I will link this to the issue of coloniality and hierarchy and how this relates to automation. I will then reflect on automation and equality, referring to how the meaning of work will change, as automation progresses in the global south. I will use an article from Will Monteith, titled, "Re-thinking 'Work' from the Global South", as a secondary source to analyse these points.

Interestingly, Hauge and Parschau refer to the 'literature discourse' surrounding automation, in which they look at the history of automation. They believe that the reason why unemployment predictions are high is because of the evidence rising from developed countries. Many developed countries have already experienced the impact of automation or are fearful of it. For example, these fears have been in Britain since the 19th Century (Hauge and Parschau 2020). These experiences are then being used to make predictions for the rest of the world. Hauge and Parschau back this up by saying "that previous studies lack literature on developing countries". This brings up themes of hierarchical status and the issue of coloniality. When I refer to coloniality, I am discussing the relationship between developed countries and developing countries, or as it was in colonial times; the relationship between Europeans and non-Europeans. Since colonial times, there has been the idea that Europeans project themselves as superior to that of the non-Europeans, with this whole idea being built around the idea of 'waged work/employment'. This can be seen today, as there are "wage disparities between the global North and the global South and in the south the project of wage employment has long been associated with dispossession, alienation and the denial of meaningful activity" (Monteith, 2020). This can be related to the fact too that work in developing countries was seen as low skilled and depicted as labour, rather than being defined as work that deserved to be paid a wage. Therefore, are these beliefs still present and are they the basis for predicting how automation is going to affect the future of work in South Africa? Whether this is the case or not, South Africa's apparel industry, according to Hauge and Parschau, has successfully implemented automation. It has not subdued to it, but rather it has led to the creation of more jobs and some of the work has proved too complex for automation to make any improvements (Hauge and Parschau, 2020), which argues that their work is meaningful and skilled, unlike coloniality dictates. The authors also believe that the

reason why the predicted effects of automation have not yet been observed in South Africa is because predictions failed to look at country specific factors but were rather used to paint a picture for developing countries as a whole (Hauge and Parschau, 2020). This again illustrates the theme of coloniality but was also highlights that the impact of automation can only be studied when you look at an individual case, which is what Hauge and Parschau did.

The second point I want to make is that equality issues will arise, and the meaning of work will change, because of automation. Hauge and Parschau highlight technical capabilities, as a reason for the slow adoption of automation, which has meant that some manual processes have had to be kept on. Furthermore, there are skills limitations in the workforce which has also slowed the adoption of these automating technologies' (Hauge and Parschau, 2020). But what happens if in the next few years technology advances and these manual processes are got rid of? Will people working in the apparel industry in South Africa need to be retrained to operate these machines? It is evident that workers lives will change, as the process of making clothes becomes less to do with human labour, but more to do with attending to machines and observing them carry out the processes. The distribution of the work will change and redundancies will increase as a result. Although, Hauge and Parschau state that automation poses a small threat to the future of labour intensive industrialisation in the near future, these questions still need to be addressed, because there is such little guidance out there for workers in the global south regarding equality. Monteith provides insight into the issue of inequality in the working environment. The article refers to the International labour organisation (ILO), which was set up to enforce international labour standards. Its key mandate promotes the idea of work as employment in conditions of freedom, equity, human security and dignity" (Monteith, 2020). However, this mandate was built on the experiences of people in the North

and therefore there is little relevance to those workers in the South, where many aren't actually in a contact of employment. Therefore, they are easily exploited in the form of automation. Monteith also refers to how, "societies in the global south continue to be excluded from debates on the future of work and that literature on 'post-work' make scant reference to the regions of sub-Saharan Africa, only as examples to be avoided" (Monteith, 2020). His main argument is that the meaning of work has to change, to include all populations of the world, in order to reach some level of equality. I believe the ILO needs to produce a more inclusive mandate, which includes the global workplace, so that if automation was to take hold in the global south there would at least be some protection for workers.

The issues I raised suggest the precarious nature of automation and how the role it will play in the future of work is highly ambiguous. However, as automating technology develops, it is inevitable that redundancies will occur in the future of work. I believe that in order to minimise the effects on the displacement of workers, issues of coloniality, equality and the meaning of work need to be uprooted. Thereby, creating an inclusive environment, where everyone is involved in future debates about the impact of automation.

Reference list

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