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Molè, Michele

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Matteo Pasquinelli
The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence[1]
Verso, London-New York, 2023

Michele Molè

Dottore di Ricerca in Diritto del lavoro
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

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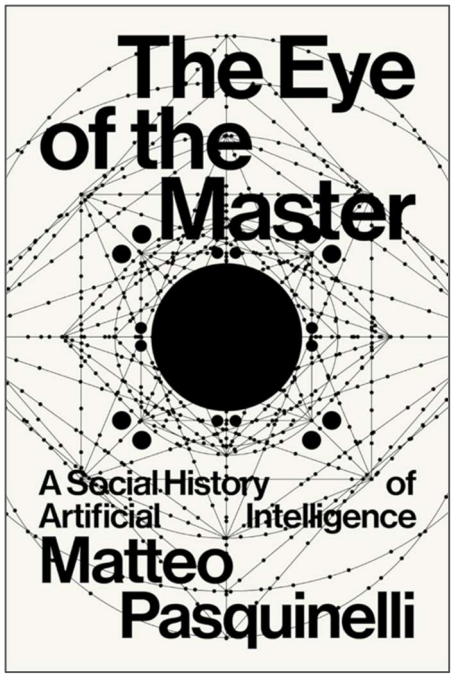
SUMMARY: 1. Introduction - 2. The neglected history of mental labour - 3. AI: a tool for defining and enforcing social relationships. - 4. What does this mean for labour law in the (green, digital) transition?



1. Introduction

If the readers of *Open* will indulge me, I want to begin with a blunt claim: Pasquinelli's book ought to be compulsory reading for every labour law scholar. It is indispensable not only for those of us who work on new technologies, but for any jurist - and indeed for anyone working in labour studies more broadly.

The reason is simple. The book quietly redefines several of the concepts that organise our jargon, both old and new - most importantly, what work is and what an algorithm is. It does so by reconstructing a social history of the algorithm that runs from 8th-century BCE India to the cybernetic project of the twentieth century, the immediate intellectual ancestor of the artificial-intelligence (AI) discourse we now inhabit. Along the way, Pasquinelli surfaces insights that have been strikingly underexplored in the labour law conversation about the future of work in an AI society. Above all, he invites us to think work beyond the industrial paradigm that originally shaped labour law as an autonomous legal field, and to recover a long-neglected dimension: the cognitive, knowledge-based "mental" labour rooted in thinking, analysing, deciding, and creating a dimension that runs through every form of activity, including manual labour. Because mental labour is less visible than the swing of a hammer, it slipped beneath the threshold of legal visibility. Yet it now sits at the centre of the economy, allowing large technology firms to accumulate and concentrate knowledge and to deploy AI in ways that reorganise social and economic life.

This becomes sharper in the second half of the book, which turns to the intellectual history of cybernetics. Pasquinelli shows how, across the twentieth century, cybernetics gradually re-described automation: no longer the mere mechanisation of discrete tasks, but the ambition to replicate the adaptive rules and performance of biological organisms. That shift - from mechanical repetition to biologically inspired systems of control and learning

- underwrites today's debate on AI. In this sense, the book offers a rich social history of AI itself, tracing how present-day "intelligent" automation grew out of earlier attempts to formalise and reproduce the logic of human and non-human cognition.

I proceed as follows. Section 2 reconstructs Pasquinelli's account of what work is through his social history of the algorithm. Section 3 then examines what AI ultimately is, building on the concept of work developed in the first half of the book. Section 4 draws out the consequences for labour law and argues that we need a paradigm shift, one that is necessary in the age of AI, but whose reach extends well beyond it.

2. The neglected history of mental labour

Pasquinelli opens with a deceptively simple question: who would ever have imagined that being a truck driver would become an intellectual job? Yet today it is, because the cabin has become a sensorial cage, cameras and sensors trained on the driver to monitor attention, focus and behaviour (p. 1). The provocation sets up his central claim: labour has always been cognitive, collective and procedural, but this dimension has been obscured both by classical economic thought (Marx included) and by legal frameworks that reduce work to measurable output or labour time. Today's debates on AI and automation, by contrast, frame cognition as if it were a newly discovered source of economic value, as if the mind only entered the workplace with the dashboard.

Pasquinelli's "archaeology of the algorithm" (p. 28) reconstructs a much longer history in which labour appears not as the expenditure of energy but as the organisation and transmission of knowledge through structured practices. His reading of the Vedic ritual of Agnicayana - in which participants reconstruct a god's body by assembling the Śyenaciti fire altar - is the entry point. Pasquinelli treats such rituals as "social algorithms": ordered sequences of operations that externalise and coordinate collective knowledge. From this angle, algorithms are not a modern invention but a recurrent historical form for organising mental labour. Both ritual and computation depend on procedural knowledge, formalised, shared, and reproduced through coordinated action.

This dimension was progressively marginalised with the rise of industrial capitalism. Labour came to be understood less as the enactment of shared knowledge and more as the execution of discrete, measurable tasks. Mental labour did not disappear; it was made invisible. This is what I would call the neglected history of mental labour.

Pasquinelli locates the decisive turn in early-nineteenth-century England, and especially in Charles Babbage (1832). Babbage's project of mechanising calculation rested on a "labour theory of the machine" and on a "principle of labour calculation" according to which machines refine and extend the division of labour by making tasks measurable and comparable. This permitted a more precise extraction of surplus value and prefigured the regimes of timing and control that would define industrial production (p. 62).

Marx, too, located the origin of machinery not in science alone but in the "collective intelligence" embedded in the division of labour: machines crystallise distributed knowledge without themselves generating it. Yet, as Pasquinelli argues, Marx does not fully follow this thread. By moving toward a labour theory of value centred on labour time, he sidelines what earlier thinkers such as William Thompson and Thomas Hodgskin had begun to articulate as a "knowledge theory of labour", one in which labour is first and foremost cognitive. The result is a kind of collective amnesia: reducing labour to time sidelines its cognitive, relational, and epistemic dimensions. The move is consolidated in Capital, where labour is treated as measurable abstract time and the distinction between manual and mental labour recedes into the background. Pasquinelli reads this, plausibly, as a strategic choice on Marx's part: time provided a universal metric for political claims (f.i. the ten, then eight-hour day), whereas knowledge resists clear ownership and clean measurement.

Today, that metric looks more inadequate than ever. With the rise of AI as we now know it, what is measured and optimised are precisely attention, judgment, and decision-making, the cognitive capacities that labour-time abstraction was designed to ignore. The contemporary workplace makes visible what has long been hidden: labour is irreducibly cognitive and relational. Knowledge and social cooperation themselves have become direct objects of capitalisation, from digital platforms to AI systems. Pasquinelli's conclusion to the first part of the book - The Industrial Age - follows: capital is, above all, accumulated social labour, and more precisely the capacity to accumulate cooperation and self-organisation (pp. 129-130).

3. AI: a tool for defining and enforcing social relationships

The second half of the book opens from a premise the first half has firmly established: the surplus value sustaining both machinery and profit derives not from labour time alone, but from the value of cooperation and the circulation of knowledge among peers.

In the twentieth century, intellectual inquiry moved beyond Babbage's idea of automation as a purely logical procedure and turned instead toward cybernetics, aspiring to replicate the principles by which living organisms organise themselves and adapt to their environments. The goal was a form of automation capable of becoming self-organising, self-reproducing, and self-repairing. Pasquinelli traces this through the work of Frank Rosenblatt, the psychologist who developed the perceptron in 1957-1958 with the ambition of modelling the cognitive processes of the human mind (p. 143). Ultimately, the project aimed at a computer that could function as an ontological model of the structure of the universe itself.

What Pasquinelli observes here is, to my mind, of particular interest for a labour lawyer trained in a discipline that still revolves around industrial labour and the exchange of working time for wages as the sole and necessary universal metric for redistribution. His argument runs as follows: the organisation of work in a given era - at the dawn of the computerised society no less than in the steam age - shapes the very formation of technology, and through it the prevailing scientific paradigms, conceptions of nature, and models of the mind. To put it in Marxian terms, the means of production imitate the relations of production (p. 154). This should serve as an invitation to rethink our attitude towards the workplace algorithm: not as a line of code, but as a new organisational and social structure with far-reaching legal implications. It also pushes us to stop treating AI as biomorphic - as something that mimics and replaces the organic brain, in keeping with the very label "artificial intelligence" - and to begin treating it as sociomorphic: as encoding the forms of social cooperation, control and collective intelligence in order to reproduce them, at scale, over workers (p. 159).

Pasquinelli pushes the demystification of AI's biomorphic self-image further by reading von Neumann, for whom "the language of the brain is not the language of mathematics". Studying how the brain actually works might even force us to rethink our concept of mathematics itself. More importantly, models of minds and models of machines do not need to match each other: they jointly operate by modelling the world; "they meet in practice" (pp. 180-181). Hayek contributes the next move by simplifying cognition into an act of decision (p. 196) and recasting the market itself as a computer (p. 198), a problem of the allocation of dispersed knowledge whose magnitude, he insisted, would always exceed the hardware limits of any apparatus of calculation. Combine this ideology with the perceptron, and you obtain the statistical view of the world, now automated at the scale of every societal domain (p. 232). Against this current, it is worth recalling Vygotsky's striking remark: there is no inner logic to be discovered inside intelligence, because intelligence is, by constitution, a social process.

For Pasquinelli, then, AI is fundamentally about the enforcement of existing social hierarchies and the accumulation of knowledge as capital. AI does not replace workers; it displaces and restructures them into a new social order (p. 246). The reason is that the means of labour have come to coincide with its means of measurement, a measurement no longer denominated in units of time but in units of cognition, of mental labour. AI does, however, displace managerial functions, because at bottom it is concerned with the management of the social division of labour. To undo AI as the imposture of existing hierarchies and to transform it into something genuinely generative, Pasquinelli proposes that we re-appropriate its meanings by returning to the matrix from which it sprang - cooperative movements - so as to dismantle the epistemic legacy of Babbage and his successors, who taught us to extract mental labour as the essential form of surplus value (p. 252).

4. What does this mean for labour law in the (green, digital) transition?

Pasquinelli's social history forces a question that labour law has long postponed. If labour has always been cognitive, cooperative, and procedural, if mental labour is not a recent feature of the economy but a permanent feature of all work that the industrial paradigm rendered invisible, then a labour law built on the figure of the manual worker exchanging measurable time for a wage is no longer adequate to its object. It was never quite adequate; it is now visibly insufficient. This is, in my view, the deeper provocation the book addresses to our discipline. It calls for a paradigm shift, not merely an update.

Three implications seem to me particularly pressing.

First, time is no longer the organising metric of labour, and labour law must stop pretending otherwise. The eight-hour day was a magnificent political achievement, and its protective core must be defended. But when employers measure attention, gaze, posture, key-strokes, click-rates and decision latency - when productivity is captured at the granularity of cognition rather than of the working day - a regulatory architecture indexed almost exclusively to time is structurally blind to what is being extracted. Labour law needs categories that can name and govern the extraction of cognitive and relational surplus.

Second, if AI is sociomorphic rather than biomorphic, then "algorithmic management" is not a managerial style but a constitutional matter for the workplace. An AI system that allocates shifts, evaluates performance, scores reliability, or filters candidates is not a neutral tool deployed within an

existing social order; it codifies a social order and reproduces it at scale, something that I analysed in my recent works (Molè 2024, 2026a). That makes the algorithm a proper object of labour law in its own right, on a par with the contract, the work rule and the collective agreement. It calls for substantive standards of transparency, contestability, and proportionality that go well beyond data-protection logic; for genuine information and consultation rights for worker representatives over the design of these systems, not merely their deployment; and for forms of co-determination over the datasets, metrics, and targets that turn cooperation into a measurable input. If the means of production now imitate the relations of production, then governing the means of production is, once again, a labour law task.

Third, and most fundamentally, labour law must recover a knowledge theory of labour. Pasquinelli's recovery of Thompson and Hodgskin is not merely historiographical: it points to a regulatory horizon. If capital is, as the book argues, accumulated cooperation, then the cognitive and cooperative inputs that workers contribute - the tacit know-how, the small acts of coordination, the data that train the very systems used to manage them - should be legible to the law as forms of labour, not as by-products, externalities or "user-generated content". This has concrete implications: collective rights over the training data drawn from workers' activity; collective ownership claims on the productivity gains generated by AI systems trained on the workforce; a recalibrated allocation of risk when a system under-performs or discriminates. It also implies taking seriously, as Pasquinelli urges in his closing pages, the cooperative tradition as an institutional reservoir for re-appropriating these technologies, something to which labour law has historically lent its instruments and could do so again.

The point, however, reaches beyond AI. The same paradigm shift is demanded by the green transition. Climate-driven restructurings - the redesign of supply chains, the reorganisation of energy and care work, the re-skilling of entire sectors - are themselves exercises in coordinating distributed knowledge and cooperation under conditions of uncertainty. They cannot be governed by a labour law that recognises only the time-clock. Just transition, like fair AI, requires legal categories able to grasp work as cognition, cooperation and procedure, categories able to protect what workers know and coordinate, not only how long they stand at a station. And the same is true of the broader knowledge economy that will outlast any particular generation of AI systems: care, education, public administration, scientific research and creative work have always sat awkwardly within the industrial template (Molè 2026b).

This, ultimately, is why Pasquinelli's book matters for us labour lawyers. It does not give us a doctrinal blueprint, that is our work to do. But it returns to

our discipline a longer memory of what work has been or ought to be, and therefore a wider imagination of what it can become. A labour law equal to the age of AI, and to whatever comes after it, will be one that has learned to see the mental labour it spent two centuries learning not to see.

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