
ACCOUNTS

- 1 Bookshelf: An Interview with Emilio J. Castilla on *The Meritocracy Paradox*
 - 9 On Polyoccupationalism: An Interview with Léonie Hénaut
 - 14 On Gendered Institutional Relational Work: An Interview with Upasana Garnaik
 - 16 Spotlight: An Interview with Claire Daviss
 - 19 New Publications
 - 20 Section Office Holders & Editorial Committee
-

BOOKSHELF: AN INTERVIEW WITH EMILIO J. CASTILLA ON *THE MERITOCRACY PARADOX*

Emilio J. Castilla is the NTU Professor of Management and Professor of Work and Organization Studies at the MIT Sloan School of Management, where he is also codirector of the MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research. His research focuses on organizations, networks, and workplace inequality, with particular attention to how social processes and organizational practices shape evaluations, rewards, and career outcomes. Dr. Castilla is the author of *The Meritocracy Paradox: Where Talent Management Strategies Go Wrong and How to Fix Them* (Columbia University Press), which examines why merit-based systems often reproduce inequality and how organizations can design fairer, more effective talent management practices.

Jessica Urzúa, a Ph.D. student in Sociology and Social Policy at Harvard University, interviewed Dr. Castilla about his book, [*The Meritocracy Paradox*](#).

Jessica Urzúa: Thank you for contributing to this issue of *Accounts*, and congratulations on the publication of *The Meritocracy Paradox*. What initially drew you to study meritocracy inside organizations? Why did merit-based evaluation and reward systems emerge as a compelling site for understanding workplace inequality?

Emilio J. Castilla: Thank you so much—I really appreciate it. What initially drew me to study meritocracy inside organizations was the gap I kept seeing between what organizations *say* they do and

what *actually happens* in practice. Many workplaces believe they advance and reward people based on performance, effort, and contribution. And that belief is powerful; it matters: it shapes culture, motivation, and how leaders justify people-related decisions.

So over time, I became increasingly interested in a simple question: if so many organizations and their leaders value meritocracy so deeply, why do unequal outcomes based on non-meritocratic factors still persist?

Merit-based evaluation and reward systems quickly became a compelling phenomenon for my understanding of workplace inequality because these people-management systems sit right at the center of organizational life. These are the systems that determine who gets selected and recognized, who gets trained and promoted, who receives the best opportunities, and who gets paid more. They're also the moments when human judgment matters most, and where concepts like "performance," "potential," and "excellence" can be surprisingly subjective, even in organizations that see themselves as highly objective, efficient, and data-driven. So, if you want to understand where inequality is produced (or reproduced), these are exactly the places to study.

J.U.: A central contribution of the book is what you call the meritocracy paradox. What do you mean by the meritocracy paradox, and how does it operate within organizations?

E.J.C.: When I talk about the meritocracy paradox, I'm describing something that surprised even me when we first found evidence of it: the more an organization emphasizes that it's meritocratic, the more likely it is that bias can quietly creep into talent decisions.

So the paradox is this: meritocracy is supposed to give equal opportunities to all, and to reduce bias and reward people fairly...but in many cases, it ends up doing the opposite.

Here's why. In a lot of organizations, leaders sincerely believe they reward people purely based on performance. They'll say things like, "we hire the best," "we promote based on merit," or "we reward top talent." And again, most people mean it. But when that message becomes part of the culture, it can actually create a kind of moral reassurance for decision makers. Managers start thinking: "If we're a meritocracy, then my judgment must be fair."

And that sense of confidence is exactly what becomes risky, because when people believe they're being objective, they often stop questioning themselves. They rely more on gut feelings, impressions,



and informal assessments—who seems like a "star," who has "leadership presence," who feels "ready," who is a "good fit."

And the problem is that's precisely where unconscious bias and other well-studied social barriers tend to show up. Not because people are trying to be unfair, but because human judgment is never as neutral as we want it to be. So paradoxically, the belief in meritocracy can make bias more likely, not less.

The second piece of it is that "merit" itself is rarely as clear or objective as organizations assume. We act as if performance is easy to measure, but in real workplaces, especially in knowledge work, performance is often ambiguous. It gets filtered through manager interpretation, team politics, visibility, confidence, and networks. So, what looks like a pure evaluation of merit can actually reflect things like who gets high-profile projects, who has a strong sponsor, who gets the benefit of the doubt—things that aren't evenly distributed.

When you put those two pieces together, you get the paradox: organizations talk about meritocracy as if it guarantees fairness, but that talk can

actually reduce scrutiny—and allow workplace inequality to persist or even grow.

And that’s the big takeaway I want people to sit with: meritocracy doesn’t fail because it’s a bad ideal. It fails when it becomes a slogan instead of a system. If organizations truly want meritocracy to work, it requires real structure, clear standards, transparency, and accountability—not just the language of “we reward the best.”

J.U.: Throughout the book, you show that “merit” is far from a fixed or universally agreed-upon concept. How did managers and organizational leaders you studied define merit in practice? And what are the consequences of this ambiguity for hiring, promotion, and compensation decisions?

E.J.C.: Those are important questions. One thing we found is that, in practice, managers rarely define merit in a consistent way. They often say merit is about performance and contribution, and on the surface, everyone agrees. But when you look closely at how managers actually define merit and make decisions, merit becomes much more flexible and a kind of moving target.

In many organizations, leaders tend to define merit using a mix of three things:

1. Measurable results: hitting targets, delivering outcomes, and solving problems. That’s the version of merit most people feel comfortable defending publicly.
2. Traits that signal competence: confidence, executive presence, strong communication, polish, or “leadership potential.” These signals aren’t necessarily the same as contribution, but they become powerful shortcuts, especially when work is complex and hard to evaluate.
3. Social fit and familiarity: whether someone feels like a “good match,” has the right style, the right networks, or resembles people who have been successful in the past. This is often framed as “culture,” but it can function as a subtle form of similarity bias.

The consequences of this ambiguity are signifi-

cant: when merit is unclear, it creates room for discretion—and it is in that space that bias often enters.

In hiring, vague definitions of merit can lead to decisions based on “fit,” pedigree, or confidence in interviews, rather than demonstrated ability to do the work. That can systematically disadvantage candidates who are equally capable but come from nontraditional backgrounds or present differently.

In promotion decisions, unclear standards often reward visibility and self-promotion over sustained contribution. People in high-profile roles or with strong sponsors are seen as “high potential,” while others doing equally valuable work—often in less visible roles—are overlooked.

In compensation, ambiguity opens the door for unequal rewards even when performance is similar. When managers have wide latitude, rewards can reflect negotiation, relationships, or subjective impressions more than actual impact.

So, one of the major takeaways from the book is that meritocracy doesn’t break down only because individuals may be biased. It breaks down because organizations often fail to define merit clearly and consistently enough for the system to work the way they think it does—and to evaluate it in transparent, evidence-based ways. When “merit” is flexible, the system ends up rewarding not only performance, but also confidence, conformity, and access.

J.U.: Many organizations respond to inequality by adopting popular “best practices,” such as diversity training, implicit bias workshops, blind hiring, or AI-based screening tools. Based on your research, why do these interventions so often fall short of producing meritocratic outcomes?

E.J.C.: Yes—this is one common pattern I saw, and it’s understandable. When organizations recognize inequality, unfairness, and inefficiencies, they often respond by reaching for the most visible “best practices” in the market: diversity training, implicit bias workshops, blind hiring, or now, AI-based screening tools. And to be clear, some of these interventions can be helpful. But my research

shows they often fall short because they don't address where inequality is actually produced within organizations.

Take diversity training or implicit bias workshops, for example. These became extremely popular, often encouraged by consultants and widely adopted across industries. They can raise awareness, but awareness doesn't automatically translate into better (and fairer) workplace decisions, especially when managers go right back into performance evaluation and promotion systems that are vague, highly discretionary, and rarely monitored. In many organizations, training becomes a kind of checkbox exercise: people feel they've "done something," but the actual routines, incentives, and decision rules remain unchanged.

Blind hiring is another good example. It can help at the very beginning of the process, especially in early screening. But inequality is rarely produced *only* at the first gate. It accumulates across multiple moments—interviews, team assignments, access to stretch roles, performance feedback, promotion discussions, and compensation. So, if you "blind" one step but leave the rest of the pipeline untouched, you may reduce bias in one place while the system continues to reproduce inequality elsewhere. You're treating one symptom, not strengthening the talent system as a whole.

And then there's AI-based screening tools, which create a newer version of the same challenge. Organizations often assume technology will remove bias. But AI reflects the data—and the definitions of success—that it's trained on. If an organization's historical decisions were biased, or if it has traditionally rewarded confidence, pedigree, and similarity, then the algorithm can replicate those patterns at scale—while giving managers a false sense of objectivity. Bias becomes harder to see precisely because it now looks "scientific."

In sum, the common thread is this: these "best practices" tend to focus on individual attitudes or surface-level fixes rather than the deeper structural problems and questions: How does the or-

ganization define merit? How does it evaluate it? And how does it reward it over time? Meritocracy isn't achieved through one-off initiatives. It's achieved through clear criteria, structured decision-making, real accountability, and continuous monitoring of outcomes.

In other words, the problem isn't that these tools are useless. The problem is that organizations often treat them as substitutes for the harder work of diagnosing their specific meritocratic failures and redesigning their talent systems to address them. And that's why, despite good intentions, they so often fall short of producing truly meritocratic outcomes.

J.U.: Rather than abandoning organizational meritocracy, the book argues for repairing and strengthening it through data-driven talent management, accountability, and transparency. What does a truly meritocratic organization look like in practice, and what are the most important first steps for leaders or organizations seeking to move beyond symbolic commitments to fairness?

E.J.C.: I love this question because it gets at the heart of what I'm trying to do in the book. I'm not arguing that organizations should abandon meritocracy—I'm arguing they should stop treating it as a belief system and start treating it as something they actively build and maintain.

So, what does a truly meritocratic organization look like in practice? It's one where fairness shows up in the daily mechanics of how decisions get made. It's not just in the values statement; it's in the way performance is assessed, how advancement decisions are justified, and whether opportunity is distributed in a way that allows different kinds of talent to actually emerge.

In these organizations, you see a few things very clearly. First, there's real clarity and transparency around expectations. People understand what strong performance looks like, what gets rewarded, and what it takes to advance. That matters because ambiguity is where inequality tends to hide. When criteria are unclear, people end up filling in the

blanks with perceptions, narratives, and sometimes stereotypes. A true meritocracy reduces that uncertainty.

Second, strong meritocratic organizations don't rely on "hero manager judgment." They build consistency into the process. That might mean more structured reviews, better documentation, cross-team calibration, and mechanisms that force decision makers to explain their reasoning. The point isn't to eliminate judgment; it's to make sure judgment is disciplined and evidence-based.

Third, truly meritocratic organizations treat data as a tool for learning, not just reporting. They regularly look at outcomes—who is being promoted, who is getting top ratings, who is receiving large pay increases, who is leaving—and they examine whether those patterns are consistent across teams and demographic groups. If disparities emerge, the question isn't "How do we defend this?" The question is "What in the system is producing this—and what do we need to fix?"

And then there's something I think is absolutely essential: opportunity management. Meritocratic organizations don't wait until the end of the year to reward "top performers." They pay attention much earlier—who is getting the assignments that build skills, visibility, and credibility? Who is being sponsored? Who gets stretch roles and second chances? Because if opportunities are uneven, the outcomes will be too—and the organization ends up rewarding accumulated advantage rather than contribution.

For leaders who want to move past symbolic commitments, I usually recommend starting with a few practical moves:

1. Pick a high-stakes talent process—performance evaluation, promotion, or compensation—and make it more transparent and structured. You don't need to redesign everything at once, but you do need to start where decisions have real consequences.
2. Run a fairness "diagnostic" using your own data. Look for patterns that don't make sense. Where do outcomes vary dramatically by manager, unit, or group? That's often where the system is leaking subjectivity.
3. Make fairness and consistency part of leadership responsibility. Not as a moral add-on, but as a core requirement of good management. Someone has to own the integrity of the talent system.

The bigger message I try to leave people with is meritocracy is not self-executing. It only works when organizations invest in the infrastructure—clear standards, disciplined processes, and real accountability—to make sure merit is recognized consistently and rewarded fairly over time.

J.U.: While the book focuses on organizational processes, it also points to implications beyond individual firms. How do you see meritocratic practices inside organizations relating to broader patterns of labor market inequality?

E.J.C.: This is one of the points I really want readers to take seriously: what looks like a "local" talent decision inside one company can have much bigger consequences once you zoom out.

The way organizations define and reward merit doesn't just affect individual employees: it shapes who gets to build a career, accumulate advantages, and move up over time. So even small patterns inside firms can become major drivers of inequality across the labor market.

For example, if merit is interpreted in highly subjective ways—where confidence is mistaken for competence, where visibility matters more than contribution, or where certain styles of leadership are seen as more "natural"—then some people will consistently get more positive evaluations, more opportunities, and more upward mobility. And once that starts happening, it compounds. Those individuals get better assignments, stronger networks, more sponsorship, and higher pay. Over time, they look like the obvious "top talent," even

though what we're really observing is the accumulation of advantage.

And the reverse is also true. If someone is overlooked early on—because their work is less visible, because they're not part of the dominant networks, or because they don't match the organization's implicit image of who succeeds—then they may never get the chances that would allow them to demonstrate the same level of performance later. That's how inequality gets reproduced not just within one firm, but across careers.

So in many ways, labor market inequality isn't only about who gets hired. It's also about what happens after people enter organizations: who gets developed, who gets believed in, who gets access to career-defining opportunities—and whether the systems that claim to reward merit actually do so in a consistent and equitable way.

J.U.: Your book draws on experiments, organizational case studies, and administrative data from firms. What methodological challenges did you encounter in researching organizational meritocracy, and what advice would you offer to scholars seeking to study inequality inside organizations?

E.J.C.: This is a great question, because studying meritocracy inside organizations is methodologically tricky for a very basic reason: you're trying to study something that is incredibly important, but often hard to observe directly.

Organizations don't actually measure "merit" in any pure way. What they measure are proxies: performance ratings, promotion recommendations, manager write-ups, peer feedback, outcomes tied to targets. And the challenge is that those signals are already shaped by human judgment. They reflect discretion, internal politics, unequal access to high-visibility work, differences in sponsorship, and the kinds of informal dynamics that don't show up neatly in a dataset. So as a researcher, you're constantly asking: Are we observing performance? Or are we observing how performance is being interpreted and rewarded? That distinction is everything.

A second big challenge is the data itself. Administrative HR data can be incredibly powerful; you can look at patterns at scale and over time—but it's rarely clean. Roles change, departments use different standards, job titles don't mean the same thing across units, and the meaning of a "top rating" can vary dramatically from one manager to another. And some of the most important mechanisms—like sponsorship, influence, or reputation—are often invisible in the formal records.

Then there's the access issue. Getting inside organizations requires trust. Even when leaders want to support the work, there are privacy concerns, legal regulations, political sensitivities, and a real fear of what the analysis might reveal. So, you have to be thoughtful not just about methods, but about relationships, confidentiality, and how to make the research valuable to the organization without compromising rigor.

Experiments bring their own set of trade-offs. I love experiments because they allow you to isolate mechanisms and test causal claims, especially when you're trying to understand bias and how it operates. But designing experiments in organizational settings requires a careful balance: you want something realistic enough to reflect how people actually make decisions, but controlled enough to clearly identify what's driving the effects.

So my advice to scholars is to mix methods whenever you can. Use experiments to test mechanisms, use administrative data to observe real outcomes at scale, and use qualitative work—interviews, field observation, case studies—to understand what's happening behind the numbers. I'd also encourage people to focus on process, not just outcomes. A lot of inequality is produced well before you see it in promotions or pay—through differences in opportunity, feedback, assignments, and who gets developed.

And finally, I'd say to treat organizations as partners when possible. Some of the most meaningful work happens when research doesn't just point out patterns but helps leaders understand how their own systems work—and what they can do to im-

prove them. That's where scholarship can be both rigorous and deeply consequential.

J.U.: How do you hope scholars in economic sociology build on this work? What questions about merit and inequality do you think deserve the most attention going forward?

E.J.C.: I hope economic sociologists build on this work by pushing one simple idea: merit is not a neutral fact; it's something organizations actively produce. It's defined, measured, negotiated, and rewarded through routines and relationships, which makes it a deeply sociological object.

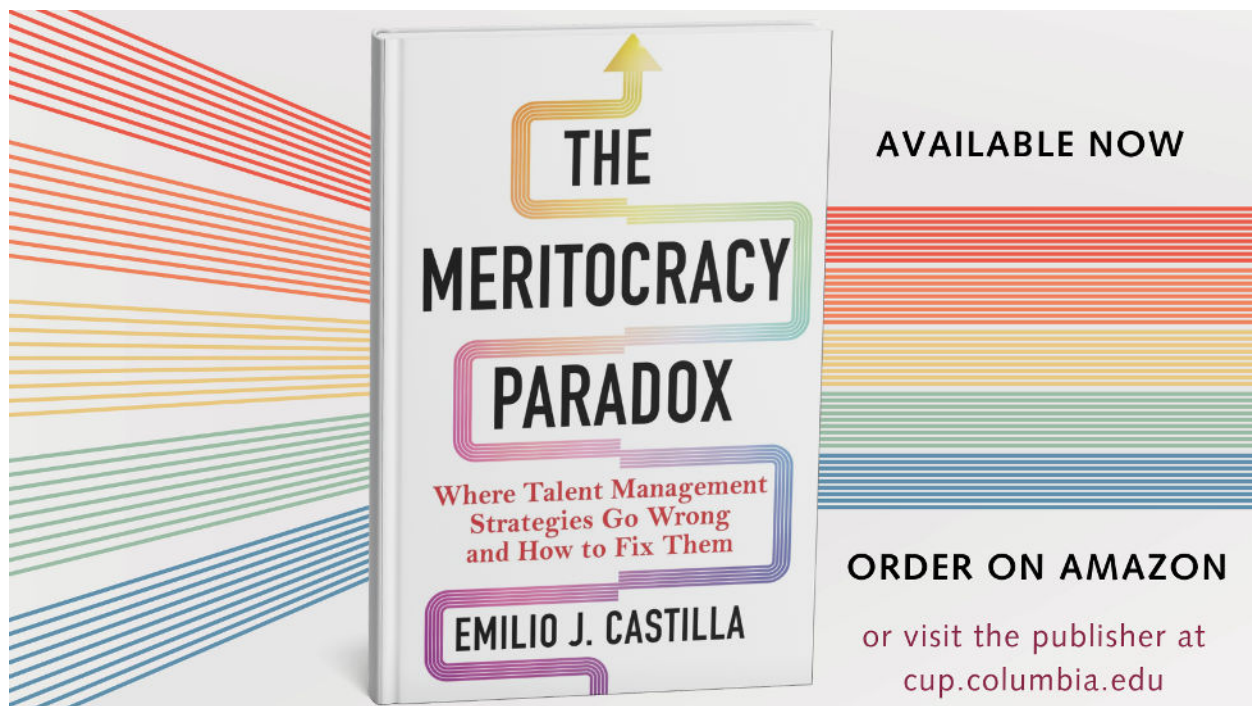
Looking ahead, I think there are a few questions that deserve a lot more attention.

First, I'd love to see more work on how organizations define merit in the real world—and how those definitions change across contexts. Even within the same firm, different teams can operate with different understandings of what counts as excellence. In one unit, it might be measurable results; in another, it's potential, leadership style, or "presence." Those definitions are rarely fixed,

and they're often shaped by history, status hierarchies, and organizational culture. Understanding how certain definitions become legitimate—and who benefits from them—is central to understanding inequality.

Second, I think the next wave of research needs to take opportunity seriously—not just outcomes. We've learned a lot about promotion gaps and pay gaps, but an equally important question is: who gets the chance to become "high performing" in the first place? Who receives stretch assignments, high-visibility work, sponsorship, high-quality feedback, and the benefit of the doubt? If those opportunities are distributed unevenly, then merit is never really evaluated on a level playing field.

Third, there's still so much to learn about the micro-politics of evaluation. What actually happens inside calibration meetings, promotion committees, or succession planning discussions? These are the rooms where vague ideas like "potential," "readiness," or "excellence" get translated into real decisions and where status and power can shape whose strengths are interpreted as leadership and whose mistakes are interpreted as weakness.



And of course, we can't ignore what's happening with AI and algorithmic decision-making. Organizations increasingly rely on tools that promise objectivity, but these systems depend on historical definitions of success and existing data patterns. That means algorithmic decisions can end up reinforcing inequality while appearing neutral, or even "scientifically fair." Understanding how algorithmic merit gets built, legitimized, and challenged is going to be a huge area for future research.

Finally, I really hope scholars spend more time studying repair, not just reproduction. We're very good at documenting how inequality persists, but we should also ask: When do organizations actually correct course? What forms of transparency, accountability, and leadership practice help organizations learn from disparities and change the system over time?

For me, the next frontier isn't simply debating whether meritocracy is good or bad. It's studying how merit is produced—and how organizations can redesign their systems so that merit becomes a pathway for expanding opportunity, not a justification for reinforcing hierarchy.

And before we wrap up, I just want to say thank you, Jessica, for such a thoughtful and engaging conversation and for these wonderful questions. You really captured the spirit of what I was trying to do in *The Meritocracy Paradox*, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to reflect on these ideas with you. I hope our discussion helps readers think critically, but also constructively, about how organizations can build systems that truly reward performance while expanding fairness and opportunity for all.■

Economic Sociology Section Virtual Events

Wednesday, March 11, 2026, 3-4 pm ET:

Econ Soc Article Club

Discuss recent articles relevant to the section.

Friday, April 10, 2026, 12:15-1:45 pm ET:

2025 Publication Award Showcase: Panel 1 of 2

Learn about the work of economic sociologists honored in 2025.

Friday, April 24, 2026, 3-4pm ET:

25 years of the ASA Economic Sociology Section

A reflection on the beginnings of the section in 2001 with Viviana Zelizer, Mark Granovetter, and Nicole Woolsey Biggart.

Friday, May 8, 2026, 1-2pm ET:

2025 Publication Award Showcase: Panel 2 of 2

Learn about the work of economic sociologists honored in 2025.

[SEE DETAILS IN THE LISTSERV EMAIL](#)

ON POLYOCCUPATIONALISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH LÉONIE HÉNAUT:

Léonie Hénaut is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the CNRS (French National Center for Scientific Research) and a member of the Center for the Sociology of Organizations at Sciences Po in Paris. Her research focuses on the sociology of work, occupations, and organizations, with a long-term interest in museums and cultural workers in France and the United States, as well as in the implementation of integrated healthcare policies in France. She is currently working on two book projects on the multiple forms of “plural work” and their consequences for both individuals and for the social division of labor.

Dr. Hénaut was interviewed by Allison Wigen, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University.

Allison Wigen: In your *American Sociological Review* article, “Polyoccupationalism: Expertise Stretch and Status Stretch in the Postindustrial Era,” coauthored with Jennifer C. Lena and Fabien Accominotti, how did you and your coauthors come to the idea of polyoccupationalism? Was there a particular empirical observation or theoretical gap that prompted this concept?

Léonie Hénaut: Interestingly, and unlike my other projects, the idea of polyoccupationalism emerged quite early in the research process, as it came from an empirical discovery.

So, just to give a bit of background, the discovery happened in the spring of 2018, during my research stay at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York, where I met Jennifer C. Lena. At the time, my goal was to finish collecting data for a book project I was working on about the changing organization of labor in American museums. But that meeting ended up taking my work in a completely different direction.

Jennifer had access to a major database on cultural workers in the United States, because she had been involved in developing the *Strategic National Arts Alumni Project* (SNAAP). She suggested I look at it to see if it might contain anything useful for my research. The SNAAP survey is administered to alumni of arts and culture training

programs across the United States through the schools themselves (high schools, universities, art schools, and so on). We had access to the first three waves of the survey (2015, 2016, and 2017), covering more than 80,000 respondents. Roughly 15,000 of these worked in the visual arts, the performing arts, or in design and communication, and this is the sample we focused on.

After a few weeks of exploring the data, it became clear that one of the survey’s greatest strengths lay in its questions about *occupational identities*. As in most surveys, respondents were asked to describe their work using occupation names. Yet, remarkably, they could select “all that apply” to a question asking them to “indicate those occupations in which [they] currently work[ed].” Within our creative workers sample, two-thirds picked more than one occupation, revealing just how limited our usual single-choice survey items can be. That’s when we decided to call this phenomenon “polyoccupationalism”—basically, the tendency for people to identify with several occupations at once—and to study its underlying factors and variations. Between 2018 and the time the paper came out, in 2023, Fabien Accominotti joined the team, and we brought in additional data on occupations from the O*NET dataset. We went through a lot of analyses, presentations, and revisions, all of which helped shape and refine the argument of the paper.

A.W.: The paper situates polyoccupationalism within postindustrial labor markets defined by flexibility and uncertainty. How does this concept complicate sociological theories of precarity, which often emphasize loss of stability rather than the multiplication of identities?

L.H.: That's right. In our article, we focus on occupational identities, which is analytically different from jobs or careers, which we usually understand as a succession of jobs. A person can hold multiple jobs but identify with just one occupation: for example, a nurse working in two hospitals, or in a hospital and a nursing home. And the reverse is also true: someone can identify with multiple occupations while having a single job, like a university professor who sees themselves as both a teacher and a researcher. This is why polyoccupationalism and multiple job holding are distinct phenomena, even though people can experience both. Most studies on postindustrial labor markets tend to focus on jobs rather than occupational identities, or they end up blending the two, which obscures an important part of workers' experiences.

What we do in the paper, first, is unpack the relationships between the flexibility of work arrangements and how people define their work and expertise. On the one hand, the rise of “non-standard” or “alternative” forms of employment (e.g., short-term contracts, consulting, freelancing, self-employment) creates more opportunities for people to diversify their activities from one contract to the next. On the other hand, so-called “post-bureaucratic” work organizations, where job boundaries and task bundles are less strictly defined, encourage workers to broaden their areas of expertise to serve the project or the client. Both dynamics can reinforce one another. But they translate into polyoccupationalism—claiming multiple areas of expertise—only when the expanded tasks and skills make sense to workers themselves, allowing them to define their work using several occupational categories. Second, we show that polyoccupationalism can be observed in any parts of the occupational structure but tends to take different forms at the top and at the bottom of the hierarchy. High-status workers are more likely to “stretch expertise”—they identify



with occupations that are similar in status but functionally distinct—while lower-status workers tend to “stretch status”—the occupations they report involve similar tasks but stand farther apart on the occupational status scale.

Yet, to finish answering your question, I would like to say something about how these findings contribute to the study of work in the postindustrial era. We are not the first to pay attention to occupational identities. Most sociological theories of work precarity emphasize that uncertain and unstable employment erodes workers' sense of belonging to occupational groups and tends to undermine occupational solidarity. For instance, Richard Sennett describes the “weak identities” of people holding multiple jobs; French sociologist Claude Dubar portrays workers who hop from one job to another as developing “network-based identities” versus group-based, “occupational identities.” By contrast, other scholars (e.g., Stephen Barley and colleagues) argue that in flexible labor markets and work organizations, occupational membership increasingly fills the identity space left vacant by the loosening of bonds between workers and their workplaces. In the paper, we propose a third possibility: that workers in the postindustrial era con-

struct and maintain *multiple*, concurrent occupational identities. This implies neither weaker or stronger forms of occupational identification, but it highlights the limitations of the assumption that occupational identities are necessarily singular and exclusive.

A.W.: Do you see polyoccupationalism as primarily a structural outcome of new labor arrangements like the rise of nonstandard employment, or as a cultural shift in how people conceptualize work and professional identity?

L.H.: That is a very good question, and not an easy one to answer given the limited data available (there are no large-scale surveys with multiple-entry items on occupational identities). We cannot determine whether polyoccupationalism is truly new or whether it is merely newly visible. What the paper show is that polyoccupationalism is more pronounced among people who are self-employed (either exclusively or in combination with salaried work), and among those whose work is more project-based, and we know that these two features are characteristic of postindustrial labor across many industries. On that basis, we can cautiously speculate that polyoccupationalism has become more prevalent, as a structural outcome of new, more flexible labor arrangements.

Now, historians would probably point out that, in the pre-industrial era, most people were polyoccupationalists. Rather than being confined to a single task or profession, they did different kinds of work depending on the season or the time of day. This idea echoes Karl Marx's famous image of an ideal pre-capitalist society, where one could "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner." What's very interesting is that Marx adds that by doing these things, people would avoid ever becoming "a hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic." Polyoccupationalism, as we see it, is almost the reverse: it's about claiming all these occupations at once. So I would say that, whatever the prevalence of polyoccupationalism across the workforce before the post-industrial era, what may be different today is the way people claim multiple forms of expertise when they have

the opportunity to do so—very much like what Mary Waters observed when she showed that immigrants and their descendants are comfortable mobilizing multiple "ethnic options" to describe themselves. In that sense, claiming multiple occupations can be seen as a way of taking hold of these highly stratifying categories and using occupational labels more strategically.

Whether or not a cultural shift is happening in society, it's safe to say that it is not there yet in sociology. While multiple job holding is now covered in surveys—respondents are asked whether they have a second job, or a third, or a fourth—questions about the occupational identities associated with these jobs are always single-entry. There are methodological reasons for this: it's complicated, and the number of categories quickly becomes unmanageable at a detailed level. But the deeper obstacle is theoretical, and even ideological. Since its emergence in the industrial era, the sociological study of occupations and occupational dynamics—whether we're talking about socialization and professionalization processes, jurisdictional struggles, or intra-occupational segmentation—has been built around a strong assumption of occupational exclusivity. In challenging this assumption, our study brings research on occupations into conversation with scholarship on social identity, showing that occupational identities are constructed, fluid and multiple.

A.W.: While the *ASR* article is the first quantitative investigation of polyoccupationalism, much of your work draws on ethnography and qualitative analysis. If you were to study polyoccupationalism qualitatively, what kinds of field sites or narratives would most interest you?

L.H.: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about my qualitative work as well, which took an interesting turn—because of, or rather thanks to—the polyoccupationalism paper. In a strict sense, and true to the discovery story I told you earlier, polyoccupationalism concerns how people self-identify with occupational categories and classifications. This means that survey-based

quantitative data are best suited for measuring its manifestations, correlates, and variations across occupations and industries. Qualitative data, by contrast, make possible to better understand processes of self-identification. I would love to design a study aimed at uncovering how people choose “occupational options” in different contexts—within a survey, but also in other social contexts such as a dinner, a job interview, or their online dating or LinkedIn profiles. This should help determine whether there is indeed a broader cultural shift in how people define their work and relate to occupational categories and classifications.

Yet, qualitative research can do much more if we move beyond that strict sense of polyoccupationalism and instead embrace the broader fact that people’s work is often *plural* – that is, made up of multiple activities, roles, logics, and arenas, and therefore not reducible to a single, clearly bounded job or occupation. Echoing sociology and management literatures that are often compartmentalized, plural work can originate from many sources, including personal aspirations, managerial pressures, multiple job-holding, entrepreneurship, and temporary needs or projects. It may or may not translate into polyoccupational identities.

This broader perspective emerged quite concretely in a study I conducted in 2019, based on interviews with French art conservators, who have been a long-standing research interest of mine. Neither polyoccupationalism nor plural work were the focus of the study, but it turned out that many of the interviewees who had trained in university programs were doing research in conservation, art history or archeology in addition to their work as practitioners. Navigating multiple activities, audiences and workplaces was often described as fulfilling and professionally rewarding, although it came at a cost in terms of personal time or family projects. Many talked about how hard it was to sustain over time, especially for women and, among self-employed conservators, for those without a breadwinner spouse or family support since research work was rarely paid. Most interestingly, we identified two different ways of articulating science and practice: what we call integration versus segregation. In the

first case, people consider the two activities as constitutive of a single, unified form of expertise; in the second, they are understood as two distinct areas of work and expertise. My co-author on that project is Brianne Dubois, who recently graduated from Sciences Po.

Currently, Brianne and I, together with Meryl Merran, a graduate student at Sciences Po, are coordinating an edited volume that brings together ten qualitative case studies by colleagues and ourselves. Comparing different field sites—such as restaurant owners, professional clowns, exhibition set preparators, hardware store employees, home chefs, mayors of small towns, green influencers, or oncologists—has proven highly heuristic. In the book, we argue that individuals engaged in plural work must literally *invent* their own occupation by engaging in three forms of additional work: “articulation,” the everyday work of stitching schedules, networks, and tasks together; “justification,” the construction of coherent narratives out of fragmented trajectories and work identities; and “representation,” the collective work of building recognition and professional value for hybrid or hard-to-classify activities. I am confident that this framework can be mobilized to analyze virtually any setting.

A.W.: As a sociologist who moves between research, teaching, and institutional roles, do you ever feel polyoccupational yourself? How has that shaped how you think about occupational identity?

L.H.: That is so true! My work moves constantly between these activities, which involve different audiences, different temporalities, and sometimes different value systems as well. In that sense, being an academic is a very good example of plural work. This has been documented by higher education specialist Christine Musselin, who shows that academics combine teaching, research, and administrative work differently across disciplines. For instance, historians seem to have a much more integrative approach and often publish papers based on the content of their courses, whereas scholars in management or biology tend

to treat these activities as distinct and try to make room for research.

That said, I wouldn't necessarily describe myself as polyoccupational: I am a sociologist, more broadly a researcher. What varies are the settings I work in and the skills I mobilize, not so much the occupational category I identify with. I see around me colleagues who do identify with several occupations—on their web page for instance, they present themselves as “educator” and “researcher,” but also “writer,” “translator,” “curator,” “filmmaker,” “administrator,” “grant writer” or “project manager,” to name a few. Is it because we have a lot of freedom in how we conduct our work, or because we are under pressure to account for more work or more areas of expertise, or both? Anyway, this has been important for my thinking. It shows that plural work does not always translate into polyoccupationalism, but when it does, it takes different forms.

A.W.: Do you think the idea of an “occupation” will remain a useful sociological category in the decades to come? What directions do you think the sociology of work and occupations should take in the coming years to keep pace with these changing realities?

L.H.: I have been asking myself the same question. The irony is that I've been studying occupations ever since I started grad school. So, they must be relevant somehow, right? For one thing, occupations are still powerful social categories: they structure training, careers, labor markets, and forms of recognition, and they are deeply embedded in how people present themselves and are evaluated by others. The famous phrase by Everett Hughes seems to apply today: “occupation names are a combination of price tag and calling card.” Even in more fragmented and flexible labor markets, these labels continue to organize expectations, inequalities, and identities. In that sense, occupations aren't disappearing—but they are being reworked, stretched, and sometimes destabilized.

That's precisely where I think the sociology of

work and occupations should be heading. First, we need to take more seriously hybridity, boundary-blurring, and the growing gap between formal occupational categories and people's actual work trajectories—especially in contexts like platform work, project-based careers, and multi-job livelihoods. There is renewed interest in addressing measurement issues and in methods for capturing dynamics in occupations, work and organizations, and that is something I strongly encourage and would like to contribute to. Think, for example, of recent papers on internal variation hidden within occupational categories (by Ananda Martin-Caughey) and coding mismatches (by Andrew Taeho Kim and ChangHwan Kim), as well as earlier research on how to keep classifications up to date. I am also glad to see that many colleagues now use O*NET descriptive data on occupations. And now that multiple job-holding questions are well integrated into surveys, I would love to push for including multiple-occupation questions.

Second, it is long past time to open a broader debate about the exclusiveness of occupational identities, and to challenge not only our tools (such as surveys) but also existing conceptual frameworks. I am personally interested in studying the macro-level consequences of polyoccupationalism. If workers no longer self-identify with a single “special activity,” what does this mean for the Durkheimian narrative of the social division of labor and for the idea of an interdependence of occupations as the foundation for social solidarity among them? While endorsing the diagnosis of an individualization of career management, I do not believe in a decline of occupations or in the advent of a “post-occupational society” (Catherine Casey). I argue that polyoccupationalism is instead reshaping the forms of social ties grounded in work. Not only are existing occupational groups being re-composed, but new social entities are also emerging that we need to uncover. ■

ON GENDERED INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONAL WORK: AN INTERVIEW WITH UPASANA GARNAIK

Upasana Garnaik holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from University of Texas at Austin and a Master of Laws from Duke University School of Law. Prior to pursuing her Ph.D., Upasana practiced in the area of family law and human rights and also taught family law in New Delhi, India. Upasana's research and teaching interests lie in sociology of gender, economic sociology and sociology of the law. Her work has been published in *Social Problems*, *Socio-Economic Review*, *Indian Law Review* and has won awards from American Sociological Association, the Society for the Study of Social Problems and the Department of Sociology at UT, Austin.

Chyi-Rong Tsai, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Texas at Austin, talked to Dr. Garnaik about her recent articles in *Social Problems* and *Socio-Economic Review*.

Chyi-Rong Tsai: Hi, Dr. Garnaik. Congratulations on your two brilliant publications, “Invisible Money and Gendered Dispossession: Relational Work in Matrimonial Disputes in India” in *Social Problems*, and “Gendered Wealth and the Challenges of Child Support in India” in *Socio-Economic Review*! In these two articles, you depicted important mechanisms by which divorce processes—mediation and courtroom divorce—shape the gender wealth gap. You found that mediators, lawyers, and judges perform relational work that renders not only women's labor but also their economic contributions to the family invisible and you conceptualize the term “invisible money.” Could you define and explain what “invisible money” is, and how this concept is built on Zelizer's notion of “relational work”?

Upasana Garnaik: Zelizer's concept of “relational work” and “social meaning of money” have been highly influential in shaping my work. In my research, I explore how women's money is understood, evaluated, and contested in family disputes. In doing so, I extend the framework for understanding social reproduction to include women's financial contributions toward sustaining households. Just as women's household labor is made invisible, I demonstrate that their tangible economic contributions to the household too are obscured; I term this obfuscation “invisible money.” Such invisibilization occurs not only within the private sphere

of the family but is also enacted by legal actors. Women's labor *and* money spent on sustaining the household are devalued and not taken into consideration when mediators and judges adjudicate economic claims. By contrast, the money that women choose to spend on themselves is hyper-visibility. Zelizer introduces the concept of “relational work” to describe how individuals create boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate economic transactions based on the content of their social relations. In my work, I highlight the process of “institutional gendered relational work” that legal actors perform to match appropriate economic reliefs to the underlying intimate relationships in family disputes. Through this relational work they perform, women's monies are selectively highlighted or obscured and women are often denied, or awarded meagre economic relief upon separation or divorce.

C.-R.T.: Those are fascinating findings! You drew your findings from your ethnographic data on courtroom proceedings, mediation hearings, and lawyer-client meetings. These occasions could involve deeply personal conversations that people might be hesitant to share with others. Could you share how you gained access to these sensitive spaces and how you built the necessary trust with your participants to capture such intimate data?”

U.G.: I lived and worked in New Delhi for many years prior to my graduate studies. I am a trained lawyer and used to work at a Family Law office. I also taught at a law school. I used my professional and personal networks to gain access to these spaces. Initially, some lawyers and litigants were hesitant to share information or let me shadow them primarily because they were unsure what I would do with the data or suspected I was a journalist. However, after a few meetings, I was successful in building trust and rapport assuring them that I was not a reporter, would use pseudonyms and maintain confidentiality.

C.-R.T.: How do you manage your positionality as a former lawyer and a current researcher? How has your legal background shaped your research process, from data collection and data analysis? Additionally, if participants sought your legal advice during your fieldwork, how did you manage those professional boundaries?

U.G.: Before beginning fieldwork, I discussed the issue with my advisors and committee members, and one piece of advice that stayed with me was that, as researchers, our relationships with participants should not be a one-way street in which we only extract information. I carried this insight with me throughout my fieldwork. When participants raised legal questions, I was careful to seek permission from their lawyers before sharing any legal information. Even then, I framed my explanations cautiously and emphasized that their lawyers, who knew the details of their cases best, were ultimately best positioned to act in their interests.

C.-R.T.: Your work reveals that even well-intentioned legal reforms, like the move toward private mediation, can inadvertently disadvantage women. Based on your research, what structural changes should the Indian legal system—or legal systems



globally—implement to ensure that women’s economic claims are judged more equitably during divorce?

U.G.: This is a very difficult question. As one of my professors once put it, “as sociologists, we are good at identifying problems, we aren’t trained to find solutions”. That said, recognizing women’s social reproduction labor including their financial labor within the household would be a step towards more equitable outcomes in divorce proceedings. In cases of child support, the most effective approaches are actually seen in countries with welfare schemes that offer a public guarantee of a minimum level of child support and rely on non-punitive approaches and enforcement mechanisms. Ultimately, achieving equity would likely require a broader set of societal and institutional changes rather than any single policy intervention. ■

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SPOTLIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH CLAIRE DAVISS

Claire Daviss is a tenure-track Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior and Sociology (by courtesy) in the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations. She studies gender, labor markets, and organizations. Her research focuses on disparities in hiring decisions to advance interactional and organizational theories of social stratification. She uses exciting new data sources—administrative and experimental—to improve the field's measurements and theories of hiring inequality. In ongoing work, she asks: does *how* we hire affect *whom* we hire? She investigates how structural elements of the hiring process moderate the influence of gender, race, and other social category biases in hiring decisions. She aims to make contributions to theories of decision-making in organizations and its implications for inequality, as well as advance best practices for companies seeking to improve fairness and inclusion. Her work has been published in *Organization Science*, *Social Science Research*, *Sociological Methods and Research*, and *Social Forces*.

Yasemin Girgin, a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Boston University, spoke with Dr. Daviss about her path into economic sociology, her research on hiring processes, and how her work contributes to understanding inequality in labor markets.

Yasemin Girgin: Thank you very much for joining us in this issue. Could you share a bit about your journey into economic sociology? What prompted you to pursue a career in this field?

Claire Daviss: Thank you for having me! I started my professional career working at think tanks in the Washington, D.C., area, including several years at the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program. A lot of our focus was on the links between labor markets and social and economic inequality. But I often felt like we had more questions than answers, which made it hard to inform business leaders and policymakers. I wanted to be part of the community of scholars answering these questions, and through some soul-searching conversations—including one with a member of this Economic Sociology section!—I became inspired to apply to sociology Ph.D. programs. I was honored to be accepted into the Sociology Ph.D. program at Stanford. My time there further shaped my interests in labor markets, organizations, and inequality, especially gender inequality, and led to my broader interest in economic sociology. I continue to believe that academic researchers have important roles to play in understanding the causes

and consequences of labor market inequality, and I aim for my work to offer theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions.

Y.G.: Conventional approaches to hiring inequality often center on callback rates at the screening stage. How does your use of large-scale administrative and experimental data reshape what we can observe about inequality across later stages of hiring, and what theoretical blind spots do these methods help uncover?

C.D.: My research is part of a large literature that focuses on hiring decisions as a window into the complex dynamics between workers' preferences for jobs and employers' preferences for workers. A huge number of scholars in this area have used audit studies. Researchers task fictional job seekers—who differ only on some manipulated and signaled characteristic(s), like gender or race—with submitting applications. Usually in these studies, the outcome that researchers measure is whether the job seeker gets a callback for a job interview. But very few audit studies have measured inequality after the callback, for logistical and ethical reasons. As a result, we have a

mountain of evidence about the screening stage, but we know a lot less about hiring inequality in later stages of the hiring process, like the selection stage (from interview to offer) or negotiation stage (from offer to hire). These stages differ substantially in numerous ways that might affect the extent of inequality they produce, including in the signals of social categories, the standards that are used, and the level of applicant or employer decision-making abilities. By focusing on the screening stage alone, we may be missing a lot of the story, and we may be woefully underestimating the extent of hiring disparities.

One exciting opportunity to address these shortcomings is large-scale administrative datasets. An increasing number of firms are using applicant tracking systems to manage their hiring processes, as this kind of software has become more user-friendly and cheaper. Through data use agreements, researchers may be able to repurpose these data to measure inequality in later stages of the hiring process. I feel fortunate to have one such data use agreement, providing me access to data from more than 3,000 firms across the United States. Additionally, to test for causal relationships, including underlying mechanisms, I also design and conduct online survey experiments. My aim is for this research to provide a clearer picture of the extent of hiring inequality, how much it varies across the hiring process, and why.

Y.G.: In your *Organization Science* article with Ming Leung on online labor markets, you find that interactions yield larger benefits for men than for women, which you interpret as interactions reducing the salience of negative stereotypes about men's trustworthiness. As work becomes more project-based and reliant on repeat hiring, how might this dynamic shape path dependence and cumulative advantage?

C.D.: With this project, we thought a lot about how generalizable our findings were to other types of jobs. Like you, we also thought about how many jobs are now reliant on repeat hiring. A substantial percent of workers in the United States are independent contractors, and some of



these contractors may be hired repeatedly by the same employer. Additionally, even among full-time employees, many are in project-based jobs, meaning they also need to be repeatedly assigned to projects, often based on their past performance. Workers that are perceived as having done well previously will have better access to opportunities in subsequent projects, gigs, or jobs.

Our findings suggest that, in contexts where trustworthiness is really salient, men may experience some initial disadvantage in these labor markets. However, they may soon be able to overcome this disadvantage through interacting with the employer. Perhaps more interestingly, these interactions also shape employers' gender preferences for *other* workers. We found that, while employers preferred women as a baseline in online labor markets, this preference was weaker after employers had positive interactions with men. Combined with gender imbalances in occupations, this pattern could certainly contribute to cumulative advantages. If men are overrepresented in a setting, even if employers initially prefer women, they may come to eventually prefer men, simply from these more frequent interactions.

Y.G.: What is on the horizon? Would you tell us about your future research plans?

C.D.: I am excited to be working on several projects developing out of my dissertation. I'm currently working on a descriptive project based on data from the large-scale applicant tracking system dataset I obtained in graduate school. I'm measuring hiring disparities by gender, race, and their intersections and comparing these disparities across industries, occupations, and firm characteristics. My hope is that this research will provide a more complete picture of the extent of hiring inequality in U.S. labor markets, as well as illuminate new empirical puzzles to be solved through theoretical development and causal testing.

I am also continuing several projects that aim to shed light on how the structure of the hiring process shapes employers' preferences for workers. This includes the project I described earlier, on intersectional gender- and racial-disparities in hiring outcomes across multiple stages in the hiring process. In another project, I'm extending prior research on the impact of the gender composition of applicant pools, which has found greater disadvantages for women in more men-dominated pools;

I'm investigating how these disadvantages may vary across Asian, Black, Latina, and White women.

Taken together, my projects build on a broad insight from intersectionality theorists: that gender, race, and other dimensions of difference intersect with each other *and* with contexts. Looking at the disparities across gender, race, and their intersections and across contexts can help to shed light on how these dimensions of difference operate systematically in labor markets.

Y.G.: Based on your own experience, what advice would you give doctoral students preparing for the job market?

C.D.: I really benefited from working toward a different big goal at the same time as I was applying for the job market, specifically training for and running a half marathon. It gave me a place to channel my worries, it kept me socially engaged with running buddies, and the exercise helped me sleep better. So, give it all you got, but don't forget that you are a complex person with many interests! ■

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Wilks, Mary-Collier. 2026. *Reimagining Aid: Foreign Donors, Women's Health, and New Paths for Development in Cambodia*. Stanford University Press.

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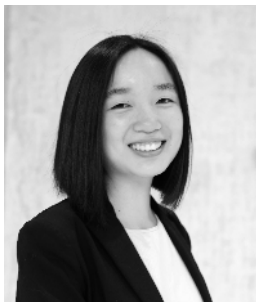
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[Ya-Ching Huang](#) is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Boston University. Her research interests include economic sociology, culture, morality, medical sociology, health and healthcare. Her dissertation on pediatric palliative care examines cultural meanings of children's lives, the complex decision-making surrounding their care in cases of life-limiting illnesses, and the unequal consequences for families across class and race. Her other research on the distribution and moral economy of homemade cloth masks amid the COVID-19 pandemic has been published in the *Journal of Cultural Economy*.



[Yasemin Girgin](#) is a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Boston University. She is interested in economic sociology, work & organizations, analytical sociology, and social psychology. She holds a B.A. from Middle East Technical University and an M.A. from Boğaziçi University, both in Sociology. In her M.A. research, she studied role diversification patterns and relational dynamics of inequality in the Turkish acting field. Currently she works on talent evaluation processes in creative industries, ideologically motivated urban transformations, and socio-economic & political impacts of natural disasters.



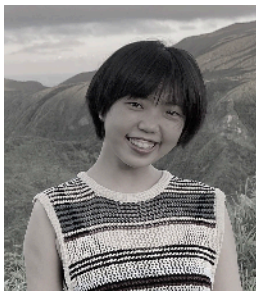
[Joyce Ho](#) is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of Michigan. Her research interests lie at the intersection of economic sociology, environmental sociology, political economy, and the sociologies of risk and morality. Her dissertation examines how climate disasters are reshaping the landscape of private property in the United States. She holds a B.A. in Sociology and Economics from the University of Toronto and an M.A. in Sociology from the University of Michigan.



[Allison Wigen](#) is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Boston University. Her interdisciplinary research interests bridge culture, work and occupations, environment, inequality, and social theory. Her dissertation utilizes ethnographic, historical, and narrative methods to examine the co-constitution of art and labor during times of social, economic, political, and ecological precarity. She explores this through the case of U.S. fishing occupations during two historical periods: the peak of the 19th-century whaling industry, and contemporary commercial fishing. Her work has been published in *Poetics*, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, and *Sociological Forum*. Wigen holds an Ed.M. in Arts in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a B.A. in Literary Arts from Brown University.



[Jessica Urzúa](#) is a Ph.D. student in Sociology and Social Policy at Harvard University. She is interested in studying how power and social structure in labor markets affect economic inequality, and how social policies may exacerbate or mitigate this inequality. She received an A.B. in Social Anthropology from Harvard College and an M.A. in Economics from Columbia University.



[Chyi-Rong Tsai](#) is a PhD candidate in Sociology at University of Texas, Austin. She is interested in housing, welfare state, gender inequality, and economic sociology. Her dissertation project investigates social and cultural meanings of housing and see how these meanings shape the old-age security in Taiwan. Bridging the literature of economic sociology and welfare states, she aims to see how a homeowner society is reproduced by ideology and social institutions and causes unintended consequences to old-age security.



[Mona Khneisser](#) is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where she expects to defend in May 2026. Her research explores the intersections of crisis, class, and political subjectivity in contemporary capitalism, with a regional focus on Lebanon and the SWANA region. Her dissertation, based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Beirut, examines how Lebanon's middle class—long a cornerstone of the postwar economic model—renegotiate identities, attachments, and aspirations in the aftermath of the 2019 financial collapse. Tracing an ethnography of everyday crisis, Khneisser's work reveals how crises reshape state-society relations, unsettle regimes of power, and illuminate broader dynamics of financialization, middle-class politics, and state-society relations.