

## BOOK ABSTRACT

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My first book, *A Global History of Unemployment*, builds on the work of historians such as Robert Salais, Alexander Keyssar, and William Walters, who showed that unemployment is not an ahistorical economic concept, applying in all times and places. Its emergence was predicated, first, on changes in the character and location of work, which caged people within urban labor markets, and second, on targeted policy interventions—including the provision of unemployment insurance—which reduced the frequency of casual and temporary labor in the economy. My book extends this story into the later 20th century and also transforms it into a global history.

Having discovered unemployment in the prewar period, European policymakers in the postwar era sought to eradicate it. They intended to create a world of *full employment*, in which bouts of unemployment would be reduced to brief gaps between jobs. This project was not limited to European countries: full employment was written into article 55 of the United Nations Charter in 1945. It was also an organizing aim of economic development in post-colonial countries. I argue that the project of full employment was derailed between 1965 and 1985, in the context of an international economic conjuncture. At that time, the global economy faced the problem of a *growing oversupply of labor*, due to huge increase in the size of the working population, which was also increasingly caged in urban labor markets. Meanwhile, industrial overproduction—brought on by rapid growth in preceding decades—gave rise to heightened international competition and worsening economic stagnation, leading to a *persistent underdemand for labor*.

The result of these twin problems was a rise in open unemployment levels, as well as the return of atypical forms of employment—such as part-time work, temporary contracts, and precarious self employment—which were supposed to have been eradicated by government interventions. The expansion of atypical employment has been a huge problem in Europe and US, where governments attempted to reduce unemployment by increasing labor flexibility, but it has been an even bigger problem in the wider world, where an enormous informal economy has grown up outside of the regulated zones of formal employment. My book contextualizes these recent shifts by relating them to the long-term history of the full-employment/unemployment paradigm.

A key, concluding element of the story I tell concerns the way that discussions of unemployment have served as venues for thinking through the ultimate ends and aims of economic development: unemployment appears at the intersection between ongoing technological progress, which reduces our collective need to work, and proletarianization, which forces most people to work in order to survive. Full employment was one way to try to resolve this tension. I discuss other ideas as well, including negative income taxes, guaranteed basic incomes, reductions in work hours—John Maynard Keynes's preferred solution—and social revolution. Research for my book was done in the archives of the International Labor Organization, a UN specialized agency headquartered in Geneva. In addition, this project draws on statistics taken from numerous historical databases, such as the Groningen Growth and Development Center's new *10-Sector Database*. This book is intended to contribute to discussions of the future of capitalist economies, adding complexity to present-day debates about automation and job loss.