1. Introduction

The emergence and spread of COVID-19 as a global pandemic during 2020 took most of us by surprise. The scope of socio-economic disruption in the last year is certainly on par with many of the major events during the last century. Understanding these issues, which cut across specialized disciplines and singular standard methodologies, belongs to the urgent tasks of socio-economic research. These challenges make the efforts of communities like the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE) more important and vital than ever.

Our present moment during COVID-19 may appear now as something completely novel, but reasons exist to think otherwise. Many socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 accelerate already existing trends and exasperate inequalities that are already well known. For example, as the pandemic induced lockdowns with significant numbers of people facing home schooling, such pressures have often reinforced pre-existing gender inequalities in the household division of labor (Allmendinger, 2020). As consumers in the developed world gravitated toward online shopping, this behavior further enhanced the monopolistic position of Amazon in many retail markets, doubling its quarterly profits in July 2020 to $5.2 bn compared to 1 year before and boosting the net wealth of founder Jeff Bezos to exceed an estimated $200 bn (Harris, 2020, more generally, see also Kenney et al., 2021). In terms of both health and economics, the poorest and most vulnerable people have been hit the hardest and suffered the most, laying even more bare structures of global inequality (Stiglitz, 2020).

2. Distopian and utopian futures after COVID-19: the case of universities

A more extended, albeit backyard example for academics is the world of universities. Starting with changes in work organization, higher education faced growing demand to use
digital technology to record and distribute teaching materials, especially traditional lectures. The ‘mechanical reproduction’ of university lectures through digital technology is not new, and has been used widely in different contexts. But COVID-19 proved that teaching online is possible on a much larger scale, and thereby exposed the underlying fragility of the lecture format. Once recorded, the same videos can be reused from year to year, and offer cost savings over recording new ones or repeating in-person lectures. Here, we soon entered a contested terrain of the labor process: if the situation of recording lectures becomes permanent, would university administrations continue to count these video recording as teaching hours in the workload? Perhaps, this question seems distant or less important to tenured faculty, although I dare to think that it is a pressing one. Beyond doubt, untenured faculty, adjunct teaching staff and research students engaged in part-time teaching are put into an even more precarious position, as their work can be easily ‘automated’ through recorded lectures. Of course, universities might justify economizing on the time spent in traditional lecture formats, but could reinvest these staff hours in smaller groups and more interactive forms of teaching. But once the video lecture becomes open to legitimate forms of commodification, additional aspects in inequality come into play.

Because of the potential for scale effects, digitalization is widely associated with the so-called winner-take-all markets (more generally, see Lutter, 2013). Digitalization creates new alternatives for university students, who would no longer have to endure the lectures of local staff. Or similarly, they would not have to watch videos that are locally produced by professors, often recorded at home with a webcam under poor lighting conditions and sound. It is only a very small step to suggest that students listen to podcasts or watch videos that are professionally produced. From the logic of cost savings, recorded lectures could be scaled-up from lectures into massive open online courses taught by colleagues elsewhere who are excel in delivering teaching in this format. In a massive step to democratize access to experts, all students could have lectures done by Nobel Prize winning economist or world-renowned sociologist. Indeed, such material is increasingly available on YouTube or other media platforms. To the extent that the video replaces the live lecture, the production of video content could easily become concentrated among the 20–30 most prestigious universities worldwide. Meanwhile, the rest might license this content and specialize on delivering supplementary (interactive) content that is less scalable. Regional universities would likely retain a role in acting as local assessment centers and grading students. While university professors are widely considered as knowledge workers and less vulnerable to being made redundant through automation, from the angle of teaching, the university professor may be unexpectedly expendable.

A different impact relates to the sustainability of high tuition fees and the more generally around the ‘business model’ of contemporary universities, which face declining state support. As the pandemic forces campus to shut down and teaching went digital, students in the UK and USA undertook collective action, such as refusing to pay high tuition for digital only teaching or demanding massive discounts (Fazackerley, 2021). In these countries with highly commercialized higher education institutions, universities remain very dependent on tuition and have prioritized maintaining in-class teaching and making sure students remain on campus. 1 But in the USA, the pandemic seems to have acted as a trigger for a new debate

1 Interestingly, universities funded by taxpayers in Germany have no tuition fees, and have prioritized public health through rapid and thorough closure of campuses.
around the $1.7 trillion student debt crisis that affects more than 45 million former students and leaves graduates with an average debt of $30,000 (Olivier, 2021). Clearly, the value proposition of higher education, and how tuition money is being used are now under scrutiny.

While these issues are not new or unique to the pandemic situation, COVID-19 has brought genuine urgency to such existing structural tensions within contemporary universities: the appropriate role of digital technology, the educational effectiveness of existing modes of teaching and the sustainability of socio-economic models of university education is dependent on very high student tuition (see also Fleming, 2021). Moreover, we see how global pressures affect different countries differently due to familiar comparative differences in the institutions of higher education. COVID-19 and its aftermath may induce changes that create even larger inequalities between winners and losers among students, staffs and organizations themselves. But the crisis is also creating local laboratories for new thinking about these issues, as well as sparking new types of counter-movements against existing power structures and practices. Universities are, after all, much more than just the information that is transmitted through video lectures, but a place for dialog between diverse disciplines and cultures, as well as a launching point for innovative social activities and experiences. In the best scenario, the dystopian glimpse of the digital university afforded to us by COVID-19 may lead to a renaissance for a more utopian commitment to the social values underlying higher education.

3. Socioeconomic research on the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath

Topics related to COVID-19 currently represent fast moving targets. Observations made today often need significant reinterpretation tomorrow. In terms of editorial policy, Socio-Economic Review (SER) would like to take a long-term view of scholarship related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In discussion with the editorial team, we have decided not to rush in being ‘the first’ to publish work on the resulting public health crisis and policy responses, nor even the immediate transformation of work and economic activity due to resulting lockdowns. The journal has received a large number of such papers that describe current events or make largely speculative claims about what the pandemic might mean for the different social and economic institutions. While SER is interested in examining these issues and others and will certainly publish such research on COVID-19, the journal is most interested in publishing studies that address these topics using data and methods that meet the normal standards of quality for an excellent scholarly journal, and which will hopefully be the most long lasting and definitive contributions in understanding these topics.

This approach implies a division of labor between our role as a social science journal and the activities of SASE members engaged as scholars in public discourse on these issues. Here, it seems lamentable that few social scientists have prominent voice in the public discussion of COVID-19. Social science scholarship seems to travel at a painfully slow pace in relation to real-world events, relating to the challenges in collecting empirical data about social life, the methodological rigor demanded in analysis and peer review practices that often demand many rounds of revision. The relation of scholarly publication and public policy or debate should certainly be discussed within SASE. New approaches are needed for making social sciences more present in the public domain. We hope that the excellent research published in
SER will be timely enough to inform policy discussion about new approaches to organizing the economy as we move to a post-pandemic world—a world that remains in need of addressing other grand challenges of climate change (which remains a very neglected topic in much of political economy and economic sociology research) and global inequality. SER has a role to play by publishing studies about interesting and important phenomena, inviting work with novel data or new methodologies, and trying to deliver a peer review process that is timely, fair and allows authors to speak in their own authentic voice.

4. Changes at SER

During 2020, SER received 484 submissions of original manuscripts from first authors in 64 different countries. This number was a slight decline from 2019 and likely reflects the impact of the pandemic. Meanwhile, SER accepted 9% of all submissions with a final decision in 2020. The journal impact factor of SER reached an all-time high of 3.77 based on the citations made in 2019 on the work published in 2017 and 2018. On this basis, SER ranked 6th of 150 journals in Sociology, 11th of 180 journals in Political Science and 35th of 371 journals in Economics, putting SER within the top 4–10% of journals in these disciplines.

Over the last several years, a number of organizational changes have been underway at SER intended to help the journal consolidate its profile and build on strengths in a more sustainable way into the future. Some of these changes are akin to a small mom-and-pop venture or startup growing into a more formal medium-sized organization, seeking to deal with greater volumes of activity and a larger team but also maintain its distinctive identity.

(1) SER goes digital: SER will now be published online only, starting with the current volume 19, issue 1. This decision was made in conjunction with Oxford University Press (OUP) and SASE with a view to cost savings, environmental impact and better reflecting the way in which most scholars access articles. The financial savings are being reinvested by SASE into the operation of the journal, and hopefully bring a number of improvements for authors and readers. Meanwhile, online only does not mean the end of published issues. After appearing in advanced access on the OUP website, all articles will be allocated to a published issue. Increasingly, SER has grouped articles thematically in ways that may help draw attention to new work on related topics. Finally, online only entails a moderate increase in the page budget of the journal, which will help us to more quickly bring articles from advanced access publication to being placed within a specific volume and issue of SER.

(2) Managing Editor: I am very happy to announce that Jutta Becker-Ritterspach has joined the team of SER in the newly created role of Managing Editor. Her role involves supporting the Chief Editor in organizing invited material (e.g. book review symposium, discussion forum), special issues and virtual special issues, answering author queries and the very extensive back-office operations related to the journal. A further critical aspect is to support authors in sharing research published in SER through social media outlets, such as Facebook and Twitter, better highlighting policy and practical implications of research and making our research easier to share more widely both within SASE and with other communities outside the SASE. Jutta is an excellent person for this role. After studying political science at the Free University Berlin and researching a number of political economy topics, she has attended SASE conferences as a researcher and
knows our community very well. She also brings international experience to our team, having lived in Germany, the Netherlands and Egypt.

(3) Governance: SASE introduced a more formal structure for the relationship of SASE and the journal. This document touches on aspects of the recruitment of editors, composition of the editorial board, the role of the advisory board and more.

5. News

The 2020 SER Best Paper Prize committee [Michelle Hsieh (chair), Lucio Baccaro and Monica Prasad] considered all the reviewed regular articles from volume 17 of SER. The committee shortlisted six articles. The committee looked for papers that: (a) addressed substantive questions and issues that have far reaching implications and are of interest to a broad range of SER readers; (b) clearly and effectively engaged prior theory and research; and (c) used state of the art research methods to analyze new or existing data in ways that either brought important new phenomena to light or substantially revised existing understanding of socioeconomic facts, trends or relationships. The committee selected the cowinning papers for the best submitted article published in the previous year for the 12th annual prize: ‘Spatial mismatch and youth unemployment in US cities: public transportation as a labor market institution’ (SER vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 357–379) by Christof Brandner, Anna Lunn and Cristobal Young, as well as ‘Permanent budget surpluses as a fiscal regime’ (SER vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 1043–1063) by Lukas Haffert. Congratulations!

The Alice Amsden Best Book Award committee [Alya Guseva (chair), Cheris Chan, Neil Fligstein and Daniel Maman] considered submitted books with a 2018 or 2019 first edition publication date, and which are not edited volumes, with the aim of selecting an outstanding scholarly book that breaks new ground in the study of economic behavior and/or its policy implications with regard to societal, institutional, historical, philosophical, psychological and ethical factors. The committee selected the 2020 Alice Amsden Book Award of the Society for the Advancement of Socioeconomics to Sarah Quinn for her book ‘American Bonds: How Credit Markets Shaped a Nation’ (Princeton University Press). Congratulations!

6. Thanks

We would like to recognize and thank our Editorial Board members, who serve as trusted reviewers for SER and give advice on important matters of journal policy. In following the policy of Editorial Board rotation, we have a few changes this year.

We thank our outgoing editor Don Tomaskovic-Devey for his excellent work, fruitful ideas and his continuous commitment for SER. Don has been a lynch pin of our team for 4 years, and strengthened the profile of SER in research related to inequality, work, organizational dynamics and financialization to name a few topics. We would like to welcome our new editor Ken-Hou Lin. He is a Professor of Sociology and a Population Research Center affiliate at the University of Texas at Austin. His main areas of interest are inequality, finance, race and immigration. We are very happy to welcome him to the team of editors.

We are very happy to welcome the following new members to the Editorial Board: Sara Watson (Ohio State University), Virginia Doellgast (Cornell University), Natascha van der Zwan (Leiden University) and Lena Hipp (Potsdam University and WZB). We also thank...
the outgoing members of the Editorial Board for their excellent and selfless service: Sarah Brooks, Chris Howell, Alya Guseva and Christina Ahmadjian.

We would like to welcome Mari Sako (University of Oxford) as a new member to our Advisory Committee. We also thank the outgoing member of the Advisory Committee David Marsden for being an excellent custodian of SER and a continuing active member of the SASE community.

Our thanks also go to our virtual editorial office of Sarah King, and especially our new Managing Editor Jutta Becker-Ritterspach for truly excellent work.

In closing, I wish to thank our authors, reviewers, editor team and readers for their collaboration and support of SER. On behalf of all the editors, we are very grateful for the confidence that SASE and its members place in our work and in the journal in promoting the interdisciplinary agenda of socioeconomics.

References

Allmendinger, J. (2020) ‘Zurück in alte Rollen Corona bedroht die Geschlechtergerechtigkeit’, WZB Mitteilungen, accessed at https://bibliothek.wzb.eu/artikel/2020/f-23092.pdf on 21 May, 2021.

Fazackerley, A. (2021, March 13) ‘Treated like Cash Cows’: International Students at Top London Universities Withhold £29,000 Fees, The Guardian, accessed at https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/mar/13/treated-like-cash-cows-international-students-at-top-london-universities-withhold-29000-fees on 21 May, 2021.

Fleming, P. (2021) Dark Academia: How Universities Die, London, Pluto Press.

Harris, J. (2020, November 18) ‘How Amazon Became a Pandemic Giant—And Why that Could be a Threat to Us All’, The Guardian, accessed at https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/nov/18/how-amazon-became-a-pandemic-giant-and-why-that-could-be-a-threat-to-us-all on 21 May, 2021.

Kenney, M., Bearson, D. and Zysman, J. (2021) ‘The Platform Economy Matures: Measuring Pervasiveness and Exploring Power’, Socio-Economic Review, https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwab014 on 21 May, 2021.

Lutter, M. (2013) ‘Structures of Unequal Success. The Social Contexts of Emerging Winner-Take-All-Concentrations on Flexible Labor Markets’, Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, 65, 597–622.

Olivier, I. (2021, February 18) ‘The Columbia University Student Strike is About Far More Than Tuition’, The Guardian, accessed at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/18/the-columbia-university-student-strike-is-about-far-more-than-tuition on 21 May, 2021.

Stiglitz, J. (2020) ‘Conquering the Great Divide’, IMF Finance & Development, Fall 2020 Issue, pp. 17–19, accessed at https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2020/09/COVID19-and-global-inequality-joseph-stiglitz.htm on 21 May, 2021.