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Innovation and equity: places and practices an introduction to the special section

Dan Breznitz[1], Jane Gingrich[2] and Amos Zehavi[3,*,†]

[1]University of Toronto, Munk School. e-mail: dan.breznitz@utoronto.ca, [2]University of Oxford. e-mail: jane.gingrich@spi.ox.ac.uk and [3]Tel Aviv University, Public Policy and Political Science. e-mail: amos.zehavi@gmail.com

*Main author for correspondence.

[†]According to alphabetic order. Not based on contribution.

Can innovation be made more equitable? The papers in this special issue center equity at the heart of a positive research agenda around innovation. This research agenda relates to practices - the routinized behaviors of social actors - in the innovation process. In this introduction, we discuss how these practices focus on a) access to innovative processes, b) targets of innovation, c) the deployment of technology in firms, d) ownership structures, and e) broader governance. Moreover, practices always occur in a specific place, understood as the distinctive social or power relations that shape how practices, and resistance towards them, emerge.

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Can innovation be made more equitable? In the last decades, substantial empirical and theoretical work has argued that both the institutions which are seemingly generative of highly innovative activities—e.g. access to venture capital, greater firm flexibility, and deregulated labor markets—and the deployment of new innovations have produced substantial inequities. Rapid innovation is associated with a growing income share for the top 1% (Aghion *et al.*, 2019), a growing wage inequality (Acemoglu, 2002), changing business models (Lazonick, 2009), and new forms of wealth and spatial inequalities (Iammarino *et al.*, 2019; Kemeny *et al.*, 2022; Kwon and Sorenson, 2023), with places focusing on innovating at the novelty stage suffering the most rapid rise of inequities (Breznitz, 2021).

As information and telecommunication technologies (ICT) have diffused through economies, they have seemingly had differential effects across workers: those with lower formal levels of skills have encountered stagnating wages, and middle-skilled routine workers have faced job losses. All the while those with high formal skill levels, who perform complex tasks, have benefitted the most (Goldin and Katz, 2009; McAfee *et al.*, 2012; Autor and Dorn, 2013; Frey and Osborne, 2017; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020; Susskind, 2020). Emerging technology has reshaped human relationships well beyond the workplace, and contributes to new forms of private (and public) measurement and control in people's lives as consumers, family members, and citizens; often to the benefit of the technology firms (Fourcade and Healy, 2024). Many of these newest technologies both reflect—and entrench—deep racial and gender hierarchies in their development (Benjamin, 2019), deployment (Greenwood, 2019, Levy and Barocas, 2017, Rosenblat *et al.*, 2017), and

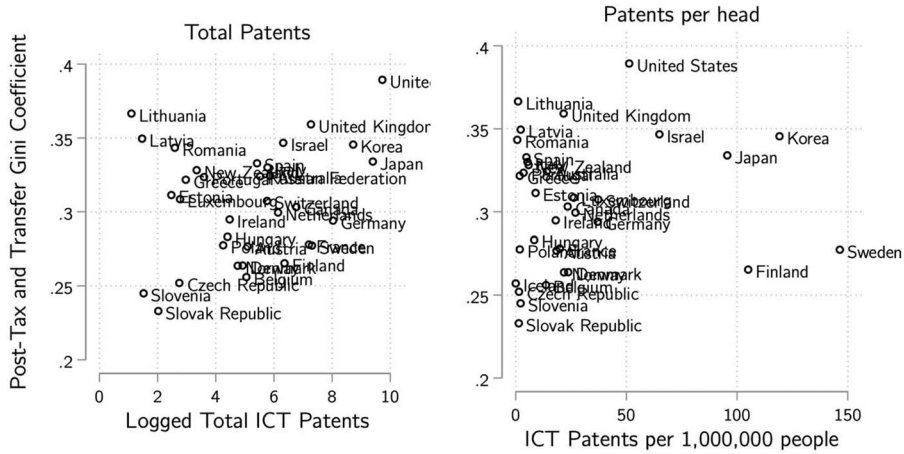

Figure 1. ICT patents and inequality.

broader economic and social effects (Kemeny *et al.*, 2022). In the face of these inegalitarian trends, a growing 'techno-pessimism' has emerged, arguing that contemporary innovation inherently creates inequality (Aghion *et al.*, 2019; Permana *et al.*, 2018).

However, both macro and micro studies cast doubt on a deterministic relationship between technological development and inequality. Cross-nationally, there is only a weak correlation between traditional measures of innovation and income inequality. As an example, Figure 1 shows a simple scatter plot between total logged ICT patents (left) and ICT patents per head (right) with post-tax and transfer income inequality as measured by a Gini coefficient. It demonstrates a weak (r = .21) or null relationship among the two variables.[1] While rates of income inequality have increased in many contexts alongside new knowledge-intensive forms of production, this was not always the case in past global waves of rapid innovation (Lee, 2016) and substantial variation remains in both contemporary pathways and outcomes (Hope and Martelli, 2019, Lee, 2024).

Some countries with high levels of novel innovation, such as South Korea, Israel, and the United States, have seen inequalities reach historic heights, while others, such as Switzerland, Finland, and Taiwan, remain remarkably egalitarian. This configuration has led some to argue that the rise of inequality has less to do with innovation and ICT themselves, and more to do with the particular stages in the new system of global production, and the concomitant institutions and policies accompanying them, which specific places specialize in (Breznitz, 2007; Breznitz, 2021; Lee, 2024). A growing body of work shows that the inequities associated with contemporary innovative activities often follow from the market and social behaviors that are adjacent to—*but not necessary for*—innovation: e.g. anti-competitive or market concentrating firm behaviors (Azar *et al.*, 2022) or explicit and implicit racial and gender discrimination in scientific labs and technology firms (Alegria, 2020). Moreover, even as novel technology reshapes many social practices in inegalitarian ways, it has also facilitated new forms of equity-aimed mobilization—from the widespread activism after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 to the 'Fight for $15' movement; suggesting that it is not innovation per se that is the cause of inequities.

At first glance, this work would seem to suggest that 'fixing' the institutions and policies shaping technologically adjacent behaviors will make outcomes more egalitarian. However, as both the above work, and a broader literature in legal studies and the sociology of information argues, separating technology, markets, and institutions, is often not possible: they are co-constitutive (e.g. Rogers, 2023). Benkler (2023) argues that legal institutions 'structure both productivity and power:' Law permits the emergence of particular business models employing technology, and new technologies shape patterns of contestation over the law. This intersection raises a critical question: if innovative activities, the institutions, networks, and policies that allow them, and their

[1] The patent and inequality data come of the OECD and refer to 2018.

relationship to social and economic equity, are deeply endogenous, how do we center equity at the heart of a *positive* research agenda around innovation?

These critical socio-political-economic phenomena are at the heart of the last seven years of discussions and research of the Innovation Equity and Prosperity global network of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR). This special issue aims to bring out some of our conceptual efforts as a call for a new research agenda: moving from Innovation versus Equity to Innovation *and* Equity as our loci of examination. The principal effort in this special issue is to reorient the research agenda on innovation to put questions of *equity* at its center (Zehavi and Breznitz, 2017). The approach we have developed relies on two linked analytic moves, which look to a) disaggregate different components of innovation and b) theorize variation in these components across specific social contexts.

First, we identify our unit of analysis, which we label *practices*. Practices are the routinized behaviors of social actors (e.g. firms, governments, organized groups, universities, and regulators) in the innovation process that shape the way innovative activities emerge, diffuse, and are used. We focus on practices around (i) access to innovative processes, (ii) targets of innovation, (iii) the deployment of technology in firms, (iv) ownership structures, and (v) broader governance. We thus conceptualize how particular constellations of behaviors are associated with a range of equity outcomes linked to innovators, consumers, workers, owners and citizens respectively. Practices constitute an intermediate level for examination, which allows us to analyze inequality producing processes in ways that are both systematic and cognizant of the feedback loops between the downstream inequalities associated with innovation and the upstream contestation over the institutions that shape it.

Second, we argue that practices always occur in a specific *place*: there is no universal, or determinant relationship behind technological development or deployment. While technology and novel developments threaten disruption, the practices of existing actors emerge to reduce potential disorder. The extent to which they can do so depends in part on the existing power structures of given places. We conceive of place as *specific units* within a *domain of activity* (e.g. the household, the workplace, the community, the broader polity) where human activity and interaction occur. Places can be spatial units—such as countries or cities—but they can also consist of communities, businesses, or even loci of collective efforts to improve social realities. Places, then, are a shorthand for the distinctive social or power relations that shape how practices, and resistance toward them, emerge. In theorizing place, we aim to move beyond claims that 'context matters,' conceptualizing and analyzing domain-specific variation in power relationships.

The papers in this special issue demonstrate the value of this move by focusing on two specific places. The first being the firm or workplace, where Gingrich *et al.*, look at how different modes of workplace governance impact both workers' perceptions of new technologies and the way in which they are diffused and employed, and Breznitz *et al.*, focus on the development of workplace surveillance technologies over the last hundred and fifty years. The second set of 'places' which we focus on in the special issue are the regional communities where Lee *et al.*, look at (mostly national) attempts to use innovation to re-balance regional inequities; and Brandtner *et al.*, develop a theoretical framework of what leads specific regions and cities to become (and stay) prosperous. We theorize systematic variation among firms and workplaces on the one hand, and regional communities and polities on the other, in order to think analytically about how the structure of these places conditions specific practices in more or less equity producing ways.

We envision this special issue as an opportunity to expand the agenda of normative-oriented innovation research to discuss innovation's impact on equity. Our highly diverse group of CIFAR IEP fellows—political scientists, engineers, economists, historians, geographers, management scholars, sociologists and anthropologists—consider paths for moving toward a future in which innovation produces more equitable distributions and relations—not less. The different papers consider the different factors that shape innovation practices as they currently are and the type of constraints on policy interventions this analysis could imply.

1. The need for a new research agenda

To center equity at the heart of the study of innovation, we need to define equity and its relationship to the innovation process. Drawing on Elizabeth Anderson (1999), we conceptualize

equity in relational terms. For Anderson, *equality* refers to people's ability to stand as equals free of oppression, domination and hierarchy. This relational understanding of equality has a material dimension—people cannot stand as equals in many domains of life when dramatically different material circumstances translate into social hierarchies—but it also extends beyond it, to encompass inequalities in status, respect and opportunities. To distinguish this understanding of equality from income equality, we use the term 'equity' here.

In thinking about equity as it relates to innovation, we look at a series of relationships that structure people's positions in the innovation process: as innovators, as consumers, as workers (broadly defined), as owners, and as citizens. In some cases, people of different classes, genders, or racial backgrounds stand in relatively more equal terms in each of these relationships, and sometimes in less equal terms. The same people could inhabit relationships of relatively more equality as consumers, but hierarchical relationships as workers, although there is often an interdependence across these roles. Taking equity seriously leads us to disaggregate practices of innovation as they relate to different relationships.

What shapes relational equity among people in their different roles? Much classic work in political economy points to broad institutions that shape markets. Even as traditional institutions continue to matter for shaping inequities, changes in global production networks, growing financialization, the rise of high-skilled traded services, and new firm structures, raise questions about how to conceptualize the link between productive incentives and distributive outcomes (Krippner, 2005; Lazonick, 2009, 2023; Weil, 2019; Breznitz, 2021; Lee, 2024). Some of the most well theorized linkages between varying forms of economic coordination (e.g. Hall and Soskice, 2001) and more equalitarian forms of distribution have increasingly frayed, as these constellations have 'drifted' apart (Thelen, 2014). Indeed, Foster and Thelen (2024), building on the work of legal scholar Sanjukta Paul (2020), argue that some of the most important theoretical innovations regarding market variation today cut across older institutional distinctions. When we cast our eye beyond income equality to include race and gender, the analytic questions as to how to understand the equity effects of innovation grow.

The study of innovation as an academic field is well placed to answer these questions. From the middle of the 20th century to the present, it has rapidly gained mainstream status. Indeed, in the last two decades, relative mentions of innovation in published books (based on google n-grams) and articles have doubled (He and Tian, 2020), interdisciplinary research groups studying science and technology have proliferated, and fundamental questions about the relationship among technology, institutions, and growth have defined major cross-cutting research agendas. Nonetheless, despite this deep scholarly attention, fundamental distributive questions persist. Why is access to innovative practices so unequally distributed? Can (and do) institutions shape whether firms or other actors engage in more egalitarian forms of technology development and adoption? Most fundamentally: when and where does innovation work for the good of the many?

We argue in this special issue that answering these questions requires centering questions of equity at the heart of innovation studies in new ways. Doing so involves revisiting the institutions and social networks which have long laid at the heart of work on innovation (e.g. finance and intellectual property law) as well as turning to areas that historically have been less central for scholars of innovation (e.g. questions about power in the workplace, social identity, and community representation). To do so, we argue means looking at the way practices intersect with places to generate different patterns of inequality.

First, we identify inequality producing practices by drawing on our relational concept of equality: conceptualizing potential inequalities among people in various roles in innovative systems—as inventors, consumers, workers, owners, and citizens. We identify five *practices* linked to these relationships that are more or less inequality producing: what we label *network access* (practices shaping access to processes of innovation), *targeting* (practices of invention for different groups), *systems of control* (practices shaping the use of innovation), *capture and sharing of gains* (practices shaping the ownership of the gains of innovation), and *embedding and disembedding* (practices shaping regulation and democratic control over innovation). We do not conceptualize these practices as unfolding in a linear temporal sequence. Rather, practices point to the interactions of actors that shape the distributive consequences, and particular relational

(in) equalities, produced by innovative activities. The value of breaking apart these practices lies in the legibility and visibility they bring to varied inequities.

Second, while identifying inequity producing practices is a useful exercise, explaining variation in them requires investigating the network, and the institutional and power structures that narrow or expand access to the gains of innovation via these practices. Because our starting position is non-deterministic, we argue that these practices are not uniform. As Lipartito (1994) argues: 'Locating technology in its various contexts makes change far more problematic and far less deterministic than it is in either Marxian or neo-classical economic models.' We thus explore practices in multiple domains. Within these domains, institutions and networks shape the emergence of practices in specific *places*. In these special issue papers, the authors focus on theorizing how specific features of firms/workplaces and communities shape the way specific practices emerge.

We thus advance a triple claim: (i) varying practices produce relational inequalities in different parts of the innovation process; (ii) these practices emerge differently across places; (iii) looking at the constellation of practices and places helps us untangle the institutions, networks, and forms of mobilization that lead to specific forms of relational (in)equity.

In thinking about *practices* and *places* in tandem, we have been developing a research program that enhances the understanding of the relationships between equity and innovation, in ways that could lead to more equity attuned *policies,* utilizing the knowledge gained to improve the human condition in the real world. To build on their theorization of inequity producing practices, contributors to this special issue consider the ways in which extant arrangements could be restructured to advance a more equitable future. For equity-enhancing interventions to succeed, they must take account of the different factors and circumstances that gave rise to the specific innovation practices in the first place. This in turn depends on the place itself. For example, innovations in workplace surveillance technologies increase the power imbalance between workers and management in different settings. How might unions, government, or other actors intervene to achieve a more equitable power balance? As Breznitz *et al.* argue in this volume, answering this question requires thinking through the power dynamics and the interests of business, labor, and the community in places that vary in systematic ways. For example, the persistent strength of unions and the legal-institutional framework of European Union countries forces European employers to address worker concerns associated with the use of algorithmic management and surveillance tools. In the United States, quite differently, unions are weaker than their European counterparts as is the regulatory framework. As a consequence, employers have a much freer hand in deploying surveillance technologies in the workplace to the detriment of workers.

Consequently, to consider realistic interventions for equity-enhancing innovation, we must appreciate the institutions, power relations, local business structure, positions within the global economy, and culture/identity-related factors that help shape innovation practices.

2. Practices in places: innovation for whom?

We start by thinking about how innovation affects equalities among people (often defined by group characteristics like class, race, and gender) across different relationships in the innovation process: as innovators, consumers, workers, owners, or citizens. Each of these relationships are linked to different constellations of practices. We thus identify five linked practices that shape relational equity. Table 1 summarizes the main subjects of each practice and the key research question relevant to each practice.

Analyzing practices helps us understand how similar technologies are likely to have different equity-related effects in different spheres of innovation: allowing us to ask who is participating (and to what degree) in the invention of new technologies (Buschmann and Breznitz, 2025), to which firms, embedded in which networks, deploy what resources to target different customers, to how firms use technologies in their own production to different ends.

For example, in the invention process, there has been very little attention given to technologies targeting people with disabilities. Here both the practices of innovation and of invention in the marketplace largely incentivize innovators to *not* target people with disabilities (Breznitz and Zehavi, 2022). By doing so, they prevent many of them from actively engaging with the labor market or acting as innovators themselves. Understanding how specific market practices create

Table 1. Practices

	Practices of network access	Practices of targeting	Practices of control	Practices of distribution	Practices of embedding
Relations of equality	Among innovators	Among consumers	Among workers	Among owners	Among citizens
Key research questions	What shapes wider or narrower access to innovative processes?	What incentives for different forms of innovation exist?	How are new technologies employed?	Who captures the productivity gains of new technologies?	What allows democratic control over innovative processes?

inequities among both innovators and consumers is a distinct task to understanding how specific technologies are deployed in the workplace to shape the behavior of employees. Examining this process has led many governments to try to achieve more equitable outcomes by developing policies that change invention practices, focusing innovation on targeting people with disabilities with the aim of making them able to participate more effectively in both social and work life.

Even though some of the relational inequalities and practices outlined above seem market-based (e.g. among innovators), others are more closely associated with the household (e.g. among consumers) or polities (e.g. among citizens). We contend that people operate as innovators, consumers, workers and so on across all these domains. The household is deeply intertwined with various markets (Zaloom and James, 2023), while market actors engage in emotional and relational work that draws on dynamics not always distinct from the home (Wharton, 2009), and the workplace and home have long been intertwined with people's civic life (Muddiman *et al.*, 2019; Lup, 2022). Despite these overlaps, distinct places feature specific power and social relations. Thus, the definition of place enables us to explore the determinants of certain practices, in specific settings, and compare among them.

As humans, our activities and interactions always happen in specific spaces. Those spaces are not random; these are particular and well-defined spaces for human action and interaction. Brandtner *et al.*, in this issue, argue that the very definitions of 'place' influence and define both the activities that occur in them and the goals which those activities seek to achieve. Places could be geographical—a particular territory in the world—and they can be political—territory X is recognized as the country or city Y. However, they could also consist of households, or businesses. Places might not even be fully defined geographically as they can be communities or even loci of collective efforts to improve social realities.

Consider the use of tracking devices in different workplaces. In Amazon's warehouses and in both ridesharing and long-haul trucking, tracking devices—developed and implemented without consultation with the workers—are used by employers to control workers actions including following their second-by-second movements with the aim of maximizing what managers define as efficiency and limiting the capacity of workers to manage their own activities. Such use is highly resented by both workers and the media. In mining, however, very similar tracking devices are used as essential safety tools, with miners highly appreciative of their outcome and use, and with miners being consulted on both their development and implementation (Clawson and Clawson, 2017; Levi, 2023; Breznitz *et al.*, this issue). In the household, intimate surveillance practices, such as tracking whereabouts through use of mobile phones, could be employed by parents as a safety device for their children. Such tracking allows parents to monitor children to guarantee that they remain in relatively "safe" zones. Tracking apps, however, could also be employed to spy on partners (Dereymaeker *et al.*, 2025). The same technology is used for different purposes (make work more efficient, promote public health, protect children, detect matrimonial infidelity) in different places. The ability to deploy the technology in these varied ways depends on the specific power relations and associated institutional constellations that characterize each place.

Our special issue looks to theorize the specific practices that impact behavior in the polity, community, and workplaces/firms, in order to be more concrete about the ways features of specific places shape particular practices, such as access to the innovative process (Brandtner *et al.*, 2026, Lee *et al.*, 2026, Gingrich *et al.*, 2026, Breznitz *et al.*, 2026, in this issue). For instance, consider

one of the most common modes of innovation—the development of labour-saving technologies and their introduction in a range of domains—households, workplaces and government services. In this special issue Gingrich *et al*., focusing on workplaces, conceptualize how different forms of workplace power moderate the consequences of technological adoption, connecting these forms of power to various dimensions of workers' preferences. This allows us to understand under what conditions workers organize against innovations in the workplace instead of adopting or acquiescing to emerging technologies. By doing so, they demonstrate the importance of taking place—a workplace in this context—and the practices in each place, seriously.

We flesh out these intersections below, regarding different practice-place constellations.

2.1 Access to innovative networks

First, who are the *innovators*? Work looking at the question of lost 'Einsteins' and 'Marie Curies' points to class, race, and gender barriers to participation in innovative activities, with substantial research showing that the children from wealthy families, particularly men from these backgrounds, engage in most innovative activity (Bell *et al*., 2019; Hoisl *et al*., 2023). Historically, in the United States and elsewhere, Black innovators were largely excluded from the innovative process—sometimes violently so. Lisa Cook (2014), in her work on lynching and violent hate crimes, shows the deleterious effect of systematic violence on the patenting activity of Black Americans in the early 20th century, estimating the profound economic costs of racism in terms of lost innovation and talent in the innovative pipeline. A growing literature on racial capitalism in the United States shows that systematic processes of exclusion, such as financial exclusion from credit markets (Thurston, 2018), continue to limit Black Americans' access to resources for innovation.

What shapes who has access to innovative processes? We focus on practices that open or close access. The practices creating contemporary inequities are less overt than the visible violence that Cook (2014) examines, but nonetheless present via forms of *network closure*. Despite a mass upgrading of the formal qualifications of class, gender, and racial groups in the last decades, the practices of 'public' innovation remain deeply skewed toward already privileged groups: inequalities in access to elite schooling, STEM education, job opportunities, finance, and connections with the 'right' networks often create material and social barriers for would be innovators. For processes of novel invention—such as work in cutting-edge-tech firms—networks matter at very early stages of access: initial education and training, access to early-stage funding, and access to the networks that come from first jobs. Here these early-stage networks are often narrow. As Neely et al. (2023) argue, in their review of race and gender in the technology sector, there are substantial barriers to diversifying many technology workplaces: which include both material limitations (access to capital) and social limitations (narrow recruitment networks). Other work on hiring in firms and academic institutions (e.g. for hiring, see Rivera, 2012)—the places where much innovation occurs—show that it often replicates class, racial, and gender inequalities. Furthermore, as Buschmann and Breznitz (2025) argue, what is important is not only who is represented in the innovation process, but also how they are represented and whether they have equal voice in it. However, research that focuses on frugal innovation—where successful innovation do not necessitate access to cutting-edge high expansive laboratories and the capital requirement is significantly lower—indicates that the entry barriers to those networks could be reduced as well as product prices (Hossain, 2018).

What then shapes network access? Both varied organizational structures across firms and broader political and economic structures matter. In workplaces where recruitment networks are narrow and barriers to entry are high (due to high capital costs and mobility limitations), innovative activities are more concentrated among the few. Conversely, where networks actively recruit outsiders—or at least do not block access—and where institutions offer various paths of advancement (e.g. enable entry of job applicants that do not necessarily possess all expected conventional credentials), we should expect broader participation in innovation and related work. Equally, the broader market-policy mix matters. Governments could work, whether by regulation or incentives, to expand networks to accept new entrants. Civil society organizations could also play a role in opening networks. For example, in Israel, such organizations were active in prying open the high-tech world to Arab high-tech workers and start-ups (Lee *et al*., in this issue; Zehavi and Breznitz, 2017; Shilon *et al*., 2022). Thinking about prosperous places in this issue, Brandtner

et al., reflect on how higher diversity of both workplaces and finance allows places to have more open networks with significant, positive, and long-term equity outcomes.

Researching the linkages between the practices that broaden or narrow access to the innovation process—and the consequent relational inequalities among would-be innovators across class, racial, or group lines—is a crucial and nascent research area. This requires thinking about the specific institutions and networks as they exist in places (both geographically and socially) that shape access.

2.2 Targets of innovation

Second, who are the targets of innovation, better thought of as *consumers?* One of the canonical claims in much research on innovation is that it is difficult to know, ex ante, if a particular innovation is socially useful or serves a particular group. However, it is quite clear that some consumers are 'better-served' (or at least better-targeted) by innovation.

These outcomes are apparent in multiple domains, from Artificial Intelligence to health. For example, the best generative AI systems (large language models LLM), only work in a handful of languages, and the very best ones only in English. Hence, to even be able to effectively use them necessitates a high proficiency in English, not a skill most humans on earth possess—meaning that most of humanity is currently poorly served by AI. Another case of better versus under-served consumers is medical research—where illnesses that afflict the politically and economically powerful have systematically received more funding and effort. Caroline Perez (2019) documents a similar lack of historic responsiveness to women in terms of technological development, pointing to the way technology has been designed for male bodies and tasks.

It is crucial to ask if, when, and under what conditions do innovators develop technologies in ways that better serve, ignore, or actively exploit some groups more extensively than others. For instance, new AI-based technologies that improve firms' capacities to control and utilize data could lead to better products offered to consumers, or products that are tailor-made to fit specific consumer needs. At the same time, consumers could also be subjected to a bombardment of AI-generated sales pitches engineered to stimulate consumer behavior that benefits the firms' bottom line. There is, however, considerable variation across legal systems in what firms are allowed to do in this respect.

Indeed, there are growing concerns regarding the impacts of new technologies on the welfare of their consumers; especially those most susceptible to abuse. Here, research is in its early days, but the significant social outcomes are widely appreciated. The founders of big tech were only recently called to testify in front of the US congress on online children safety, where Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Meta (Facebook), used the opportunity to apologize to parents, teenagers, and children (especially girls), worldwide for the adverse impact social network technology has had on their lives and safety online (Jan 31st, 2024 https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/protecting-children-online).

Hence, a critical question for equity and innovation involves asking: if consumers were treated with equal respect and standing in innovative processes, how would the distribution of innovation differ? Understanding this question requires conceptualizing exclusion/inclusion as applying not just to innovators, but also to consumers. Attention to *practices of wide or narrow targeting* focus our attention to the private and public incentives around the development of new technologies that shape the distribution of effort across categories of consumers in the market, the household, and even the state itself. Again, variation across both firms and polities matter. Firms seeking profits naturally tend to gravitate toward satisfying the demands of the more affluent consumers. Institutions that allow for broader economic strategies—an alternative to 'winner takes all' forms of investment and entrepreneurship—and/or those that allow a substantial public presence in supporting innovation, are more likely to pursue forms of innovation with a more equitable social impact. In the market domain, the incentives firms face to concentrate on different types of consumers is likely to vary based on the structure of markets they are targeting. Where practices of product development are narrowly linked to consumer wealth, outcomes are more likely to be narrowly targeted than where firms or governments have incentives to address a broader range of consumers.

Equally, within polities, the choices that governments make about how to purchase and procure goods can have major distributive implications for whose needs are served (Coyle, 2020). More

equal practices could emerge through active policies, like direct spending. For example, as part of the European Union Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, national governments were encouraged to mainstream gender concerns in decisions about public support for innovation, including considerations of gender equality in consumption. The Austrian Femtech program financed a project dedicated to the design of gardening tools that would be suitable for women, who have on average lower muscle mass and smaller hands than men. Other innovations are intended to make public spaces safer for women, which could involve intensification in the use of surveillance technologies (Oksenberg and Zehavi, 2025). Similarly, government policies have had positive outcomes in directing more innovation to targeting people with disabilities (Breznitz and Zehavi, 2022).

2.3 Distribution of control

Third, how does the well-being of *workers* (defined broadly to include unpaid household and public sector work) relate to different structures of technological deployment? A substantial body of economic research examines the impact of innovation in the paid labor force, examining working conditions, wages, scope, and availability, as well as the impact of technology on the relative power of workers as a class and in specific sectors. Those questions, in turn, have led researchers to examine the impact of innovation on the quality of distribution of job creation and destruction (e.g. Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020).

In many cases employers *do* use technology to exert greater control over production processes. A prime example, analyzed at length in this issue by Breznitz *et al.*, is the increasing use of highly intrusive surveillance technologies in the workplace. For example, some employers issue mobile phones to workers with the intention of taking advantage of GPS to follow them everywhere (Clawson and Clawson, 2017).

In the market domain, the literature suggests that both broader institutions and firm level structures can affect the incentives for de-skilling and working conditions associated with the diffusion of new technology. Firms may choose to innovate in ways that augment their workers by increasing their productivity, or they may opt for innovation that is labor-replacing. In addition, research demonstrates that firm practices create differential work environments for workers based on race, ethnic origin, etc. For instance, Wingfield Harvey in her study of Black health care workers, shows that workers have a different relationship to organizational power based on the intersection of their professional status and race, with implications for technology (Wingfield Harvey, 2019). This work shows that negative outcomes for workers are not necessarily inherent to the technologies themselves (although some of them lend themselves more easily to one or the other).

The paper by Gingrich *et al.*, in this issue, looks to develop these insights. They review the broader literature on practices within and across firms as they relate to worker and management control over technology. Use of technology varies in part because organizational structures within firms vary, which are linked in part to worker organization. As Breznitz *et al.*, in this issue argue, not all innovation for technological control is inherently bad for workers. For example, surveillance in service loci (e.g. hotels) could be deployed to reduce opportunities for sexual harassment, false allegations by customers, etc. The use of algorithmic management, which tightens employer control, could under some circumstances reproduce human bias, but when carefully designed could in fact help correct such bias—for instance by exposing discriminatory hiring practices. The question of how technology affects these differences, requires thinking about practices of control in particular places, which often embody different power relations.

Both papers suggest that broader differences in macro-political-economic systems further impact the use of the same technologies. Institutions that provide for more union power or formal codetermination are likely to shape the aggregate deployment of technology across sectors in relatively equitable ways. Such meaningful institutional differences extend to the state itself. In looking at technologies deployed within the state, certain technologies may limit some forms of hierarchical control (e.g. police body cameras) while others expand it (e.g. surveillance of minority communities).

A fundamental question then is when firms, households, or other actors have incentives to adopt technologies in ways that systematically look to control—and sometimes repress and undermine—the power, income, and opportunity of workers (i.e. to exert relational dominance),

and when the incentives guide these actors to allow those in weaker positions more scope to collaborate in collective decision making. In short, how are *practices of control* structured over the usage of technology across different places?

2.4 Capturing or sharing of gains

Fourth, how are 'innovation rents' shared across social groups? A central question in relation to innovation is how its fruits are distributed. Large innovative firms, especially 'superstar' ones, have vastly increased capital returns in recent decades as the returns to labor have diminished correspondingly (Autor *et al.*, 2020). This development is especially jarring given the fact that many of the innovative breakthroughs that enabled these firms to grow were government subsidized. Thus, the public takes the (very high) risk and bears the (very high) costs of innovation, while private firms enjoy the financial gains. Lazonick and Mazzucato (2013) argue that many of the early innovations central to major companies such as Apple, SpaceX, and Google were developed in part by tax-payer—that is citizens'—funded research, the same taxpayers that now are required to buy the products of these publicly-subsidized companies.

Moreover, to gain from commercialization, firms often adopt practices that ensure that they capture the highest possible share of revenues generated by innovation. Feldman *et al.* (2021) show that the way firms operate using monopoly power—not technology per se—produce regional inequalities, with tech firms often explicitly blocking more deconcentrated local development attempts. Capture processes involve the incentives of firms to both seek specific rents—rather than productive gains—and maximize their share of the gains of innovation.

A critical question is what shapes the *practices of capture?* In relation to the market domain, substantial work examines how institutions can incentivize rent seeking activities, concentrate power, and reproduce inequalities. Where there are more 'winner takes most' structures—as in leading edge sectors—firms have incentives to focus on strategies that monopolize gains. In places with more incremental forms of innovation, firms may also seek rents, but these follow from more oligopolistic type practices.

One strand of work analyzes the ways in which we finance innovation, incentivize managers and capital owners, and commodify the gains from innovation (Lazonick, 2023). Other work focuses on systems of intellectual property rights (such as patents, copyrights, trademarks and standards to name a few (Bessen and Meurer, 2009). This work examines how different institutions, from capital market regulation to rules regarding intellectual property, shape different business models—in financial and non-financial firms—which increase or reduce the scope for actors to colonize the gains of innovation. Institutions that facilitate the capture of the gains of innovation (e.g. fissured firm structures, management pay packages) and networks that provide few social sanctions for capture strategies, allow more concentration of gains within firms or organizations. It is also possible that the feasibility of introducing new competitive advantage generating technologies is greater for large firms leading to sales concentration and the decline in the labor share of income (Autor *et al.*, 2020).

Examining what allows more or less capture requires thinking about the varied institutions and networks that produce practices of capture or sharing across place, and how these in turn structure the 'ownership' of technological gains in more or less equal ways across groups.

2.5 Disembedding

Finally, innovation affects people as *citizens*—not only in their private lives, but also in shared spaces, services, and their shared (public and semi-public) resources. Political equality is a contested concept (Ansell and Gingrich, 2024; Beramendi *et al.*, 2024), but recent work suggests that on nearly all metrics—voting, descriptive representation, policy influence—citizens from different class and racial backgrounds, and often women and men, do not stand in relationships as equals (Lupu and Pontusson, 2023). These inequities can produce processes of political control over innovative procedures that reflect existing power imbalances in the market rather than check them.

Disembedding practices refers to the ability that those with more power have to avoid oversight or collective democratic control. As explored in this special issue by Brandtner *et al.*, elites' incentives to reinvest in their community vary. Firms often care little about the effect that their activities have on the social and natural environment in which they are located (e.g. making

housing unaffordable for non-tech workers). Corporate actors, moreover, take action through lobbying and other methods to maintain an innovation system that generally increases inequality and favors the affluent. Where there are weak incentives for elites to reinvest in workers or provide compensatory policies for negative externalities of concentrated growth (e.g. high house prices), it will lead to more overall inequality.

Furthermore, as argued by Lee *et al*., in this volume, such actions could undermine the innovative potential, and therefore growth, of non-core, or peripheral regions. As they show in both the Israeli and Korean cases, entrepreneurs and workers are attracted by the quality of life offered in the places in which innovation activities take place. Conversely, if firms—and government—neglect investments in the institutions in which local communities are embedded, these innovative forces would seek their fortune elsewhere leading to long-term place-based decline. Hence, disembedding practices tend to exacerbate spatial inequalities between core and periphery areas *and* undermine place-based innovation capabilities.

Where elites are more 'embedded' in local communities (Safford, 2009; Young, 2017), they may behave—both as employers and via local policy support—in ways that distribute the gains of productivity improving innovations more broadly. Investing in the community, for example through Corporate Social Responsibility programs, could not only lead to more equitable environments, but as Cook et al. (2019), find, also to more innovative firms. This could be explained by how community investment creates social capital, which in turn positively affects the collective innovation process. This finding is also borne out by specific regional development experiences in Israel and Korea as reported in this volume by Lee *et al*.

In summary, inequalities can emerge through each of the above five practices. It is important to stress that individuals relate to multiple—or even all five—of the practices above, but not always in the same way. While it is possible that innovation creates disadvantage for an individual with reference to all five spheres, in other cases, an individual might be disadvantaged more by one practice than others. Tracing the intersection of social inequalities and market identities allows us to see diverse patterns that open different research questions: (i) social inequities can emerge differently across practices—women, for instance, have made more strides as workers than as innovators; (ii) some inequalities are more durable than others—seen in how there has been more change in diversifying access to top research labs than in dramatically reshaping productive ownership; and, (iii) inequalities across practices may intersect in different ways across places—for instance, men and women's relationships in the household as caregivers can shape the way they use and adopt workplace technology.

3. A way forward

The aim of this special issue is to develop a research agenda that centers equity at the heart of innovation studies. To do so, we argue that disaggregating specific practices and thinking about how they widen or narrow particular relational inequalities, and then theorizing the specific institutions, organizational forms, or networks that stand behind the variation in practices, is critical to advancing a positive empirical research agenda. But what does this agenda look like?

Diane Bailey and Stephen Barley (2022) argue that much research fails to capture the complexity of technological impact, because it does not account for variation in the power relations across its design, use, and deployment. Understanding these connections, they argue, requires a 'unified framework', one that follows the technology from development through to use, and can model and examine how inequalities interact and develop across these points in the process. Doing so, they argue, requires looking to the left—at how technology is developed—and to the right—how it is used. They argue that this requires interdisciplinary collaboration among economists, sociologists, engineers, policymakers, and organizational scholars, an expensive and often improbable venture.

Our approach to thinking about specific inequality producing practices in place suggests a more targeted method for thinking about equity and innovation, which can occur at a smaller scale. Rather than aiming to understand the general distributive effects of a particular technology or set of technological affordances—such as AI and surveillance devices—our approach suggests that work could focus on particular practices related to a component of the technology (its development, its deployment in firms). Examining the way that these practices intersect with

place-based power and institutional structures, provides more tractable mid-level theorizing of the ways specific relational inequalities can emerge around a component of innovation. However, engaging in such work is inherently inter-disciplinary and comparative. It requires thinking carefully about human action around technology in specific places. Each of the papers in the special issue, in specifying and theorizing how specific practices emerge in places, look to theorize the specific nature of a given practice in place. Scholars looking to understand a particular practice—the distributive effects of specific forms of funding, or R&D, or deployment of a given technology—should both define the practices and their potential variation clearly, building specific interdisciplinary engagement. Moreover, given the significance of place in such comparative-analytical ventures, collaboration among experts from different countries, or ones that belong to different sectors (public, private, or academia), could contribute greatly to the research.

4. Conclusion

This special issue is the culmination of the joint work of the global network on Innovation, Equity and the Future of Prosperity of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR). Under the auspices of CIFAR we have created both a framework and a common language for research that would allow scholars from engineering, sciences, law, humanities, and social science to work together creating a research agenda focusing on innovation *and* equity. The papers in this special issue aim to demonstrate the value of our jointly developed practices and places framework in developing a new research agenda that focuses on innovation and equity as its core interest.

In doing so, this special issue offers four conceptual papers that look at two specific places, the workplace and the community/region, from various angles. The first paper by Gingrich *et al.*, utilizes our framework to offer a minute understanding of how changes in various practices (such as control and capturing/sharing of gains) in the workplace influence workers reaction to the use of new technologies. By seriously taking into account not only the differences between formal institutions, such as unions, in various countries, but also equity affecting practices and how they play out in the workplace, the paper offers an extensive understanding of a critical subject.

The second paper by Breznitz *et al.*, focuses on surveillance technologies in the workplace—technologies that have become a heated area of public debate in regard to innovation and equity. Utilizing the full array of skills of its highly interdisciplinary authors, the paper looks at the full modern history of workplace surveillance to analyze how different surveillance technologies and practices, in diverse periods and workplaces, led to both positive and negative outcomes for the workers.

A second set of two papers focuses on innovation and equity in different socio-geographical places. The first, by Lee *et al.*, looks at innovation and regional (as in sub-national) income inequality. Beginning by developing a conceptual understanding and then elaborating on it using the extreme case studies of South Korea and Israel, the authors explain how national governments use innovation policy as a tool to promote spatial equity while taking into account both economic and political considerations. This article offers sound policy recommendations for governments seeking greater inter-regional equity. One such insight, which might be viewed by some as counterintuitive, is that to stimulate growth in the periphery, it is best not to spread innovation-centered investment evenly across an entire peripheral region, but to concentrate it on its main urban centers.

This insight is the perfect segue to the special issue's final paper by Brandtner *et al.*, that develops a comprehensive conceptual understanding of how specific socio-geographical places become, and stay, prosperous. That is what makes some locations (e.g. Copenhagen, Taipei, or Vienna) balance economic growth with social equity. By analyzing the processes, policies practices that foster prosperity, and more equal distribution of resources and opportunities within places, they are able to call attention to four organizational and community properties of prosperous places: diverse organizational demographics, shared ownership structures, spatial and social integration, and cross-sector inclusive governance.

Together these papers demonstrate the value of using a Practices and Places framework to devise and conduct radical interdisciplinary research as the anchor on which to build a research agenda focusing on innovation *and* equity. We view these efforts and this special issue as a beginning and a call for arms, and hope that their main impact would be to kindle more, especially radically interdisciplinary, research on such a critical subject.

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