

# Reimagining the future of work – towards a right to shape AI: A Conversation with Prof. Jeremias Adams-Prassl and Prof. Isabelle Ferreras

## Transcript

Dr. Caroline Green

Hello, and welcome to Accelerating AI Ethics, the podcast of the Institute for Ethics and AI at the University of Oxford. I'm Dr. Caroline Green, and in each episode, we explore bold ideas, innovative research, and creative responses to the ethical challenges posed by artificial intelligence. Today's guests are Professor Jeremias Adams Prussell, Professor of Law and Associate Dean at the Faculty of Law at Oxford University, as well as Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Ethics in AI. And Professor Isabel Ferreras, FNRIS Research Director and Professor Extraordinaire of Sociology at UC Louvain, who's also a Distinguished Research Fellow at the Institute for Ethics in AI. Welcome both. Jeremiah and Isabel, you both work on the challenges of bringing more democracy into the workplace. And actually both of you have been working with the Spanish government to provide some expert insight into this matter. which directly speaks to the deployment of AI in the workplace. So this is what our conversation is going to be all about today. We're going to be speaking about an event that is happening on the 25th of June, 2026 at the University of Oxford. And I'm really looking forward to our conversation. But before we get started on your research, I would like to get to know you a little bit better and how you have come to the work you're doing and how you're working together. So Isabelle, could you tell us a little bit more about your background and yourself?

Professor Isabelle Ferreras

Of course. Thank you, Caroline, to have us today to speak about this exciting conference, but also our work here. So I am a sociologist, as you said, and a political scientist, and I started to work on these AI-related issues because I am a labour sociologist. And what is very central to the labour experience today in a service-based economy in the Western world, certainly, it is that people have high expectations vis-a-vis their work experience, what they want to contribute in the workplace. And what we are seeing with the development and deployment of AI is that these are basically governmental technologies which are reordering the way work is organized. work is divided, work is actually assigned. And indeed, workers really expect to have a say about these technologies.

Dr. Caroline Green

Thanks, Isabel. And Jeremiah, over to you. Tell us more about all the exciting work that you've already been doing for quite a long time now into this topic and also about yourself.

Professor Jeremias Adams-Prassl

Thank you, Caroline. So I've been interested in technology, particularly through my involvement in workplace law. And about 15 years ago, I started to do work on what today we think of as the gig economy or platform work. So these are the drivers in your transport services, the people come and deliver your food, your groceries, and increasingly industries right across the socioeconomic spectrum. And one really interesting phenomenon that struck me there was that it wasn't workers that were losing their jobs because of technology, it was management that was being replaced. So all tasks from hiring workers through to managing them on a day-to-day basis, all the way through to firing them, suddenly we started seeing automation come in. And my intuition about five years ago, and that led to the research project funded by the European Research Council that I've been leading for the last five years, and the results of which we'll present at the conference in a few weeks' time. is very much focused on what happens when these algorithmic management techniques come to workplaces across the socioeconomic spectrum. Because once the phenomenon started in the gig economy, today no longer matters whether you work in an Amazon warehouse or whether you work in a white collar professional services firm. These kind of algorithmic management techniques have come to all of our workplaces.

Dr. Caroline Green

Yeah, and it's such an incredible topic now in the age of AI and so much concern, but I think also potential around it. And I think that's why I'm especially excited about the work that you're doing in that conference that we've been talking about a few times now in this podcast already. So let's go into that. Isabel, you chaired the International High Level Expert Committee on Democracy at Work. And Jeremias, you served on the committee established by Yolanda Diaz, the Vice Prime Minister of Spain and Minister of Labor, who will take part in this conference later on in June. And it was all on workers reimagining the future of work and democracy at work, right? Tell us more about this work with the high level expert committee and the report that was published quite recently.

Professor Isabelle Ferreras

Well, thank you for raising that work indeed. So we've been tasked, Jeremias and I and a group of 13 scholars overall into this expert committee by the Spanish government to provide expert insight into the topic of voice and ownership in the economy. By that, I

mean this is a very particular entry point that we actually used. It's an article of the Spanish constitution that speaks to workers' ability to actually participate in the decisions at the firm level, but also to have access to the ownership of the wealth that's created into the economy through their work at firm level. And actually, the Spanish government has this commitment to legislate on this article of the Constitution, because in 50 years now of the Constitution being the modern constitution of the democratic Spain, nothing had been really done about this. And we called these the two promises that the Spanish Constitution actually makes to Spanish workers. And what's very interesting is to realize that these two promises are basically universal expectations that workers have. They want to have a say on the decisions that concern them in the workplace, and obviously they want to share the wealth that they are contributing to create. And so the Spanish government has asked us to basically collect all the academic, the scientific knowledge that we have around these issues, and then to devise a path, a trajectory, to really deploy these two promises into the economy. And so as we've done that, we really realized that the topic of AI was becoming prominent here, because obviously, as our workplaces are changing, it's very obvious that the introduction of AI is reordering matters of voice and ownership. And so here we are with an array of proposals that we are going to discuss in this conference.

Dr. Caroline Green

So a few follow up questions to both of you about this report and your findings. You know, something that strikes me when I work with tech companies. So first of all, I'd like to hear how companies have played a role in the whole process towards, you know, in this committee and the findings and the recommendations and so on, and some of the challenges you might foresee in or pathways into actually making them happen in practice. Can you tell us more about that?

Professor Isabelle Ferreras

Shall I go? Yes. Well, obviously, so this was an expert committee. And so that was very clear from the beginning that the Spanish government wanted to have expert knowledge. intake to proceed with what we call in Europe social dialogue, which is basically the collective bargaining at the higher level of the economy between employers association and trade unions association to really bargain on the propositions that the report contained. So it was not up to us as experts to do the politics of this. And so it was to us to collect the expert knowledge. Yet we felt it was super important that we could hear from the actors themselves, so from firms, from business leaders, from union leaders, also from human rights activists, environmental activists. And so we actually conducted hearings in Madrid last June, so now almost a year ago, during one week during which we actually auditioned all the relevant actors to hear from their perspective, to know about their expectations, how they want to see the legislative framework, to move, to adapt to the new challenges, and to AI in particular.

Dr. Caroline Green

Okay, thank you. So we are now going to take this report into the next phase with an event on the 25th of June called Reimagining the Future of Work Towards a Right to Shape AI. Jeremias, tell us more about the framing of that event. What are you hoping to achieve? Who's coming? What's the topic?

Professor Jeremias Adams-Prassl

Thank you, Caroline. One really important intersection between the work that Isabel and I have been doing together with the Spanish government and also the work that I've been doing with my team funded by the ERC. is the sense that we can't lose our agency when it comes to implementing AI in the workplace. I think very often with emerging technologies, their sort of first story is at least a sense of innovative ability, right? Technologies are something that happens to us. These sort of very fast moving innovations happen. People lose their jobs or AI takes over these tasks and reshapes business models. And I think part of the problems with these narratives is that they then create this sense of, we've got no agency. There's nothing we can do about it. Technology is something that happens to us. And that's a problem because it means that we suffer alienation from the technology. I think it means that the path in which technology develops is not necessarily the best one in best interest of everyone. And so one thing we were puzzling about is how can we convey this message and this strong sense that we want agency? and yet keep it specifically anchored in the kind of research we've been doing. And what we struck on upon then was that through voice, through various other legal mechanisms, really it was about involving everyone in social partnership in shaping AI as it's being deployed in the workplace. That's not at all to say that we don't think there aren't great use cases for AI in the workplace. In the health and safety context, for example, we can think of very, very important use cases. But it's interesting when you look historically and also more recently in empirical work, the introduction of a new technology in the workplace is often a moment of break. It's a moment of renegotiation of existing implicit contracts. And it's in that moment that we can not see it as a threat necessarily, but actually as a positive opportunity to reshape how we think about governing the workplace. both, as it were, on the high level, the kind of advice of work, co-determination, various proposals for ownership advice that we discussed in the report of the Spanish government, but also in very concrete terms in terms of involving workers in day-to-day choices about deploying AI, about challenging, supervising, measuring its impact. How do we translate this into the conference? Well, I think it's fair to say that we're very excited about the lineup of speakers we've been able to sign up. So in the morning, we'll have a panel session, and you will hear in detail from Isabel and myself presenting our reports. And we'll be joined by two of our star guests. First, Yolanda Dias, as you've already mentioned, Caroline, Vice Premier of Spain, and very much the driving force behind the Spanish government's efforts to deliver on the

constitutional promise of Voice at Work. And Darren Asimoglu, who's an economist at MIT and Nobel Laureate, who's done a lot of work on the economic perspectives of workers and AI. And again, speaking up for this involvement of workers in shaping and deploying AI. And that morning then sets the stage for an afternoon of three parallel tracks. We'll be exploring different aspects of deploying voice at work and regulating algorithmic management with a great cast of speakers from academia, from all over the world, from businesses, from trade unions and worker representatives and governments. So hopefully we'll have exciting morning to simulate the discussion and then make concrete panels that will focus on the different proposals in the report and really ask, what can we do for the next step? And we go about actually then implementing them.

Dr. Caroline Green

But I really in what really struck me what you just said and Jeremiah is before you were going into the event. is you said, you know, there's also some opportunity in AI and at work and how that could actually help us to re-envision worker's voice and democratizing the workplace. I think this is a really pivotal idea because so often, as you said, we're just here that it's all doom and gloom. AI is going to take people's jobs. There's nothing they can do that lack of agency, but what you are really saying here is that, well, let's use this opportunity and let's create workplaces where people can shape and workers can shape how AI is being used, but not just that, also beyond that, right? So have you already seen something like this in practice in businesses? Have you seen examples where that has worked? Yeah.

Professor Jeremias Adams-Prassl

Yes, absolutely. Particularly in jurisdictions that already have various forms of work advice, such as works councils in the German context, what you see is that often, again, we think of very large tech companies usually. But actually, the vast majority of businesses don't build their own AI systems. They have to buy them in. As you have this moment when I buy off-the-shelf software, I then need to implement it and fix it to my own business processes. Now, I could spend a lot of money getting external consultants to do this for me, who might know the software world, but have no idea of the reality of my business on the ground. Or I collaborate with my works council, my work representatives, the people who will actually be deploying and using the software on a day-to-day basis. And what a lot of businesses have found, and the Berkela Foundation in Germany, for example, has done really interesting research on this. is that you end up in a win-win scenario, because you end up deploying technology in the way that will actually be used, that'll be accepted by workers. But also on the worker side, you might end up deploying technology without some of the creepier features enabled. Because again, in my experience, very often employers don't want the weirdest and creepiest features enabled. They might do it by accident, because they

simply don't know about it. And so working with social partners is actually a way for both sides to cut through those kind of challenges.

Dr. Caroline Green

Thank you. Yeah, Isabel, have you ever seen the examples?

Professor Isabelle Ferreras

Yeah, well, I really would like to add the idea that basically I think how we see AI and all the evidence that we reviewed is that the introduction of this AI moment is actually a revelatory moment. It's a moment actually in our human history, at which we are probably most capable to reveal people's expectation, in particular, in the context of work. So people expectation of meaningful work, people expectation of having a voice in the workplace. And indeed, what we see is that AI could very well be a big help to make that possible, as it could be, as Jeremiah says, as it could be also going into the opposite direction, the wrong direction. And so it is, I truly think it's our role as scientists to help society understand that and see the importance of the moment to size it, and to really think about what kind of future do we want for work. And as we wrote, actually, a blog entry for the institute that was probably two years ago with Jeremiah's, with the futures of work as a plural. Because indeed, everything is possible. But of course, what will make the difference is the type of institutions that we agree on, the type of rights that we agree on. And this is something on which, for instance, Darren Acemoglu, who will speak at the conference, has been a big voice on. And in the conference, we will actually focus on basically 5 main propositions that are coming from the report we wrote for Spain and eight propositions that are coming from Jeremiah's work with his team for this ERC project. And we will be very specific also. So it's not like a wishful thinking. It's also a very sort of concrete, policy-oriented discussion, because what we know is that, indeed, the institutional equipment of society and of each And every firm will be there to make the difference between a desirable direction or a direction that will not lead to fair outcomes and actually a flourishing of society.

Dr. Caroline Green

Yeah, it's really exciting. And some of the work, why this is also, we are really proud to be hosting this event with you under the Accelerator Fellowship Program is because we're starting to look into this topic more widely. We've got a fellow Alistair Stevenson from the National Domestic Workers Alliance in the US. And they're actually people, so domestic workers have gone to Silicon Valley to learn about how to create AI tools that would serve them and their community. And they've built it themselves and are now testing it and evolving it and developing it. And so Alistair is also looking at the worker's voice and their rights at the workplace and how to really guide AI themselves in a way that it will support them. So I think that's really exciting work and so hopeful. And so, at the conference, this is not just going to be a place for people to convene and talk about

this important topic, but you are actually really hoping and on a very good trajectory to define next steps. and bring people together in order to really advance that agenda. So this is really great. The question I have, so for listeners who are listening to this podcast before the 25th of June, they might want to know, is there any way for them to be part of this event? And then for those who already know they can't anyway, or people who listen after the 25th of June, how will they be able to get involved, learn more about your work.

Professor Jeremias Adams-Prassl

So in terms of attending, we have to admit that in an embarrassment of riches, we were completely overwhelmed with subscriptions. So we had barely started advertising the conference. We already had a few hundred people sign up. So what we now have available is online slots. So whilst we are already capped for in-person, but if you're really keen to attend, send us an e-mail and we'll see where we can ask Caroline and her team to work some magic. But we also have the ability for people to join us online, particularly for the morning panel with the keynote speakers, which we will stream live. And then afterwards, we'll also hopefully make it available as a recording. The other thing we've been doing is we've been putting together a booklet with the core policy ideas. So of course, a lot of the outputs from my ERC project are all available as open access publications, as is now very important that ERC funded work. So if you go online and search by my name, the team's name, you'll find a lot of the blueprint and other publications. But in addition to that, we've decided that we want a really accessible sort of short document that both sets up what are the key takeaways from the Spanish government reports? What are the key takeaways from the iManage ERC-funded project? And that will be a booklet that will be available both on the day, physically, but they will also make available online, including, I hope, on the Institute website. So when you want to find out more about the details of our policy proposals, as well as links to further reading, that's another place I would recommend you go.

Dr. Caroline Green

Thank you. Yeah, and Isabel, I think, I mean, the report, all the resources are there, right? So we will also create a page for people that they can go to and they can have a look at the resources. And I'm just thinking we should probably have another podcast recording after the event to compliment this one, to see what the outcomes were, what some of the things were that really surprised you, or that you're taking away from it. But for now, it sounds like it's a great next step. And it's such, I think, you know, the level of interest we have had, just again, shows just how important a topic it is. how pressing a topic it is. So it's really great to be working with you on this.

Professor Isabelle Ferreras

Fantastic, Caroline. Thank you so much. Yes, I think it would be really worth to dig into the proposals themselves, and we will be best positioned after the conference. So before the conference, you can really get the documents, as Jeremiah says, and read them, and especially if you are actually attending the conference, because all the afternoon panels will really be devoted to get into the concrete proposals, and we want to basically increase the collective intelligence around and underpinning these proposals. So please get to these readings, but then it would be fantastic afterwards to discuss the type of feedback we receive and how we can actually reorient, push for actually the next steps of this very important societal conversation.

Dr. Caroline Green

So thanks so much for the overview of your work. I am really excited for the 25th of June. And I'm excited for, we've just decided that we're going to have another podcast recording after the event, where we'll go into these proposals that you've been speaking about, some of the insights, and then we can talk about that more. So thank you, Isabelle and Jeremias, for joining us and for all your insights. And this has been the Accelerating AI Ethics podcast at the Institute for Ethics and AI at the University of Oxford. If you have enjoyed this episode, please subscribe and share. Until next time, thanks for listening.