

SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

Let me be honest-- the beginning of Darrell West's book, *The Future of Work*, terrified me. Until I read it, I had been blissfully ignorant of just how many kinds of jobs can be done by robots. From driverless cars, to serverless restaurants, to bankerless banks, if an industry hasn't already been disrupted by AI, it's going to be soon.

DARRELL WEST: I think people are going to be generally shocked how rapidly a lot of these technologies come in.

SARAH BALDWIN: But as West argues, these changes don't have to be as damaging as our worst sci-fi nightmares. And in fact, they could actually be an opportunity to rethink the nature of work in our society and to create an economy that works better for everyone. In a sense, it's up to us.

And while West has laid out a daunting set of challenges, in *The Future of Work*, he's also given us a powerful guidebook. On this episode, Darrell and I take a long view on the changing nature of work and on the impact AI and robots will have on our economy, society, and politics.

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Darrell West, what a pleasure to have you here. Thanks for coming in today.

DARRELL WEST: Thank you. It's nice to be with you.

SARAH BALDWIN: So I wondered if you could talk briefly about the emerging technologies that you talk about in your book and how they're affecting our society, for better or worse. I mean, there's the internet of things, there's artificial intelligence, there's automation, and they're not all the same thing.

DARRELL WEST: I mean, what I do in the book is talk about the accelerating pace of technology innovation. So artificial intelligence is becoming much more common in health, education, finance, and e-commerce. Amazon targets ads on people. Using AI, they kind of track what you look at and then develop ads based on your interests. I've gone into restaurants where instead of ordering from a waiter or waitress, they give you a tablet and you order from that device. Autonomous vehicles are hitting the roads in major American cities, and that's going to continue over the next couple of years. There now are almost fully automated factories where you have a few

humans manning the control panels, but it's basically robots that are assembling whatever the item happens to be.

And so what I do is when you add all those innovations together, it really is a revolution that is taking place and this is worldwide, this is all around the world. So it certainly is not limited to the United States. I think people are going to be generally shocked at how rapidly a lot of these technologies come in.

So for example, with driverless cars, when I talk with people they say, oh, you know, five to 10 years from now I can see that happening. But, you know, the road tests are going on now. Ford just announced it's coming to Washington, DC, and so we're going to see these for real-- taxicabs, ride sharing services, and so on.

So what I try and do in the book is to think about what are the societal ramifications? How is it going to affect people? What's it going to mean for the workforce? And then how should we respond?

SARAH BALDWIN: Right, you point out that jobs like retail, and cashiers, and waiting on table, and truck driving-- that's a huge part of the American-- or that always has been a huge part of the American workforce. Like, 2.5 million truck drivers might be out of business and those are people with just a high school education. But it's also affecting the financial services sector, which I had no idea about.

DARRELL WEST: Yes, it is.

SARAH BALDWIN: So white collar, too.

DARRELL WEST: It's going to hit a lot of different sectors. And in terms of the retail sector, Amazon already has opened automated stores. So basically you download the app, you walk in through turnstiles, you go shopping, you exit through the turnstile, and it automatically checks the tags that you are taking out and will charge your credit card or your mobile payment system. So no retail clerks. You won't interact with any humans.

SARAH BALDWIN: Terrifying. It's terrifying.

DARRELL WEST: And so this is really the future and much of this is here now. Like, we're not talking about down the road. Like this, stuff is open. The stores are up and operational. So we do have to think about what this is going to mean for society, how we relate to one another, how people earn

incomes. Just how our country and the world is going to function.

SARAH BALDWIN: Right. You talk about these mega changes, and I wonder is the shift from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy really akin to this shift that we're in the midst of now? Is it that major?

DARRELL WEST: I think it's equally fundamental to what we went through 100 years ago when, as you mentioned, we shifted from an agrarian to an industrial economy. And if you think about that time period, it was very tumultuous, it was chaotic. There was violence-- like, workers were organizing, they were getting shot on the frontlines. It took decades to work through all that.

But there were a number of policy changes that we made, we renegotiated the social contract, we developed social security, unemployment compensation, added an income tax to the Constitution, encouraged mass education. There were lots of things that we did to help people adapt to industrialization.

And so today, it's an equally fundamental shift in moving to a digital economy and we're going to have to think big. Think this is not going to be an era for incremental solutions. The problems are big and the solutions are going to have to be big.

SARAH BALDWIN: All right. So can you talk a bit about these recommendations? They are fundamental. Like, the notion of rethinking work. What do you mean by that? And this-- I was fascinated by the separation of benefits from labor.

DARRELL WEST: Well, people are worried that a number of people are going to be put out of work as a result of the new technologies and that will happen. It'll certainly vary from sector of sector and region of the country to other parts of the country. And so, you know, how can we respond to that?

Well, one way is you could reduce the workweek from 40 hours to 35 hours.

SARAH BALDWIN: Like France.

DARRELL WEST: That's a way to kind of employ more people. Another way is just to redefine the concept of a job because there are lots of socially beneficial things that we don't consider jobs, like being a parent, being a caregiver. You know, whether you're taking care of the young or the old. There are lots of volunteer activities, there are community service projects. I mean, none of those qualify you for social benefits. But they could.

The United Kingdom, for example, is experimenting with a program where people engage in certified volunteer activities that help the overall community, and they can qualify for social benefits that way. So that's a way to kind of redefine how we think about a job to deal with the new realities.

SARAH BALDWIN: That brings me to the second reason I found this book chilling. It's when you sort of describe the political and social landscape in the US. Particularly the fact that the digital economy benefits the few and not the many, which I'd love to hear you talk about more, and the fact that the wealthiest are not only the most politically active, but the least politically progressive. So very invested in exactly not what you're talking about.

So how does this bode for the changes that you're prescribing?

DARRELL WEST: I mean, you're right. Technology has increased inequality and it's likely to even further increase inequality because the benefits are going to a small number of people who own the big technology companies, and these companies don't employ a lot of workers. Like Facebook is probably a \$600 billion company in terms of its stock evaluation. They only have 25,000 employees.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's crazy.

DARRELL WEST: So it's all about the digital platform, and they're not going to need a lot more people except for the human moderators to kind of check what appears on the website. In the old days, there were big companies that were quite valuable, but they employed 500,000 people, 600,000 people. They redistributed the income through the workforce. That is less likely to be the case here.

So we do have to worry about prosperity. We have to worry about income inequality. We have to worry about social cohesion because if you look at other societies around the world where 20%, 30%, or 40% of young people are unemployed, they're violent places, especially when male unemployment-- that male youth unemployment is very high. Unoccupied men do bad things.

SARAH BALDWIN: So talk a little bit about how-- like, tie the situation that we're in, the changes that we're in-- if we don't make profound societal changes that take care of people, tie that to sort of what is at risk for American democracy? How that is going to destabilize our institutions?

DARRELL WEST: These changes could end up destabilizing our elections, our political process in quite profound

ways. If you have income inequality, people outside the workforce, people churning through jobs, like working one place for six months and then being unemployed for a year and then getting another job that lasts nine months, you know, that is not a stable situation. There's going to be a lot of anxiety and insecurity.

And when people feel anxious, angry, or insecure, they will turn to populists. And right now, we've seen that with Donald Trump. He's an example of a right wing populist. There also could be left wing populists in our future. But populists are playing to the broad electorate, and they're likely to suggest more extreme measures than what we are used to.

So in the book I suggest Trump is going to outlast Trump, in the sense that all of these economic changes, the technological changes that we're seeing-- it's going to create a lot of anxiety. And even after Trump leaves office, that anxiety is still going to be there. The structural transformation that is taking place is much deeper than that and the anxiety associated with that is going to last a lot longer than his administration.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, let's talk about your notion of-- or what you propose as Republic 2.0, kind of this Copernican revolution in how America thinks-- Americans think of each other and themselves, and who's responsible for well-being. It's sort of a shift from individuality to solidarity, in a way.

DARRELL WEST: People are going to have to change how we kind of think about ourselves and how we think about our society. I mean, as you point out, America is based on individualism and it's every person for him or herself, and if you're doing well it's because you're smart and hard working. If you're not doing well, it's because you're lazy and didn't get a good education.

And in the future, there are going to be people who want jobs who are probably not going to be able to get them. There are going to be people who go through a series of jobs with periods of unemployment between those jobs. And so we're going to need to think about a society that's based more on solidarity and taking care of one another. That it's not all about the individual.

Now in Europe, that's a more common approach and they actually have policies that enable that kind of perspective. We tend not to have those kind of policies. So it's quite possible that the societal consequences of technology innovation are going to hit the United States a lot harder than even other Western democracies.

SARAH BALDWIN: So can you be specific about some of these recommendations? They're really interesting, but

they're not timid. They're quite-- I mean, they would require major shifts.

DARRELL WEST: I did not write the book for the next three or four years. Like, there's probably almost nothing that I recommend that's going to get implemented after the 2020 campaign, or probably even after the 2024 campaign. But we're really facing a 30 year period from 2020 to 2050, when all these technologies are going to accelerate. So we basically have 30 years to get it right.

And so I wrote the book for the long term, that the country is going to change, our politics is going to change, you know, we're going to move towards a majority minority country by 2044. When you look at surveys of young people, they're actually more progressive and more inclusive than older people. And so the solutions that are going to be possible 10 years from now are going to include fundamental changes in tax policy, social welfare benefits, how we think about the nature of jobs.

But the uncertainty in all this is really our governance system. Like, does our political system have the capability to make hard choices, to adopt big solutions? And that's the thing that I worry the most about because when you look at our political system today, the answer clearly is no. Like, our system is not up to the task that we're facing.

So among the reforms that I suggest are we're going have to get rid of the electoral college because it just-- you know, we've already had two elections in 16 years where the popular vote winner did not win the electoral college. That could actually become much more common in the future because of the geographic disparities. There's something like 15% of American counties today that generate 64% of our GDP.

We could end up in a situation where most of our economic activity is basically concentrated in 15 states. So what that means is those states-- that the prosperous parts of America are going to have 30 senators, and the not very prosperous parts are going to have 70 senators. That is a recipe for a constitutional disaster. Like, that is just simply not sustainable because 2/3 of the country will not be sharing in the economic prosperity. They're going to be very upset. They're going to be very populist. They're going to be looking for scapegoats.

The politics in that type of situation are very ugly, so we need to be thinking about the structural changes in our political system. Because if you look 100 years ago when we moved from the agrarian economy to the industrial economy, it wasn't just developing social security, unemployment compensation, and other policy changes. Like, we changed our political system. We added amendments to the Constitution. You know, we doubled the electorate

when women earned the right to vote. We moved to direct election of senators. We developed primaries and referenda to break the power of party bosses.

We need governance reforms today that break the logjam that are preventing us from addressing these problems.

SARAH BALDWIN: You're giving me a little bit of hope. I say this very tentatively, but you're making me a little bit hopeful that major change is actually possible. That it has happened before. I mean, we take the past for granted because it's what we grew up with. But you're saying that this has happened before, people have come together and dared to make fundamental changes even to the Constitution.

DARRELL WEST: I actually am optimistic in the sense that when you look at American history, we faced big challenges at many points and most of the time, our country has risen to the occasion and actually done a good job and addressed the problems, and ended up in a better position.

From my standpoint, there are a number of things that if we do them, we're going to end up in a great situation by 2050 in terms of the policy changes, changes in tax policy, and the governance changes. But, you know, we do have to think big. I'm disappointed people have given up on amending the Constitution because they say it's too hard and can't be done. Well, we've done it many times in American history. We're going to have to do it again.

SARAH BALDWIN: So let's get specific about some of these changes. A solidarity tax, universal basic income. How do you see those solve-- helping to solve the problems that you're anticipating?

DARRELL WEST: A solidarity tax, which I talk about in the book, is designed to address the problem of income inequality. Like, you know, the big problem with our economy today is the middle class and the working class are just not doing well and capitalists have forgot the old idea that capitalism needs customers. Like, if you don't have people who can buy the products, you know, the system is going to fail.

So we just need a fairer tax code. We need a fairer distribution of income. Just raising income taxes on the wealthy is not going to get us there because it doesn't address the underlying asset question. Elizabeth Warren, for example, has proposed a wealth tax. It may require an amendment to the Constitution to make that legal. But, you know, that's the type of idea that we need to be thinking about.

SARAH BALDWIN: I want to stay with this notion of you-- capitalists need customers because it seems to me if things keep going in the direction that you're describing in this book, eventually the people with really well-paying jobs are going to be coders and the people watching the robots in the factories. What's going to be left for anybody else besides the caretaking or the mentoring that you mentioned?

DARRELL WEST: That type of situation is not sustainable. If we end up in a situation where a very small number of Americans are doing well and most people are not doing well, that really is a recipe for authoritarianism because you're going to have a lot of political protests, social unrest, crime, violence, just general disenchantment. And the people in charge are going to turn to authoritarian means just to restore order, and obviously, that's not the future that I want.

It's the reason I propose dealing with income inequality, having fairer social policies because it's good for the country. You know, I'm not just trying to be altruistic in making those arguments. Like, if you want social stability, if you want some semblance of the American dream, if you want equal opportunity, it's like we need policies that make that possible.

SARAH BALDWIN: But just to say, I-- yes, I agree with that 100%. But just to stay with this notion of jobs, are we-- do we just not know what the jobs are yet? I think you say in the book that 65% of jobs of the kids in-- that the kids who are now in school will have, we just don't even know what they are. I just want to believe there's something besides coding and monitoring robots.

DARRELL WEST: Imagine a society where we certainly are going to need this scientific and technical people, the data scientists, the coders, the engineers, and so on. But I also envision a society where the humanities are going to be a big part, where people will actually have more leisure time to pursue their hobbies, which could be music, theater, art, sports, or whatever they happen to be interested in. People have more time for community service projects, helping other people.

Like, we're kind of trapped in this industrial world notion of a job kind of being 9 to 5, Monday through Friday and we kind of work ourselves to death and then we're too tired to do anything else. That's a fairly recent invention. Like, when you look at most of human history, that's not how societies were organized. It's like work was a little more sporadic and people had time to do other things, and they did them.

You can look at any historical accounts and a lot of countries were organized that way. It may be that that's what we will revert to in the future.

SARAH BALDWIN: Mhm. And thank you for mentioning the humanities. In fact, I was thinking, reading this book, you're a social scientist, but it's got such a humanistic feel to it. The soul of this book feels like it's written by a humanities person.

DARRELL WEST: That that was a deliberate choice on my part, because--

SARAH BALDWIN: I thought that was very courageous, I have to say.

DARRELL WEST: I didn't want a study of technology and its impact just to be a technology book. Like, it has to be based both in the social sciences and in the humanities because I think we're going to need both of those to deal with the ramifications.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, I love that you wove that in. I mean, there's so much data, there's so many studies cited and yet it reads like a recommendation on how to sort of be good humans together.

One other question I had, and this has occurred to me earlier, is you cite all these applications for AI and automation that are-- some of them are really good. And the internet of things, and in terms of how it can improve health care, and personalized medicine, and disaster recovery, simulation, or vehicles that can go unmanned into dangerous places, and all of that seems great.

So we make these cars that see better and farther than we do, just as one example, or algorithms that predict fluctuations in stock price better and faster than we can. So are we making ourselves obsolete? I mean, as a future job ethicist?

DARRELL WEST: I don't think we're making ourselves obsolete because we still need the human touch even in advanced technologies. Like, I think it's no accident that Apple has done well as a company. It's not that they always had the best products, but they had the most accessible products because Steven Jobs incorporated humanities people and design people in the process of creating new technologies, and I think that's the secret for being successful in the future. Like, we need that human angle so that the technology both serves our purposes and we know how to use it. We don't want computers where you have to be a computer scientist in order to get the benefits.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, I think that every candidate for the 2020 presidential election should read this book. Who do you hope will read this book?

DARRELL WEST: I mean, the book is aimed at policymakers, certainly political candidates, opinion leaders. But

also the general public who's just interested in what's going on. I mean, a lot of people don't really understand technology. You know, they see science fiction movies and fear that the robots are going to take over and enslave humans.

I'm actually not worried about that, at least for the next few hundred years. After that, who knows. But they're not that good now. They still need us. But the economic consequences and the political consequences, we're going to see in our lifetimes, and so that's the part we have to worry about and deal with.

SARAH BALDWIN: Darrell, one of the more hopeful notes that you sound in your book has to do with millennials. Can you talk a little bit about that?

DARRELL WEST: This is probably the most optimistic part of the book, but it's also the part that actually could generate the most optimistic future for all of us, as well, because right now, we see a lot of conflict in our political system and we have rich people being divided against poor people, and so on. When you look at surveys of millennials and young people, there's an optimistic vision there in the sense they want a better work life balance. They look at my generation and they see that we worked very hard but didn't have enough time to really enjoy it. They don't want that kind of life. They want meaningful jobs, but they want time to pursue leisure activities, hobbies, art, culture, community service projects.

But the other part of millennials is they tend to be more progressive in their political views and more inclusive in how they view the world. From my standpoint, that's exactly what we're going to need as we deal with the ramifications of technology innovation.

So as the millennials age, accumulate power, move into positions of responsibility, become the real leaders in our society, we may actually be able to work through all of our current problems, and the dislocations, and the political conflict associated with them. They may be the solution in the end, and it may be a gradual transition, it may be completely peaceful and things that might agitate us now may not agitate us 10 and 20 years from now just because the people changed, and the country has changed, and the culture has changed.

SARAH BALDWIN: I hope you're right, and I hope we're alive to see it. Thank you so much for that note of hope.

DARRELL WEST: Thank you.

SARAH BALDWIN: And thanks for coming in. This was fascinating.

DARRELL WEST: My pleasure.

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SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards, Babette Thomas, and Alex Laferriere. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

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