

Navigating Meta-modernity: AI and the Evolution of Social Dialogue Institutions

Apostolos Xyrafis¹

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this distinguished audience today. As we gather in this important forum, it is clear that the challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI) are not just technical; they are profoundly social, political, and ethical. AI is reshaping our world, and the question we must ask is not merely how to adapt to it—but how to ensure that it serves our shared values of fairness, justice, and solidarity.

Today, we are in a unique historical moment -what we might call the era of meta-modernity. This new paradigm represents a synthesis of modernist confidence in progress and postmodernist skepticism. It is a time when complexity, interconnectedness, and ambiguity are defining features. In this context, AI is both a symbol and a catalyst for these transformations.

So, the critical question we must ask is: How can we ensure that social dialogue institutions evolve to foster inclusion, fairness, and stability in this new, AI-driven world?

The Challenge of Meta-modernity

To understand this, we must first acknowledge three key elements of meta-modernity that are particularly relevant in the context of AI:

1. **Interconnected Complexity:** AI has transformed global systems—from supply chains and labor markets to governance itself. As AI links economies and societies, decisions made in one part of the world ripple across the globe, often without the traditional barriers or buffers we once relied on.
2. **Accelerated Change:** AI's exponential evolution is outpacing the ability of many traditional institutions to keep up. Labor markets are restructured almost overnight, leaving behind workers and communities that are slow to adapt. Social dialogue institutions, which have historically been slow-moving and hierarchical, must now rethink their processes.
3. **Cultural Plurality:** Meta-modernity calls for embracing multiple truths, perspectives, and aspirations. In a world shaped by AI, we must balance tradition and innovation, efficiency and ethics, local and global needs. This requires flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to experiment.

In this context, social dialogue institutions—traditionally structured as slow-moving, consensus-driven entities—are facing an unprecedented challenge. They must adapt to the reality of a rapidly changing, AI-influenced world. These institutions, such as economic and

¹ SG of AICESIS and ESC of Greece

social councils, can no longer be passive observers. They must become active architects of AI governance and champions of the public good.

AI's Impact on Social Dialogue Institutions

The introduction of AI presents both challenges and opportunities for social dialogue institutions. In some key areas, we see disruption and potential transformation:

1. **Work and Employment:** AI-driven automation is polarizing labor markets. High-skilled jobs are on the rise, while middle-skilled, routine jobs risk to disappear. This disruption creates a pressing need for social dialogue institutions to mediate between workers, employers, and policymakers to ensure just transitions. The role of these institutions is crucial in guiding societies through these shifts.
2. **Decision-Making:** AI systems are increasingly being used to inform policy decisions—from resource allocation to hiring practices. Yet, many AI systems operate as “black boxes”—we don't fully understand how they make decisions. This lack of transparency challenges the trust and accountability that are fundamental to social dialogue.
3. **Inequality Amplification:** AI is often criticized for perpetuating existing biases. Algorithms can exacerbate social inequalities by reinforcing gender, racial, or economic biases. Social dialogue institutions must ensure that AI governance is grounded in ethical standards, prioritizing fairness and accountability.
4. **Participation and Representation:** Traditional trade unions and workers' organizations risk becoming obsolete in an economy that is rapidly moving toward gig work, freelancing, and AI-driven tasks. Social dialogue institutions must broaden their scope of intervention into the new era. We need to rethink representation in this new, fluid economy.

Opportunities for Reinvention

Despite these challenges, AI also presents exciting opportunities for reimagining social dialogue:

1. **Enhanced Collaboration:** AI can become a tool for mediation, processing large amounts of data to identify shared interests among stakeholders. Imagine real-time negotiations where AI highlights win-win solutions based on data-driven insights, helping labor and management reach common ground more effectively.
2. **Digital Platforms for Inclusion:** AI-powered platforms can give a voice to traditionally underrepresented groups—marginalized communities, gig workers, and others—making social dialogue more inclusive and dynamic. Virtual consultations can complement traditional forms of dialogue, expanding participation and engagement.
3. **Anticipatory Governance:** Through predictive analytics, social dialogue institutions can better foresee future disruptions—whether labor market shifts or demographic changes—and plan accordingly. AI enables more proactive and anticipatory governance, allowing institutions to address potential conflicts before they escalate.
4. **Ethical Frameworks:** Europe, with its strong focus on human rights and ethical governance, is in a unique position to lead the world in embedding ethical AI standards. We must ensure that AI systems are transparent, accountable, and fair, and that they uphold the dignity of all workers.

A Call to Action

To navigate this new AI-driven reality, I propose three key pathways for action:

1. **Invest in AI Literacy:** It's essential that decision-makers, trade unions, and citizens alike understand both the capabilities and the limitations of AI. AI literacy will allow for informed, rational dialogue about the technology's role in our societies and economies, reducing fear and misinformation.
2. **Redesign Institutions for Flexibility:** Social dialogue institutions must embrace adaptability. The old ways of working—rigid, slow-moving—are no longer sufficient. We must experiment, pilot programs, and design adaptive frameworks that allow us to respond to the rapid pace of change. For example, exploring the use of AI in collective bargaining could unlock new potentials for efficiency and fairness.
3. **Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation:** AI knows no borders, and its governance should not be confined to national frameworks. Europe needs a coordinated AI governance structure to ensure that ethical standards and equitable outcomes are pursued across member states. This will be key in ensuring AI serves the public good.

Can AI Replace Dialogue in Social Dialogue Institutions ?

As we consider these opportunities, an important question emerges: Can AI replace human dialogue in social dialogue institutions?

The answer, I believe, is no. Dialogue is fundamentally human. It is rooted in empathy, trust, and the shared aspiration to build a better society. AI excels at processing vast amounts of data, recognizing patterns, and even simulating conversation. But it cannot feel the lived experiences of workers, the pressures faced by employers, or the societal responsibilities of governments. AI lacks the essential human qualities that drive meaningful dialogue.

What AI can do, however, is enhance dialogue. By providing stakeholders with data-driven insights, it can inform decision-making, streamline processes, and expand participation. It is a tool that supports, but does not replace, the human bonds that are at the heart of social dialogue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while AI is a powerful ally, the responsibility for social dialogue rests firmly with people. Social dialogue institutions must evolve, but they must do so in a way that prioritizes human dignity, social cohesion, and solidarity. AI must serve people, not replace them.

Let us embrace the possibilities AI offers, but always with the understanding that the ultimate purpose of social dialogue is to strengthen the fabric of society—to build bridges between workers, employers, and governments, and to ensure that no one is left behind in the AI-driven world.

Thank you.

