BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Huws, Ursula. *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014. 208 pp., \$19.00 paper (9781583674635)

From art and culture to public services, personal relationships and social interactions, capitalism has successfully encroached on nearly all aspects of life. Thanks to recent rapid transformations in technology, interactions with family, friends and colleagues depend more and more on channels designed to capitalise on every word—make that every character—whether spoken or typed.

Work and labour are increasingly automated, with information and products crossing national borders for increased efficiency and decreased costs. In *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*, Ursula Huws problematizes the deep yet subtle commodification of everyday life, challenging readers to reconsider the insidious and often contradictory nature of labour exploitation under present capitalist rule.

The text continues where a series of earlier work by the same author left off. *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World*, published in 2003, focused on capitalism's ability to move and adapt when placed at risk. This current collection of essays consists of work written from 2006 to 2013. In the introduction the author locates the text within this body of work, and provides an overview of the chapters that follow. As the author makes clear, no space is off limits when capitalism takes advantage of new opportunities for commodification. The introduction employs descriptive snapshots of how familiar, everyday scenarios are mediated, controlled and exploited for profit. Divided into six sections, the book can be read as a series of thematic lectures. Individual chapters stand on their own and can be read separately, in any order.

Huws asserts that occupational identities are produced when the division of labour intersects with other social structures, such as class and caste. In the first section, the author examines how mass production in factory systems devalues occupational identities, making workers replaceable, even disposable. From a socialist perspective, contradictions related to occupational identity in automated labour may be problematic. Huws unpacks the tensions that arise when balancing building workplace solidarity, through shared occupational identities, with increasing

workers' knowledge and skills. Huws also highlights tensions within capital's ability to balance a need for skilled labour with a desire for increased mechanised labour by offshoring labour where possible. The author examines knowledge exploitation through capitalist systems, identifying limitations in Marxian theory, and shows how active practices of discrimination have shaped various labour forces. Exploring mounting pressures facing workers in search of job security, as well as dynamic challenges facing employers, this chapter overviews social and economic consequences associated with undervaluing occupational identity.

The second section explores the connections between occupational identities and social identities at the hands of globalisation. Revisiting the social linkages between occupation and class, the author examines how labour markets shape geographies. A typology to categorize labour is presented—(1) fixed, (2) footloose, and (3) fractured—each considered in terms of geographical space. The author addresses patterns in outsourced labour, increases in telecommunications and the normalisation of a global workforce specialising in providing custom corporate services as across borders. According to Huws there is a growing technical division of labour; workplace opportunities may be unstable, but skilled, computer literate workers remain needed. Technology, it is argued, has encroached on our daily lives, with time spent divided between the real and the virtual. Huws emphasises the importance of historical considerations, as well as social and political factors, for understanding urban transformations at the hand of labour markets, asserting that the broken and insecure nature of 'fractured' occupational identities can be seen in the changing nature of space and time in urban environments.

In the third section, a lecture first delivered in 2006, Huws reflects on an academic career that spans more than 30 years. The author highlights challenges and pressures that have accompanied personal experiences in paid academic work, as well as unpaid, public sector and community work experiences. After reflecting on the women's movement and tensions in the bureaucratic, top-down, implementation of policies that support practices of anti-discrimination, Huws challenges commodification as a driver for social change through the privatisation of services found within the public sector. Here, the author says by monitoring performance in labour markets, information and communication technologies (ICTs) not only reinforce standardisation but, in fact, further develop additional standardisation processes.

In sections 4, 5 and 6 Huws questions the changing dynamics of relationships between the state and transnational corporations, the place for creative labour in the knowledge economy, and the standardisation of such services such as a health care and education, resulting in new

and increasing forms of worker alienation. In the final section, Huws reflects on the use of Marxist frameworks to understand class and divisions of labour and explores a need to redefine terms for key concepts. This section examines “digital labour” and explores how social media sites make, and facilitate the making of, profit. Highlighting the work of the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), a transnational labour rights organisation working to improve the workplace conditions of garment workers in global fashion and apparel product supply chains, Huws notes that labour rights activism is also at work, challenging labour exploitation. The CCC coordinates campaigns both offline and online. In this case, digital tools are employed to promote labour rights on the one hand, and challenge modes of production on the other. This is an interesting example, but one that requires further attention.

The book draws on a variety of research, including theoretical and empirical work, secondary sources, and personal experience. While the author does not always locate the text, by contextually grounding it within a particular geographic space, she instead puts emphasis on the movement of people and products, systems and processes, across borders. *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age* is best suited to readers interested in tensions within and between labour and global capitalist networks, as well as widening their understandings of how labour exploitation directly connects to transnational economic systems. Huws successfully problematizes contemporary labour, questioning ICTs for enabling capitalism to locate and commodify new space in everyday life. Readers are invited to rethink capitalism, as well as their own positions within wider global systems of production.

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