One of the great mystifications about the so-called Information Society is the social arrangement under which its infrastructure is produced. The information society is INDEED largely a myth that conjures up fantastic images of a society in which, as certain futurologists projected, working people have jettisoned the burdens of physical labour to focus their efforts on creative mental tasks. When the idea of the information society began to circulate in the 1970s, fashionable and serious intellectuals alike anticipated a postindustrial future in which one of the greatest human concerns would be what to do with surplus leisure time. Blinkered by technocentric utopianism, they failed to recognize the real interests of the underlying political economic forces managing such a future.

Since the advent of digital technology, there have been important structural changes in the way commodities are produced, but the repressive and mind-numbing aspects of work, for most people, have not decreased. The vast majority of workers in the now dispersed digital assembly lines are no less alienated from the production process than they were before the integrated circuit made its debut. In some respects the prospects for labour as a whole have retrograded to the industrial period that Marx and Engels described after examining English factory life. The anomic character of contemporary work life in which job security, strong unions, retraining opportunities, living wages, and decent personal and family benefits have deteriorated is ignored or distorted by most politicians, mainstream media, and educators. Under the veil of postindustrialism, corporate capital peddles the ideology of the free market, hires mass media to distract the public from its obscene profits and environmental assaults, and conceals from public view the cynical brutality that occurs in its off-shore Third World sweatshops.

For the vast majority of Western workers, labour is anything but knowledge based, i.e., creative or edifying. Far more information workers are keying cash registers or computers; reciting canned sales, call centre, or telemarketing scripts; or are stuck at desks copyediting, handling claim forms, and performing other uninspiring tasks than those who actually get to use their imaginations and intellect in the so-called creative industries. Even the intellectual work of professionals such as physicians and professors is being standardized or compressed under a business model that measures success in accounting algorithms. Aided by convergent digital technologies and telecommunications, the production process has become not postindustrial, as Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell conceived it, but rather hyperindustrial—the extension of regimented factory life to the whole of society and, increasingly, a consumerist-oriented world.

McKercher and Mosco have produced an expansive text that dissects, from workers’ perspectives, the chimera of postindustrialism and the fallacies generated by its propaganda. While industry spins the term knowledge for what are actually immaterial forms of capital, the contributors to this volume use it to depict how workers historically have lent their insights to methods of producing wealth, of which they are denied their fair share. Although “knowledge workers” and “information society” in the book title are never defined, they surely reflect an ironic intent of the editors. This volume of 19 essays plus a topical introduction discusses the impacts on workers of the digital mode of development pace through discussion of the conditions of production in a range of informational indus-
tries in several countries. Chapter after chapter describes how highly mobile neoliberal capitalism has introduced new technology not to make the work environment more interesting, remunerative, and socially rewarding, but rather, as Harry Braverman (1974) explained in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, to standardize, commodify, deskill, and monitor labour and make it cheaper to hire and more profitable to exploit.

One of the recurring themes addressed in the chapters is *precarity*. The flexibility designed into digital production means that companies can hire workers on a project basis, as in Hollywood, in which resources are gathered for a limited duration, after which workers are on their own. This aspect of precarity breeds a high degree of uncertainty among workers well beyond what they experienced in full-time, long-term work situations, leaving them vulnerable to the impulses of risk-averse management. Under these conditions, together with a steep decline in post-World War II unionization rates in North America, working people are compelled to be more cautious about making demands. In the United States, where real wages have fallen and more than half the population is either without health insurance or severely underinsured, the fear of bankruptcy and even homelessness is a looming threat for millions of citizens.

Another aspect of precarity is the outsourcing of work to cheaper locations, often in Third World countries that historically were set up as colonial and neocolonial outposts of transnational production, subsidized by foreign aid to state repression. Millions of Western workers have seen jobs taken to countries like China, India, Mexico, and the Philippines, where labour costs are a small fraction compared to home-country production. *Knowledge Workers* describes the consequences of outsourcing of below-the-line Hollywood crews, service employees, computer programmers, engineers, manufacturing, and other North American labor sectors. Quasi-left political parties, such as the Democrats in the United States and Labour in Britain, have done little, despite their populist rhetoric, to challenge neoliberalism and stanch the outflow of jobs to the superexploited regions of the world. The architects of neoliberalism and deindustrialization have engineered an economy that is truly lean and especially mean.

There is much useful information and insight to be gleaned from the case studies covered in this book. The early chapters deal with the informational environment—the decline of labour reporting and the transformation of library workers into technofunctionaries. Other chapters discuss how the fetishizing of celebrities in the feature film and animation industries shields the public from understanding the creative inputs as well as the tedium in the labour process, much of which is outsourced to Asia—for whom there are no Oscars. Two chapters discuss trade union conflicts and changes instigated by the insertion of digital technology in the British press and Spanish television news. Another interesting chapter exposes the little-known travails of journalists in China whose efforts to negotiate a more independent professional status have been stifled by an overzealous state bureaucracy.

As the McKercher and Mosco collection also reveals, workers are not without their own means for analyzing, challenging, and resisting the hegemonic power of corporate managers. However, the labour movement is up against a nearly implacable corporate ideological apparatus. New information and communication technologies not only disarm critical public awareness and worker resistance through the opiate of consumption, but also increase segmentation of production and labour across the world’s poorer periphery, which makes labor organizing and mobilization considerably more difficult. Unionizing efforts are widely understood to be the best hope for improving working conditions. Educating the public is another important objective. Mainstream media, which dominate public discourse, are now facing formidable challenges from progressive bloggers and rad-
ical informational websites. The labour of these informal knowledge workers is contributing to undermining the corporatist and militarist regime of propaganda. The contributors to McKercher and Mosco’s collection are part of that alliance of formal and informal communication workers who are building a foundation for democratic revolutionary change on behalf of workers everywhere.

Reference

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