

Cybertarian Struggles in the Gig Economy

Ursula Huws, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*. Monthly Review Press 2014.

Reviewed by Russell Harrison

"I thought it was very nice that there were so many job openings, yet it worried me too—we'd probably be pitted against one another in some way. Survival of the fittest. There were always men looking for jobs in America. There were always these usable bodies." (Bukowski, *Factotum* 166)

The central problematic of this book is an investigation of how the myriad new types of jobs that exist in today's digital economy have significantly changed today's relations of production and its working class. Along the way, Huws looks at a number of areas, such as: the globalization of work, the reserve army of the unemployed, and, especially intriguing, "The New Accumulation through Public Service Commodification." To take but one example bearing on the issue of jobs. Huws writes that the category "occupation" has become increasingly unstable in a situation in which workers are expected to change their skills in response to each wave of technological and institutional innovation" (86)ⁱ. She notes the effect such constant restructuring (along with the spatial dislocations caused by such practices as offshoring the work to be done and the dis-integration of the very term "occupation") of the job has on the issue of worker solidarity. One has only to look at the controversy surrounding the business model of such taxi businesses as Uber to get a glimpse of what's at stake in these issues. Uber maintains that the boss/worker relationship does not exist because the drivers are independent subcontractors. (I have always wondered about the name of this company. Even without the umlaut, the German word Uber comes to mind and the Nietzschean term "superman ("Uebermensch") somehow suggesting that the firm and/or its services are "better," although better in just what way remains unclear.) Laws and regulations for subcontractors with respect to unionization, for example may be quite different (and less favorable to the worker) than in the traditional boss/worker relationship.

One phenomenon that amazes in Huws's analysis is how the "same ol," same ol" makes its presence felt. I have in mind here Huws's use of Marx and Taylor. The first such example relates to the phenomenon of the reserve army of the unemployed. This refers to the tendency of capitalism to eschew full employment so as to reserve a pool of unemployed workers to maintain pressure on the employed to mitigate their work-related demands, such as higher

wages, shorter workdays, better working conditions. This has at least been the case as far back as the enclosures of the commons. What Huws also makes us aware of (the second "same ol") is the persistence of the reserve army category along with the persistence of Taylorist work practices dating back to the 1870s, the moment of Taylor's studies at the Midvale Steel Company. But what Huws shows is the extent to which this reserve army has become globalized since the collapse of the Soviet Union. (A prevailing countertrend trend was the introduction of Elton Mayo's Human Relations school of management in the 1920s, which focused on worker motivation and how it could be improved (short of giving the worker more money). Huws shows us not just the persistence of Taylorist work practices, but their intensification and metastasis, by virtue of technological changes. Taylor had worked with reducing manual labor to the simplest task, thus reducing the amount of training necessary significantly and thus the cost of the worker. Huws shows how the digital economy enabled this to be done for semi-skilled jobs as well—and most importantly—for professional jobs too. The term Huws uses for this de-skilling process is "modularization." This process has been most effective for the service sector, a sector which had earlier remained pretty much untouched by the changes Taylorist practice had introduced into manual labor. Summing up, Huws writes: "Work processes are, in effect, modularized, and this modularization, makes possible a wide range of different spatial and contractual permutations and combinations: aggregation or disaggregation; centralization or decentralization; labor processes based on single tasks or multiple tasks" (95). Modularization increases the options of an employer.

However, It seems to me that Huws's major contribution to the discussion of these ⁱⁱseveral topics is that indicated by the subtitle of her sixth chapter: "The New Accumulation through Public Service Commodification." One of the most important parts of Marx's analysis of capitalism is his concept of primitive accumulation, i.e., "the historical process of divorcing the producer

from the means of production" (*Capital, chapter 26*) originally, this had been thought to exclude the service sector where nothing concrete is produced. But over time many had come to conclude that the service sector, too, could produce surplus value, had become commodified. And thus something from which profits could be made. Huws writes:

"In this commodification process, which might be regarded as a kind of 'secondary primary accumulation,' activities already existed out in the paid economy for their use value (such as education, or health care) are standardized in such a way that they can be traded for profit and appropriated by capital: use value is thereby transformed into exchange value." (128)ⁱⁱⁱ

Huws' book is important for the convincing way it makes its point regarding the ability of the service sector to produce surplus value and thus profit. This is, of course, crucial because it is this sector that continues to grow and grow. Thus what happens in this sector will affect all sectors mutually. And thus the reconstituted auto companies (at a much lower pay and benefit level) were not unrelated to Gov. Scott Walker's attack on unions.

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NOTES:

- ⁱ Barbara Ehrenreich made the same point in her 2005 book, *Bait and Switch*.
- ⁱⁱ This conversion from unpaid labor is striking. Take dog walking. This used to be an ordinary household chore, something that often had a pleasurable component. Now it is often paid labor and something from which surplus value can be drawn.
- ⁱⁱⁱ An important point which I want to at least touch on suggested by Huws's analysis is the phenomenon of the workerless store, i.e., a store where there are plenty of commodities on sale but no salesperson. How far we have come in the last 25 years or so may be made clear by two purchases I made, 25 years apart. In 1989 I went to a German electronics store to buy two double A batteries. I went over to a counter where I told the sales person what I wanted and she went over to a draw and got it. She then passed it to another salesperson who wrapped it up in tissue paper and in turn passed it on to a third salesperson. Who took my money and then gave me the package. Within the past month I went into a local drug store, found my item, scanned it on to my credit card and left the store, never having had contact with a person.