

# Book Review: Ursula Huws, Labour in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age

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**Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Ferreira, J 2017, 'Book Review: Ursula Huws, Labour in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age' *International Sociology*, vol 32, no. 2, pp. 219-220  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0268580916687465b>

DOI 10.1177/0268580916687465b

ISSN 0268-5809

ESSN 1461-7242

Publisher: SAGE

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Urusla Huws, *Labour in the Global Digital Economy*, Monthly Review Press: New York, 2014; 208 pp.: ISBN: 978-1-5836746-3-5 (pbk)

Reviewed by Jennifer Ferreira, Coventry University

Key words: labor, digital economy, technology, globalisation, commodities.

Technology has a ubiquitous presence in modern capitalist societies, and its ever growing presence has shaped and transformed many aspects of everyday life. In particular, information and communications technologies have opened up new fields of capital accumulation, and led to dramatic restructuring of work arrangements. In *Labour and the Digital Economy* Huws, an astute analyst of life in contemporary societies, examines the ways in which technologies have affected these realms, creating a 'sea change in the character of work' (p.17) considering what the future in the digital era holds for the landscape of labour.

The book offers an overview of how we can begin to understand the impact of capitalist systems, technological change, and the ways they are in turn reshaping the landscape of labour. Huws argues that the global digital economy is shaping the nature of work, and in the essays included in this volume she explores the contradictory experiences of such changes: how a lot of work has been standardized, yet at the same time workers are also encouraged to think more creatively and be innovative. The book begins by revisiting the idea that capitalism has an extraordinary ability to survive crises by generating new commodities. And just like in the early twentieth century when the emergence of electricity led to the new commodity development based around domestic labour (for things like washing machines) or entertainment (such as radios), technology today is creating a new set of commodities. Capitalism has used new technologies to fuel an intensified wave of commodification, which itself faces contradictions too. As part of this, Huw points to new fields of accumulation that have emerged including in: biology, art and culture, public services and sociality.

The first of these, biology, refers to the ways in which plants and animals are being exploited for commodities, such as new drugs or genetically engineered foods. Of these new fields, the issue of biology is introduced but not explored in detail, a point which she argues needs further attention, and debate.

For art and culture Huws points to the ways in which many areas of production of cultural commodities have been influenced by technology, but also has how it is a realm which has

increasingly crept into the ownership of large transnational companies. Of the creative industries, publishing, TV and film production, and games production have transformed into industries that are comprised of an infrastructure dominated by 'corporate behemoths'. The companies involved, often transnational in nature, have involvement in different areas of cultural production, using 'content producers' which operate in increasingly precarious terms. Technology has made it even easier for work to be broken into micro-tasks, with often being completed at different locations around the globe, for very little money.

For public services Huws explores ways in which public sector work has become increasingly privatised, how the commoditisation of public services has taken place for much of the twentieth century. In particular Huws highlights how the 2008 financial crisis acts as a turning point which led to a new phase of accumulation, based on commodification of public services. Even beyond the most basic public services, other skilled professionals are having their work transformed, for example the increasing number of academics providing materials through massive open online courses.

The fourth realm, sociality is described by Huws as the new form of commodification which has 'mindboggling' implications considering the ubiquitous nature of technology within social life, pointing to how the need for communicating through technologies has made this aspect of life a realm for the exploration of capitalism systems. She illustrates the point with four snapshots: school children and the proliferation of mobile phones (and the impact on young people who do not have access to such hardware); people in a café, again with multiple uses of the mobile phone; on a crowded London bus the multiple and in many ways mundane conversations, again happening through technology; and from a conference session where academics during presentations look at iPads, laptops or phones. All the time, there is the potential for profit to be made from the interaction with technologies, and the presence of capitalism is inherent throughout all of these situations, from the hardware produced, the software, the ICT infrastructure to facilitate data downloads, to the electricity provided to keep the technology running. Contemporary consumer trends have led to a greater global connectedness through ICTs, but also various forms of exploitation, explored in various ways, and places, throughout this book.

Essentially Huws explores how capitalism is invading not only world of work but personal relationships, making them part of wider system of corporate profit making. Each of these realms presents the potential for the experiences of work, and lives more broadly, to be transformed by the presence and utilisation of technology. Of course the transformation of

any system cannot be without contradictions, and Huws points to some of these which occur at various levels, from the worker to the nation state.

This work follows on from, Huws' previous book, 'The Making of Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World' which began to explore the impact of technological change on experience of the workplace just after the millennium. This volume moves the discussion forward to illustrate how as the title suggests, the cybertariat has come of age'. The book is organised via a series of essays which explore some of these issues in greater depth. Chapter 1 explores the concept of occupational identity, and how the division of labour has become increasingly dispersed contractually and geographically. Huws revisits the class concepts of dual labour markets, and in particular internal labour markets (Doeringer and Piore, 1971), and why a more update date conceptualisation is needed, raising questions over the nature of job destabilisation as a manifestation of capitalism.

Chapter 2 continues with the theme of work identities to consider the nature of jobs, how they are changing, and the potential impact this has for the nature of cities, after all 'social structures and relationships are played out in the physical geography of the city' (p.48). In exploring the transformation of work in the digital world, Huws points to the parallels between increased movement of people around the world and the breakdown of traditional occupational identities. She highlights that increasingly many people are experience features of being both fixed and footloose often in complex configurations – leading a fractured existence, and how 'there has been an erosion of the clear boundaries of the workplace and the workday, with a spill over of many activities into the home or other locations' (p.58). A key point raised here is that 'the future of our cities will depend in large part on how we reintegrate these fractured selves, workplaces and neighborhoods' (p.60).

It's not possible to do justice to each of these chapters in a few sentences. Each presents an essay, exploring issues in more depth, including: the intensification of work and increased precarity (chapter 3), the development of a conceptual framework for analysing the restructuring of industry and its impact on employment (chapter 4); the complexity of relations between actors involved in the creative industries, and the role of creative workers in capitalist development (Chapter 5); the financial crisis as a capitalist opportunity to encourage the recommodification of public services (chapter 6); and a consideration of how to apply Marx's concepts of class, commodity and labour to the modern world (Chapter 7). In doing so the final chapter beginnings to consider how we can understand how the modern capitalist systems are functioning, how one may imagine alternatives and act to instigate collection action in order to foster change.

In this book, Huws has provided an analysis of the ways in which information and communication technologies have created new fields of capitalist accumulation, and new waves of commodification for biology, art and culture, public services and sociality. For a book of this length it introduces multiple experiences from around the world, beginning to analyse the impact of such transformations in capitalist societies, and in doing so raises questions about the implications of the digital era for the world of work in the future. At times the themes are not rigorously developed, but are vividly illustrated with real world examples. This shows the various contexts and scales which these phenomena are taking place.

Overall, this book makes a convincing and illuminating critique of the contemporary world in which so many people take for granted their use of information and communication technologies which have become entrenched into so many spheres of modern life. It raises crucial questions about how we can go about understanding these transformations of capitalism. The insights in this book are illustrated through the author's experiences from daily life, which will likely have affinity with many readers. Huws does not suggest solutions for the issues presented in the book, but instead raises awareness of them, showing the importance of a continuing research agenda around the impact of digital economies on the workforce. Undoubtedly Huws has moved the discussion on from the development of the cyberariat to raise awareness of the various ways in which technology is transforming not only economies, worlds of work, but individual lives.

#### Author biography

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