

Book Review

Phoebe V. Moore (2018) *The Quantified Self in Precarity: Work, Technology and What Counts*. London and New York: Routledge. ISBN 9781138674066. 234 pp. Hardcover £105, eBook £36

Reviewed by Benjamin Herr, University of Vienna, Austria

Phoebe Moore has written a timely and interesting book on data-tracking, precarity and the labour process. We read about agility management systems, unseen labour, surveillance and managerial control. The book does not leave the reader with a grim perspective on the world of work but ends by sketching possible futures and highlights points of resistance.

After an introductory chapter (“Getting to Know the Automatic Self”), Moore begins a revision of the Labour Process Debate (“Labour Processes from Industrial Betterment to Agility”). In this chapter, the author identifies how particular technologies appropriate labour and how this results in particular subjectivities. Technology has played a pivotal role in the value extraction of human labour since the beginning of capitalism. Particular managerial ideas on job design – that is, the way that a set of tasks is organised – have also played an important role. One of them is Taylor’s *Scientific Management*. This managerial ideology focuses on the body’s movements, the isolation of them into discrete units and the quantification of output in an attempt to increase productivity and decrease costs per unit of outcome. The author offers an additional wave to the “waves” of managerial ideology, namely *Agility Management Systems* (p. 58). Herein, information about workers at work and in life play a more important role than before. A greater emphasis is placed on technology compared to Scientific Management. Where Scientific Management was concerned with efficiency, agility seeks adaptability. In these systems particular subjectivities are required, because “agile workplaces require agile workers” (p. 62). This is where the author introduces another important concept for the argument of the text: *unseen labour*. Agile workplaces are characterised by constant change, and its impacts have to be self-managed by the workers. This involves a high degree of affective control and emotional management. None of this work is apparent. Constant transformation requires emotional and affective resilience by the affected workers, to withstand this constant change (p. 109).

Precarity is central to understanding the quantified self in agile workplaces, because through these tracking technologies even attitudes, sentiments and thoughts become a site of value creation (pp. 82–3). Precarity is understood as “the purest form of alienation where the worker loses all personal association with the labour she performs. She is dispossessed and location-less in her working life and all value is extracted from her in every aspect of her life” (p. 79). Hence, precarity presents a re-composition of the relationship between capital and labour in which workers become increasingly disposable. “The quantified self at work phenomenon is linked to the rise in precarity...” (p. 12). Precarity and agility necessitate and facilitate one another.

Agility management seeks to obtain much more information about workers than before. A greater emphasis is placed on technology, especially to track and monitor in order to control the workforce more intensely. In these settings, the corporeal is no longer separable from the mind or the machine. This requires a more comprehensive ontological look, because “researchers do

not look at ontology but rather make assumptions about the hierarchies of minds over bodies” (p. 41). This links to Chapter 3 (“Precarity 4.0”), in which Moore calls for an ontological shift in mainstream political economy towards an understanding that refrains from a dualism of body and mind. That is important, because it enables insights for the type of “self” that self-tracking devices require under conditions of precarity. The chapter departs from the claim that the qualitative, immaterial, affective and creative qualities of workers are increasingly important to capitalist production systems (p. 115). The possibilities to use data from these technologies to track workers intensifies power relations in the workplace (p. 121).

Chapter 4 (“Unseen Labour and All-of-Life Surveillance”) assesses the claims previously made. Inventions in sensory technologies enable digitalised surveillance. *People analytics* is a new area in human resource management, where computerised tests, database searches and quantifiable performance metrics are brought to the task of corporate hiring and promotion. The low cost of data and information processing allow for people analytics in hitherto unseen ways (p. 149). As a result, “new patterns of labour selection in new work design models” (p. 156) facilitate the outsourcing of labour through platforms for freelance and self-employed work. This fosters precarity of the workers since “platforms are designed to reduce employer liability” (p. 156). A wearable device refers to a piece of technology that is small enough to be worn on the human body. It includes sensor technologies to collect information and track data related to a person’s surroundings and the user’s vital signs. Wearables are increasingly used in warehouses and factories (p. 162), but also in professional settings (p. 165) to maintain labour control. The author then presents an own study on a group of professional workers and their wearable devices in the Netherlands (p. 166).

Self-trackers are people who collect personal data to achieve quantitative self-knowledge. This can include, for instance, mood, sleep or spending patterns. Chapter 5 (“Meet Some Self-Trackers”) provides verbatim interviews with self-trackers. Chapter 6 is the conclusion (“Robot Army of Redressers”).

The book sets out to understand new technologies at the workplace and connects these to digitalised approaches of workplace management. I found the interviews in the book particularly useful, because they provide first-hand insights from people whose life-worlds are actually touched by the phenomena discussed in the book. That being said, I would have liked to see the interviews edited, because they are presented verbatim and at great length, which I sometimes found distracting. A great strength of the book is the focus on emancipation. Moore paints a grim picture but does not leave us in a hopeless place. Already in the middle of the book (p. 121), the reader will find a list of examples of how to resist in the workplace. The quantified selves need to find new ways to refuse the use of data as a method of quantification. A refusal of data-driven surveillance and a refusal to subordinate the qualitative to the quantitative are the struggles of our time (p. 211). “Refusing to share data is becoming a political act” (p. 212).

Phoebe V. Moore has written a timely and relevant contribution to the study of digital labour. Reading *The Quantified Self in Precarity* was a great opportunity for me to obtain a closer understanding of quantification, managerial control and precarised forms of labour. The book will be of great value for people interested in a critical perspective on digital labour.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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