

Alessandro Delfanti, *The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)

Rawan Abdelbaki

Volume 90, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094799ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0027>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Abdelbaki, R. (2022). Review of [Alessandro Delfanti, *The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 90, 322–325. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0027>

overlooked by the book. A second critical point, closely linked to the previous, is the understanding of work from a primarily individual perspective – future trends are approached by interviewing service workers and studying their experiences and projects. However, a collective conception of labour must be part of any multidimensional understanding of the future of work, given that unions and social movements are at present battling to defend their collective rights, again, as exemplified by digital workers' activism. Rangunath tends to follow sociological analyses that overestimate the effects of individualisation in contemporary societies, leaving this collective level of analysis unexplored. There is value, to be sure, in the author's emphasis on agency to frame the future of work, but individuals, companies, and states are not the only protagonists in its development: organisations and civil society are offering channels to shape the future in a variety of tangible ways.

The reader will find in this book an interesting exercise of "sociological imagination," despite its shortcomings. In terms of future research and how to expand this study's project, it can inspire analyses of the institutional transformation that proactive governance would represent. The author presents a number of reasons to implement a proactive approach from a policy perspective – and this need is understandable given the uncertainties that technological change, the environmental crisis, and new geopolitical crises might bring about. As an extension to this book, a study of the already existing model of governance – perhaps more reactive than proactive – as well as an interpretation of the welfare state and its (in)capacity to deal with contemporary risks appears particularly promising. At the same time, since the latter is focused on workers in the knowledge economy in a richer nation, comparative

scholarship would benefit from applying a similar approach but now focused on other contexts. Millennials in Singapore seem, based on the findings of the book, particularly attuned to the idea of an ever-changing world of work, and that is certainly one of the reasons that makes them interesting as a case study. However, if the analyst's aim is to understand modern risks, it would be worth looking at vulnerable groups as a complement, especially in occupations and socio-economic situations that make them unaware and unprepared for the future of work. A proactive state should devote its energies and political will especially to protecting this type of group.

VICENTE SILVA

London School of Economics
and Political Science

Alessandro Delfanti, *The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)

AS A KEY PLAYER in today's era of digital capitalism – "the corporate use of digital technology to maximize the private accumulation of power and money," (9) Amazon looms large in today's social, economic, and political landscape. Delfanti's book offers a rich and timely ethnographic account of the labour process inside Amazon's warehousing facilities (referred to as "fulfilment centres or 'fcs'" by the e-commerce giant), drawing on interviews conducted primarily in Piacenza, Italy and site visits to warehouses in Canada, among other textual materials. Though primarily set in Piacenza, Delfanti's description and analysis of the labour process extends across multiple regions and locales where the company operates given the high degree of standardization of work in its facilities. Offering a history from below, each of Delfanti's six book chapters is ironically

titled after Amazon's slogans: *relentless, work hard, have fun, customer obsession, reimagine now, make history*.

Grounded in the Italian Marxist tradition of *operaismo*, Delfanti asserts that despite the relentless pursuit of ever-expanding bottom lines, "it is labor alone that allows a firm like Amazon to exist" (5), hence his focus on the company's global yet least profitable sector – high-tech warehousing – as the new factory of digital capital. Contrary to corporate dreams of fully automated warehouses and the notion that technology *facilitates* work, the book's central argument is that it creates "despotic" workplaces in which workers are subordinated to the algorithmic organization of the labour process, resulting in the intensification of work performed by living labour, making it more precarious, standardized, and dangerous – what he calls "dispossession by machine." (41)

From Piacenza, Italy to Brampton, Canada, the author underscores the parasitic and rapidly metastasizing presence of Amazon, pointing to the ways in which the company both exploits and (re)makes the geographies in which it operates, from existing transportation infrastructures of logistics hubs, their proximity to wealthy urban markets, overlain atop classed, raced, and gendered inequalities that punctuate and perpetuate its access to cheap labour, increasingly reshaping and further degrading the standards of employment across sectors of work.

Delfanti situates Amazon's use of digital technology and its impact on labour processes within the long arc of scientific management, wherein "the supervisors' stopwatches and notebooks are replaced by the digital analysis of data generated from human labor." (32) This is facilitated by the barcode scanners that warehouse workers use to scan the objects which they stow and pick. The scanner mediates workers' relations with management

and organizes their labour process into individualized tasks, directing them to the locations of commodities within massive warehouses. Importantly, it is the algorithms of the software system that monitor both inventory and make possible the heavy surveillance of workers' speed and whereabouts. Unlike traditional warehousing work, the "chaotic storage" that places items in random locations in these digitalized warehouses dispossesses workers of the knowledge of where the stuff is, thus making them expendable as "only software can reorder the chaos." (38) However, it is workers' physical labour that sustains the ongoing capture of data stored within the algorithms. Compared to conventional Taylorism, "the novelty, in a digital-intensive warehouse like Amazon's, is that the information generated by workers is algorithmically crunched to make possible and improve the machinic processes" (37) that ultimately control workers.

The author highlights that working at Amazon's FCS is fundamentally dehumanizing not only because the pressure to *work hard* and "make rate" generates an isolating culture of both physical and mental injury, but also because workers' bodies themselves become absorbed within a broad web of algorithmic alienation, scanning their badges in the same way that they scan commodities in the warehouse when they start their shifts, themselves becoming the objects of the rationalization of production under digital capitalism. The high injury rates inside these warehouses are made worse by the use of Amazon Robotics – robots that inhabit the warehouses to aid in the sorting process – as they are used to further speed up work.

In addition to its technological infrastructure, Amazon's FCS also deploy a cultural infrastructure of mandatory fun enforced by managers and supervisors as a tool of ideological control over workers'

subjectivities and identities. These practices range from rituals of singing and dancing during daily briefings, to the colourful décor of lunchrooms, themed workdays, and even the occasional automated nudge to “project loving energy” at workstations where they serve robots. (56) Vacillating between stress and fun, the company’s demand that workers directly participate in their own discipline. As management cheers workers to work harder and harder with enthusiastic fun, they never reveal what the targets are and when they have been met, leaving workers in a perpetual state of mental and physical depletion with little recourse to commiseration with their fellow workers, with whom they are discouraged from interacting.

Gamification – the fusion of the joy of playing games with productivity – is a key aspect of the company’s culture of compulsory fun. Delfanti argues that insofar as “gamification facilitates capital’s need to control the rhythms of work and serves to counter workers’ natural tendencies to slow down and take it easy” (67), it is an extension of Taylorist techniques. Here, Delfanti draws on Michael Burawoy’s seminal *Manufacturing Consent* (University of Chicago Press, 1979) to highlight the ways in which competition between workers, under the guise of ‘fun and games’ deflects workers’ frustration away from management and compels them to view one another as competitors, diminishing the possibility of collective resistance. The author is sure to emphasize that the power of digital technologies and management are co-constitutive: while algorithms assign tasks, organize work, and surveil workers, management enforces tacit and explicit discipline, and their power to squeeze more out of workers is enabled by the close digital surveillance of workers.

Amazon’s ability to feast on precarity is made possible through the broader

political economic milieu of flexible labour regimes that produce a vast reserve army of labour. In addition to its heavy reliance on employing and discarding temporary workers (often hired through temp agencies) during peak seasons, Amazon’s employment practices are built with temporariness at their core – a process referred to as “planned obsolescence.” With programs like Pay to Quit and Career Choice, workers are encouraged to leave before they grow too resentful of their working conditions or build meaningful relationships to mobilize against their bosses. Such programs normalize workers’ own sense of disposability and incentivize turnover. Precarity, however, is not evenly distributed: workers’ surrender to or refusal of these logics are inflected by gender, race, and class.

While most workers are futureless at Amazon, the company projects a future of heightened automation. From augmented reality visors to wearable robotic arms, Delfanti investigates Amazon’s patents in great detail, concluding that even at the height of their automated futurism, humans remain central to their operation. Amazon imagines a future in which humans and robots co-exist but where machines serve a managerial role. Although this may lead to the geographical displacement of jobs (outsourcing), these technologies will nonetheless need a human operator *somewhere*. Delfanti’s arguments have great bearing on debates around the threat or promise of automation and the spectre of tech-induced unemployment. As Aaron Benanav argues in *Automation and the Future of Work* (New York: Verso, 2020), automation can be either labour-augmenting or labour-substituting. In the case of Amazon, workers may be deskilled and rendered replaceable through digital technologies, but automation does not make them obsolete. Instead, as Delfanti asserts, it makes them subservient to those

machines, intensifying their labour under more alienating, dangerous, and authoritarian conditions of work.

With the prospect of the Amazonification of various sectors of the economy, Delfanti's ultimate point is that technological innovation and automation can never be emancipatory when wielded by the grip of digital capital. Without broad democratic participation, technological evolution will only further subdue and disempower workers. The author ends his book with a survey of the existing terrain of worker struggles within Amazon's FCS, from small acts of daily resistance to unionization efforts and networks of grassroots worker collectives. Given Amazon's steady path to monopoly power, Delfanti offers a sober suggestion: a broad multi-issue, cross-class coalitional, and transnational forms of coordinated resistance alongside a strong regulatory state are needed if Amazon's power is to be reined in. With this in mind, future research is needed to further interrogate the political implications of Amazon's top-down imposition of employment transience on workers' subjectivities and their capacity to change the course of technological evolution. What are the conditions under which a transnational resistance can be borne, especially in the near-future context of outsourcing warehousing work or the recruitment of temporary migrant workers from the Global South amid rising sentiments of economic nationalism in the Global North?

Delfanti's account succeeds in painting a vivid picture of working at Amazon's warehouses, and will be of interest to multi-disciplinary scholars in the areas of work and technology, as well as workers, union organizers, and labour and community activists working towards more just futures.

RAWAN ABDELBAKI
York University

Zachary Austin Doleshal, *In the Kingdom of Shoes: Bata Zlin, Globalization, 1894–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021)

A COLD WAR ERA shopping mall in Canada was home to a range of stores, and shoe retailer Bata was usually one of them. Bata was popularly considered the creation of Czechoslovakian émigré Thomas Bata and was associated with Bata's company town, Batawa, which is located in south-eastern Ontario. Zachary Austin Doleshal's insightful book *In the Kingdom of Shoes: Bata Zlin, Globalization, 1894–1945* reveals that the Bata story is far more complex than Canadian consumers may have imagined. Doleshal is a clinical assistant professor of history at Sam Houston State University. He engaged in extensive primary source research to complete this book, and is clearly able to read Czech. Doleshal's efforts resulted in a book that covers several historical subfields, including business and management, globalization, labour and working-class, the history of both world wars, gender and ethnicity, and technology. A lot of ground is covered in this work.

The Bat'a story – this is in fact the correct spelling of the name, although the Anglicized version is known in Canada and elsewhere – begins with an ambitious family making shoes in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Germany more readily comes to mind when Canadians and Americans think about World War I and the Central Powers that were on one side of the conflict, but the Austro-Hungarian Empire was also a key combatant. Many of the countries that now comprise eastern and south-eastern Europe, including modern Czechia, were part of that empire, although it was a decidedly unstable edifice that collapsed as the war ended. The founding and expansion of the Bat'a company was principally