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## **The International Political Economy of Work and Employability** **By Phoebe V. Moore-Carter**

*Review by John Smith*

The subject of this stimulating book is *employability*, shorthand for how ‘workers... manage their subjectivities and... equip themselves to remain employable in preparation for the post-industrial world’ (p. 2). Its central thesis is that ‘employability’ is being redefined by ‘an increasingly international hegemonic project of skills reform that occurs within the superstructure, or in this case at the level of ideas and human subjectivity’ (p. 2). It develops its arguments through an extensive literature review and through three case studies: the UK, South Korea and Singapore. The literature review is used to elaborate a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework; as for the case studies, despite differences noted by Moore, ‘all three of these nations look increasingly like neoliberal capitalist models.... each of the three nations has been enthusiastic about the use of education as a direct instrument for growth... the resulting skills revolutions can be legitimately analysed and compared as attempted neoliberal capitalist hegemonic projects’ (p. 16). These ‘skills revolutions’, she explains, are touted as liberating and empowering but are in fact designed to subordinate and enslave, and it is these ‘traits of *trasformismo* that give a unifying logic for my choice of case studies’ (p. 117).

She concludes by arguing that ‘the creative and networked industries may be the space for creating post capitalist ecologies of production and even societies that are built on tenets that contradict and challenge the very basis of capitalism’ (pp. 139-140), and in particular that ‘the P2P [peer-to-peer] movement... holds the potential to embody the next age of global political economic history and a form of socialism’ (p. 144), and that ‘this mode of production poses a real threat to the current dominant mode’ (p. 146).

This review assesses these arguments from the standpoint of a Marxist who prefers Lenin to Gramsci and Gramsci to the neo-Gramscians. Despite this book’s impressive insights and important empirical findings, in my opinion its investigation of employment and employability is hindered rather than helped by its theoretical approach.

Perhaps a good place to start is the book’s choice of case studies, which do lend themselves to comparative analysis – but not for the reasons stated by the author. While the UK may be taken as representative of the short list of ‘core’ imperialist nations (which, the late Fred Halliday reminds us, has ‘remained the same for a century and a half, with the single addition of Japan’<sup>1</sup>), Singapore and South Korea are definitely not representative of the ‘peripheral’ oppressed nations of the global South. Instead, these two small nations are almost alone in showing signs of a capacity to traverse the thin pontoon bridge connecting the two sides of this grotesquely divided world, and it is only this that makes them in any way comparable

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Halliday, 2001, ‘For an international sociology’, in Stephen Hobden and John Hobson (eds.) *Historical sociology of international relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (p. 255).

to the UK – putting in question the claimed universal significance of the findings of the case study analysis.

Related to this is the book's conception of capitalism's current neoliberal stage of development. The term 'neoliberalism' appears rarely, it is instead presumed to be synonymous with the 'post-industrial world', the era of 'immaterial production', the 'knowledge economy', and other such notions or concepts popular in the neo-Gramscian literature. But the emergence of the so-called 'knowledge economy', seen here as the defining feature of neoliberal globalisation, is only one part of a much broader transformation of capitalist production. Over the past three decades the centre of gravity of industrial production has dramatically shifted towards low-wage countries – from approximate parity in 1980, there are now four times as many industrial workers in the global South as in the 'triad' nations of Japan, Europe and North America. If the 'international' in IPE includes China, Egypt, the Dominican Republic etc, why all this talk of a post-industrial world? Even in the 'triad' nations, isn't 'post-industrial' a bit of a stretch? Industrial production has shifted, and it has changed in other important ways, but it has *not* been superseded; the neo-Gramscian assumption that it has, in my opinion, leads away from investigating the causes and consequences of this 'global shift'. To be fair, this real-world development is mentioned, even if the theoretical framework adopted by the book impedes its digestion: '[a]s long as capitalist investors seek out the cheapest sites of production, there will be competition with low-cost workers at all levels of the game, and thus pressures will be placed on workers in developed, post-industrial economies to keep afloat with all levels of competition.' (p. 55)

One aspect of the 'employability' discourse really is universal: '[a]s the world continues to 'shrink' in the age of globalisation... the pressures to 'flexibilise' labour markets have seen strikingly similar responses from governments, civil society, and business forces' (p. 16). In different forms and to different degrees, labour markets across the world are indeed being flexibilised... but flexibilisation means something very different to a FoxConn worker in Shenzhen assembling Dell computers and Apple iPhones than it does to those designing and branding these products in Silicon Valley. The argument developed in this book – '[t]he hegemonic project discussed here is a policy-driven discourse that merges skills with competencies and requires lifelong learning from mobile and capable subjects' (p. 73) – applies much more to Californian knowledge workers than it does to Chinese production workers (or, for that matter, to the low-skill, low-wage workers selling these products in retail outlets across the imperialist world).

Rather than arguing that we are all in the same boat, it seems to me to be essential that we recognise the privileged status of the 'cognitive workers' – even if these privileges turn out to be transient; even if, in the end, we will all sink or swim together. A recent study of the Apple iPod value chain,<sup>2</sup> for instance, discovered wage ratios of 55:1 between Apple's R&D employees and its subcontracted Chinese production workers. This poses some huge and complex questions to which, I would argue, no trend within broadly-defined Marxism has yet found answers. Some very interesting trains of thoughts are provoked by Moore's comments that 'capital seeks to [quoting Marx] "use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces

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<sup>2</sup> Greg Linden, Jason Dedrick & Kenneth L. Kraemer, 2009, *Innovation and Job Creation in a Global Economy: The Case of Apple's iPod*. Personal Computing Industry Center, UC Irvine, p2. <http://pcic.merage.uci.edu/papers/2008/InnovationAndJobCreation.pdf>.

thereby created”.<sup>3</sup> But the pivotal shift in our era of cognitive capitalism is that the owners of the means of production are not as clearly defined’, (pp. 137-8) and ‘while post-modern theorists look at the subject as being disciplined through bio-power and self-management, Marxists look at the human being as *becoming* capital’ (p. 140). But if it makes sense to talk of ‘cognitive workers’ as owners of capital or even as the incarnation of capital itself, this implies that at least part of their income represents surplus value extracted from those toiling lower down the value chains. Here, then, is one reason to be deeply sceptical about Moore’s claim that the potential gravediggers of capitalism are to be found among their number.

There are others. Moore claims that ‘the P2P movement... is already demonstrating reciprocal behaviours as essential prerequisites for communism’ (p. 144), and ‘promises to challenge the core activities and premises of competitive capitalism... while market-based capitalism is based on the private ownership of the means of production and hierarchically organised corporations, the peer production model is based on shared ownership’ (p. 145). But only tiny numbers of ‘cognitive workforce’ are actually engaged in P2P production – ‘FS/OS [free software/open source] is an open, evolutionary arena wherein hundreds and sometimes thousands of users voluntarily explore design codes, spot bugs in codes, and make contributions to the code’ (pp. 153-4) – and they do so as a hobby, supporting themselves by engaging in more conventional forms of employment (or from the proceeds of more conventional forms of capital). To my mind this is the least convincing part of Moore’s argument. ‘If OS is indeed a critical space for alternative exchange and creation that fundamentally contrasts with capitalism, then it has the potential to provide the momentum and blueprint for a ‘hardware’ world of distributed infrastructures as well’ (p153). The evidence offered to support these claims is meagre – a list of small-scale projects in different countries that are difficult to evaluate without more information. Moore argues that P2P ‘casts aside the wage relation’ (p160), and represents ‘a veritable revolutionary threat... a resistance movement that... may, I argue, overcome class struggle and empower people in ways that labour struggle previously has not been able to do’ (p161). The political perspective being proposed here, it seems to me, has much more in common with anarchism than with any type of Marxism; more a way of opting out of the class struggle than a new form of it; a perspective that relegates the most oppressed and exploited – and most multitudinous – of imperialism’s wage slaves to the sidelines. But, just in the last year, waves of strikes in Shenzhen and across Asia announced the emergence onto the world stage of a new, militant, youthful and increasingly female industrial proletariat, while industrial workers in Tunisia and Egypt played a decisive role in opening up a profound anti-capitalist revolutionary process in Arabia. Meanwhile, economic depression in the imperialist heartlands, from which there is no escape, is obliging the ruling classes to tear up the social contract that has for so long paralysed the workers movement in these countries. Now is the time to rediscover and reaffirm our continuity with the historic line of march of the working class, the bearer of human culture; to unflinchingly set our sights upon replacing the dictatorship of capital with the power of working people. ‘Cognitive workers’ and intellectuals will play an important role in advancing or retarding this perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, 1973, *Grundrisse*, London: Pelican (p706).