

Alex J. Wood, *Despotism on Demand: How Power Operates in the Flexible Workplace*, Ithaca: ILR Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781501748875 (cloth); ISBN: 9781501748882 (paper); ISBN: 9781501748899 (ebook)

Flexibility has always been a critical watchword for gig platforms like Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, and Deliveroo. In a recent *New York Times* op-ed, Dara Khosrowshahi, the CEO of Uber, set out his vision for a new type of workplace built on the principle of ultimate flexibility. “Our current employment system is outdated and unfair”, Khosrowshahi (2020) writes. “It forces every worker to choose between being an employee with more benefits but less flexibility, or an independent contractor with more flexibility but almost no safety net”. Uber had a different model in mind where drivers for his platform were not employees of the company *per se*, but rather entrepreneurs who enjoy the freedom to work whenever they please. As long as they stay in the good graces of the platform. In exchange gig workers also get to bear the burdens of essentially no labour rights, few benefits, and little say over how they work. In reality, the flexibility to work any time takes shape as a necessity to work all the time just to make ends meet. But, hey, now it’s your choice – your responsibility – to realize your true potential and thrive, survive, or die.

Khosrowshahi’s op-ed was part of a successful campaign led by Uber and other digital platform companies that spent over \$200 million lobbying for Proposition 22 in California (Marshall 2020), a ballot measure that enshrines into law many of the infamously exploitative labour practices that were already happening through regulatory arbitrage and legal loopholes. With the passing of Proposition 22 in November, which is now facing a lawsuit in the state supreme court by Uber and Lyft drivers who hope to overturn the ballot measure, have we entered a new era of the flexible workplace regime?

As Alex Wood demonstrates in his new book, *Despotism on Demand*, the weaponization of flexibility by gig platforms is not their own innovation. It is, instead, an acceleration of techniques that corporations have long been perfecting in various ways. Tyrannical managers may become replaced by authoritarian algorithms, workplace

surveillance may become supercharged by ubiquitous sensors and artificial intelligence, human workers may become treated more like flesh-and-blood robots. But, regardless of their technological form, these “smart” systems are not “unlike anything that has ever come before”, as both tech evangelists and their critics have a tendency to claim. They are, instead, the latest developments in the history of capitalist innovations for accumulation and domination.

Building on literature from industrial relations and the sociology of work, Wood structures *Despotism on Demand* around two extended ethnographic case studies that investigate the internal functioning of the “workplace regimes at two of the largest retailers in the world” (p.19). He gives these companies the pseudonyms of PartnershipCo and ConflictCo. Each one is representative of a different flavour of flexible managerial control. For the sake of consistency with Wood’s account, and to maintain the protection of anonymity for his informants working in these corporations, I’ll use the pseudonyms he gives the two retail giants. Though, with a bit of extra footwork, they are simple enough to decode for the curious reader, but plausible deniability is a better shield than nothing.

PartnershipCo, based in the UK, is “the archetypical hegemonic regime, with a recognized union, collective bargaining, and a fairly stable and harmonious industrial relations climate” (p.19). Whereas ConflictCo, based in the US, is “a more despotic regime – being famed for its hostility toward, avoidance of, and conflict with unions, along with its low pay and poor benefits” (ibid.). Bosses at both companies deploy “flexible scheduling” – or, ultimate control over workers’ time and, thus, wages and livelihood – as a “simple, readily available, and unaccountable way to threaten and punish specific workers with worse hours and shifts, as well as requiring workers to actively maintain the managers’ favor through being ‘good employees’” (p.76). Different conditions at each company mean this control manifests in somewhat different yet often overlapping ways, as both “flexible discipline” and “flexible despotism”, depending on the severity of the power asymmetry between managers and workers. As Wood explains:

As at PartnershipCo, the flexible nature of scheduling resulted in workers' schedules varying widely in both the number and timing of hours week by week. Managers at ConflictCo had near-total control over this scheduling, which had a damaging effect on workers' work-life balance and led to workers experiencing a pervasive sense of schedule insecurity regarding future changes to their hours. As at PartnershipCo, managers not only had control over workers while they were in the workplace but also over their family and social life. (p.95)

The relationship between discipline and despotism exists on a spectrum, with the former being a subtler soft power that influenced workers' behaviours, and the latter being a more direct coercive power that limited workers' autonomy. Their differences in practice were clear at times. But I also found that their similarities, and Wood's tendency to speak about them together, could lead to some conceptual slipperiness in their analytical distinctions.

Wood ably argues, in general, that we must always understand the exchange of labour for wages as an already exploitative relationship rife with asymmetric power dynamics. Employers act as if, by paying a wage, they own more than just the value produced by workers, but also have dominion over every part of their life. By wielding control over workers' time, both regimes of flexible discipline and flexible despotism have very real consequences for workers' total well-being – materially, mentally, socially, existentially.

In multiple instances, Wood's informants from the more despotic ConflictCo explicitly equated the temporal control exerted by managers to slavery. The "my-guide" task management program used by ConflictCo, which was associated with increasing intensity and scrutiny of their jobs, was called "my-slave" by workers. As one informant told Wood, "I would compare [working at ConflictCo] almost to feeling like a slave because your power to control your own life is taken from you; they are going to make you [work] whenever ... they want". By denying employees even small degrees of autonomy to direct and organise their own lives, while also paying wages that are continually decreasing in real terms as they are

outpaced by inflation, these corporations have created a class of wage slaves for the post-industrial economy.

Perhaps one of the most insidious ways that flexible scheduling manifests is through the power dynamics inherent in so-called “schedule gifts”. The absence of set schedules, and the ability for managers “to arbitrarily improve or worsen workers’ schedules in terms of both the quantity and quality of their work hours” (p.100), meant that one of the only ways to mitigate the perpetual insecurity of flexibility was for employees to find ways to please their managers. “When managers accommodated workers’ needs by providing them with different hours or alternative schedules, workers experienced it as an act of kindness that needed to be reciprocated through hard work” (ibid.). They were forced to perform gratitude for even the slightest benevolence of petty tyrants. This required employees to internalise their exploitation by working even harder, longer, whenever – and doing it with a deferent smile while producing higher profits for the corporations. The “schedule gifts” indebted employees to their managers. A debt they could never really pay back.

Some workers expressed conflicting feelings of “moral obligation to those in positions of power”, while others were not fooled by these acts of dominance masked as “kindness”. Those who saw through the bullshit felt even more incensed at the indignity of being treated like children, which then fuelled further antagonism between labour and capital. But, even then, it was difficult to escape the debt bonds and time traps these “schedule gifts” established. Choosing not to play the game was, most often, met with punishment for insubordination, ranging from hours being cut and changed, to termination.

This is not to say there is no space for worker resistance and organisation against these systems of exploitation. Wood stresses that they are not (yet) totalizing; they are vulnerable to subversion and breakdown. But there is no question that capital has succeeded in policing and limiting such spaces of “hidden resistance” in an attempt to completely exterminate its existence. To demonstrate the “limits and contradictions of control”, Wood provides some quick examples of expected forms of micro-resistance, such as slowdowns (e.g. strategically using breaks during busy periods) and sabotage (e.g. costing the store

money by “accidentally” breaking goods). Unexpectedly, Wood also places a lot of emphasis on the power of social media to confront corporate power. He describes, for example, how workers at ConflictCo used Facebook groups to network with each other and mobilise awareness campaigns about the company’s exploitation. Back in 2012 – the time period in which Wood’s analysis is situated – the potential for social media to lead to real material changes that challenge mighty institutions seemed limitless in the midst of the Arab Spring. But now such assertions feel outdated as arguments about the radical potential of social media to break existing social structures and power dynamics have been tempered by a more sober recognition of the myriad ways they very often plug into those structures and reflect those dynamics.

I don’t deny that creating a sense of shared injustice among disconnected workers is important. Nor is it any less important for workers to find ways to claim some agency and lash out against managerial control. But the strong conclusions Wood draws about the capacity for – what he admits are largely symbolic – forms of resistance to actually challenge these oppressive workplace regimes aren’t quite supported by the evidence presented. Without stronger empirical and/or theoretical support, these conclusions risk sounding overly general, even gestural.

While almost nothing Wood describes will sound unfamiliar to anybody who has worked in the service industry, the book does a marvellous job of showing just how systemic, extensive, and drastic the individually felt experiences of these cruel workplace regimes actually are. This is the book’s real value. By contextualizing flexible discipline and flexible despotism across two corporations and two countries, Wood explains how even though the modes of managerial control can operate in different ways – and are situated within “highly divergent industrial relations climates, employment protections, and welfare systems” – they tend to result in very similar outcomes of disempowering workers and disrupting their lives.

Despotism on Demand is a brisk book with a big point to make about, as the subtitle sums up, “how power operates in the flexible workplace”. It is written in a clear and straightforward, albeit somewhat dry and austere, manner that makes it easy to pick up. It

does, however, suffer from a fair amount of repetition throughout the chapters. While at times this serves to reinforce, or make slight variations to, key points in Wood's argument, this repetition can also often feel like retreading already well-worn ground.

Wood's narrow focus on the extended case studies of PartnershipCo and ConflictCo, primarily based on research that took place roughly between 2009 and 2013, may leave readers expecting and wanting more analysis about contemporary developments by big box retailers – or other behemoths of post-industrial employment like X-as-a-service platforms (e.g. Uber) and e-commerce logistics (e.g. Amazon). *Despotism on Demand* is bookended with brief discussions of these technological shifts. But the work of applying Wood's findings and concepts to managerial control and worker resistance under the regime of digital capitalism is largely left to readers. This near absence was a surprise to me – perhaps revealing more about my own biases in terms of research interests and academic literatures. That said, this is not a mark against the book. There's much to be learned from the "internal states" of two of the world's largest retailers. After all, as Wood makes clear, they paved the way for many of the abhorrent practices that companies are now, in the name of innovation and progress, subjecting their workers to.

The book finishes with a methodological appendix that offers ten pages of super informative details about why, how, and where Wood's undertook his extended case studies of PartnershipCo and ConflictCo. In terms of structure, I would recommend reading the appendix after the introduction, rather than waiting until the end. The background provided here is useful to keep in mind while reading Wood's account of his own ethnographic observations, interviews with workers, and analysis of the companies' stated policies and actual practices. In addition to analysing documents like corporate policies, staff handbooks, and union materials at both companies, for PartnershipCo Wood conducted participant observation and interviews with 35 informants, both workers and union officials, from four stores in the London area, as well as working for two months as a part-time shelf-stacker in one store. For ConflictCo, Wood took two fieldwork trips to Los Angeles and San Francisco where he conducted participant observation of union drives at six stores and interviewed 33

informants from a dozen stores across the two cities. There is no doubt that Wood's research is rigorous and well-reasoned, while also reflexive about his own position as a scholar studying workers as they cope with and organise against workplace regimes that seek to subjugate them.

In my view, Wood's scholarly commitments in *Despotism on Demand* are admirably aligned with the approach that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a labour leader with the Industrial Workers of the World, advocated for in her 1917 pamphlet *Sabotage*:

I believe the mission of the intelligent propagandist is this: we are to see what the workers are doing, and then try to understand why they do it; not tell them it's right or it's wrong, but analyze the condition and see if possibly they do not best understand their need and if, out of the condition, there may not develop a theory that will be of general utility. Industrial unionism, sabotage are theories born of such facts and experiences. But for us to place ourselves in a position of censorship is to alienate ourselves entirely from sympathy and utility with the very people we are supposed to serve.

While reading *Despotism on Demand*, there were times when I was struck by an overwhelming sense of despair at the obscenely cruel working conditions in these companies, at the plight of the working class whose stories Wood tells, at what the future of flexible control portends. But, as I had to remind myself, indignation must be the infinite well of energy we draw power from in our unyielding quest to liberate all people from the yoke of capital's control. We study the machinery, so we know how best to dismantle it.

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December 2020