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GLOBAL HANDBOOKS IN  
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION  
RESEARCH

# **The Handbook of Digital Labor**

**WILEY** Blackwell



# **The Handbook of Digital Labor**

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*We dedicate this book to the life and work of Vincent Mosco*



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# Introduction

**Jack Linchuan Qiu, ShinJoung Yeo,  
and Richard Maxwell**

The term “digital labor” emerged with the penetration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and renewed debates among scholars centered around labor issues (Fish & Srinivasan 2012; Scholz 2012; Fuchs 2014). Today, network-enabled digital technology has become ubiquitous. It is deployed from industrial to service sectors to countless everyday life scenarios, so much so that the term “digital labor” could obfuscate how the global working class is being recomposed and where working-class power resides. Our intention for this handbook is therefore not to narrowly define “digital labor” as separate from conventional forms of labor. Instead, we put together this edited volume to shed light on changing labor processes, new working conditions, and workers’ struggles in this period of major restructuring when digital technology is the fulcrum of global capitalist development.

In other words, rather than a single set of occupations, we understand digital labor as a dynamic, technologized condition of work, characterized by vastly different ownership schemes, labor processes, and reward systems. It is also a collective effort to build solidarity, within and across the platforms, unions, co-ops, and industries, including not only “high tech” industries but also “traditional” ones where digital labor struggles are embedded but often concealed. A goal of this handbook is to render the invisible visible.

In 2022, over 250 million Indian workers and farmers, along with their allied students and civil groups, went out on the streets protesting against the attacks on workers’ rights and the new agricultural policy by the Modi government that undermined farmers’ livelihoods (Phawa 2020). In the same year, workers in South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand organized major strikes against platform companies (Nguyen 2022). In 2024, South Africa’s largest public sector workers went on to the streets and demanded wage increases (Casual

Workers Advice Office 2025), while there has been a wave of strikes by transportation, ports, factory, and metal workers in Germany (Schuetze & Solomon 2024). Even in the United States where only 10% of workers are unionized, there has been a record high of collective actions among workers from various sectors such as mining, automobile, ride-sharing, and Hollywood cultural industries (Moody 2023).

The new upsurge of strikes and collective actions around the globe demonstrates that the global working class is alive and resilient. They are inspirational and encouraging. However, to transform this into a meaningful global political project, the collective fight must be sustained and augmented, eroding the power of the transnational capitalist class (Gindin 2024; Sklair 2001). To search for working-class power that could truly lead to radical social change, we need to have a clear understanding of the global working-class dynamics within contemporary capitalism to harness and sustain working-class power. We hope that this handbook can contribute to that goal.

Over the decades, crisis-ridden global capitalism has been radically transformed. With falling rates of profit since the late 1960s, the Third World debt crisis since the 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and China's reintegration into global capitalism, the US-led global system has changed significantly through structural adjustment, privatization, and financialization (Brenner 2002; Gindin & Panitch 2012; Schiller 2014). All these are accompanied, in most parts of the world, by austerity policies and attacks on labor. Within political economic dynamics, bolstered by techno-utopian ideology, massive internet infrastructures across the globe were built unevenly. ICTs helped draw areas outside markets into the capitalist economy, reorganizing the production and distribution of goods and services, extending and deepening the global value chain for numerous sectors including media and communication (Huws 2014; Lotz 2018; Schiller 1999) and the IT industry itself (Yeung 2022). The restructuring of the capitalist economy built over the internet has also transformed the global labor market and labor processes, producing new working conditions, new grounds for labor struggle, and new networks of class formation (Dyer-Witheford 2015; Huws 2014; Moody 2017; Qiu 2009).

With the recurrent crises of capitalism, followed by cycles of new technologies deployment, existing occupations are being restructured or disappearing, whereas new occupations, new patterns of work, working conditions, and new contradictions are emerging within the capitalist logic of profit maximization, imperatives of competition, and capital accumulation. The 2008 Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated these trends across the globe, exposing and deepening social inequality. Our handbook covers these tumultuous changes and is organized around four sections:

1. Working-Class Resistance
2. Digital Capitalism and Alternatives
3. Laboring under Digital Capitalism
4. Theorizing Digital Labor.

A lead chapter sets the tone for each section and provides a broad introduction to themes that resonate with the set of accompanying chapters. The first part focuses on the different terrains of working-class struggles and organizing efforts. These issues have

been central to the work of Vincent Mosco, an activist scholar whose influence, directly or indirectly, has inspired the growth of interdisciplinary studies of labor and labor organizing in communications and other sectors. It is fitting that Professor Mosco's essay serves as the groundbreaker for this section and, indeed, this handbook, which we have dedicated to the memory of his life and labors.

The second section comprises essays examining historical experiments of democratic technology as well as structural conditions of global digital capitalism. It provides further context to the contemporary challenges faced by workers amid seismic political and economic shifts. Dan Schiller sets the stage for the section, illustrating how capital deploys digital technology to accelerate commodification and alters the political economy while opening up digital capitalism to new geopolitical conflicts, in particular between the United States and China. The section challenges the idea of a politically neutral process of technological development.

The third part is comprised of comparative case studies that share both critical and methodological frameworks to detail working conditions in platform work and beyond, which, despite the technological novelty, reproduces the global division of labor. This is a process full of durable inequalities as well as possibilities for worker empowerment. This section starts with work by Antonio Casilli et al. who discuss their multi-country study concerning the production of artificial intelligence (AI) to illustrate the global challenges faced by a largely unacknowledged workforce.

The final section takes us to the theoretical realm of studying digital labor, led by Christian Fuchs, who introduces the broad conceptual framework and touches on the future political horizon. This part of the book gives readers an opportunity to engage with various theoretical debates centered around "digital labor" that have been discussed over the years. Most of these debates are likely to continue into the future with long-lasting conceptual, practical, and political implications. They may also stimulate reimaginings beyond contemporary digital capitalism.

## **Section One: Working-Class Resistance**

The opening chapter is a semi-autobiographical essay by Vincent Mosco, a true role model for students, scholars, and activists who work on issues of labor, communication, and digital media. It tracks his life trajectories from a working-class youth to an activist scholar dedicated to critical political economy, policy research, and pedagogy. His lifelong efforts were shaped by his belief "that teaching and research are forms of labor and provide opportunities for praxis, the integration of thought and action." When he began to incorporate labor studies into communications research, there were a handful of others who shared his radical interest in challenging the mainstream views of media and communication, especially as activists. By the end of his life on February 9, 2024, he had witnessed "the extraordinary growth of research in the field, today manifest most extensively in digital labor studies." His chapter is imbued with solidarity with labor movement politics and action, as well as enthusiasm for new scholarship and how he

insisted on “passing the torch” to his students and collaborators around the world. He urges researchers in the West to look beyond their borders—both national and scholarly—to reach out to “scholars in less developed parts of the world but especially in Africa where digital labor begins its journey through the international division of labor in the coltan mines that contain the rare minerals that power the digital world.” But most importantly, and in the spirit of the writers of the essays in this section and throughout this handbook, he encourages us to “join activist movements everywhere, from universities to Amazon warehouses, where some of the most important labor organizing is taking place today.”

Chapter Two by Seamus Bright Grayer and Enda Brophy, examines the hierarchical structure and disconnection between full-time employees at Alphabet (and Google) and the large and overlooked workforce of temps, vendors, and workers at subcontractors. The “practice of contracting out,” they argue, both shapes the composition of labor and provides new grounds for organizing and resistance to digital capitalism. The chapter draws from research with Pittsburgh Tech Workers United (United Steelworkers Union Local 4040) and Alphabet Workers Union-Communication Workers of America (AWU-CWA). The authors identify a rift in the tech sector that sets up system-serving conflicts between workers as the sector adopted ever more aggressive disciplinary strategies of corporate labor management. Many of the workers Grayer and Brophy interviewed noted that managers of both Alphabet and the outsourcing worksites discouraged solidarity, enforcing a key strategy to break up the composition of digital labor to maintain the advantage of capital over workers. Every effort of solidarity and labor organizing across the value chain and “contractor divide” is, in this sense, a significant threat to digital capital, as the latter reorganizes to reassert “employer power.”

Chapter Three by ShinJoung Yeo turns our attention to logistics and transportation. Yeo explains the rising value of logistics and the growing number of workers in this critical sector. Through the case of South Korean truck drivers, Yeo examines how global supply chains are linked in complex ways. After explicating the intersection of logistics, working-class power, and global capitalism, Yeo presents an extensive interview she conducted with Wol-san Liem, who worked with South Korean truck drivers and the Cargo Truckers Solidarity Division (TruckSol) for 15 years as Director of International Affairs at KPTU (Korean Public Service and Transport Workers’ Union) and is currently working for the International Transport Workers’ Federation) as Policy and Strategy Coordinator. The interview is wide-ranging and details the composition of transport labor in Korea and truck drivers’ place in the global logistics sector. The political struggles of workers seeking safer and more stable working conditions face many challenges in Korea, where the state has pushed back against organizing initiatives, strikes, and legislation for “safe rates” protections of truckers. The interview touches on questions about the limits and potentialities of worker power in logistics as well as international comparisons and solidarity among logistics worker unions and organizers, particularly the bilateral collaboration with Transport Workers’ Union of Australia and Wol-san Liem’s work of transportation unions in Africa.

In Chapter Four, Ericka Wills offers a praxis-oriented examination of automation, financialization, and union mobilization of underground US coal mining, which has become a “highly computerized industry.” A labor educator and activist, Wills explains how “processes of mechanization, automation, and digitalization in the underground coal mining industry have foundationally altered the nature of miners’ work.” Wills frames these processes to provide insight into the restructuring of employment in coal mining regions of the United States, the rising demands for unions to fight the financialization of mining companies where private equity firms and investment funds (BlackRock, Vanguard, and State Street) have insinuated themselves to the detriment of workers and worker rights, and the increasing importance of mobilizing for union solidarity in the fight against these trends. She asks us to keep watch on the progress of collective worker power emerging in the era of finance capitalism “in every organizing drive, contract negotiation, and strike where workers hold the line.”

Chapter Five adds to the study of digital worker empowerment through the research of Greig de Peuter and Nicole Cohen, who have spent years studying workers and labor conditions in digital media, cultural industries, and the tech sector. Their work endeavors to answer questions about what spurs workers’ organizational choices between unions and worker co-ops and how each model addresses workplace democracy and racial and gender inequities. Through a comparative analysis, de Peuter and Cohen identify commonalities and tensions between the models to understand the political horizons of each kind of collective organizing and action. The comparative approach is innovative, emerging from critical debates around proposals for a “union co-op model.” The empirical examples offered by de Peuter and Cohen provide an invigorating examination of how these organizing toolkits can enhance digital labor studies and inform activist “pathways to worker empowerment in the digital age.”

## **Section Two: Digital Capitalism and Alternatives**

A goal of this handbook is to demonstrate that issues of digital labor are neither exclusively 21st-century concerns nor are they peripheral ones. Rather, they are pervasive and time-honored, even before the diffusion of personal computers. With this holistic view, we submit that digital labor is global and historical; that class identity and consciousness are malleable and contingent, rather than essential or fixed; and that labor solidarity and struggles continue to matter despite all the myths about digital technologies such as AI. Digital capitalism is neither natural nor is it the only destination for humanity. There were, are, and will be alternatives.

In Chapter Six, Dan Schiller examines the historical origins and contemporary characteristics of digital capitalism. Schiller’s expansive understanding of the history of digital capitalism has developed over decades of research and analysis. In this chapter, he explains both the political economic continuities that ensure capitalist domination and discontinuities stemming from inherent vulnerabilities and tendencies toward crisis—via financialization, global debt crises, and unregulated activities, among which we might add

climate change. In this context, tech companies' leading role in reconfiguring the "overall political economy" has provided an economic growth pole that also became a geopolitical flash point, particularly between the United States and China. In the digital geopolitical economy, US leaders have made it their mission to "maintain pre-eminence over this technology ... as the entire political economy is regenerating around digital systems and services." Schiller argues that US tech hegemony is vital for its maintaining global supremacy. He shows how China has been "reorganizing its national political economy and, concurrently, seeking to bring other countries into its digital orbit: in short, attempting to reconfigure the overall political economy of digital capitalism." The United States has contested this emerging power through aggressive trade policies, national security, and intimidation of its allies. But as Schiller points out, there is "no guarantee that U.S. measures to inhibit and retard China's innovation of digital technologies will succeed." He suggests finally that "digital capitalism in the 2020s is likely to be marked by violent contingency, perilous confrontation, and continued geopolitical reconfiguration."

Chapter Seven by Mark Andrejevic scrutinizes the central role of surveillance in the monitoring and control of labor from the industrial era to today's digital capitalism. He tracks the development of this techno power from Taylorist and Fordist models of control through to generative AI, the latest "control technology." From its roots in industrial capitalism, surveillance has become more intense and ubiquitous under digital capitalism, extending beyond workplaces and into the realms of social reproduction and consumption, to reshape and control social life on a model that capital has imposed upon labor in general. As digital devices that we use for work and social and domestic lives intermingle, the motivations for monitoring practices are no longer distinctive. As Andrejevic puts it, "The tyranny of convenience can result in a form of surrender." The digitalization of labor and lifeworlds depends on unregulated surveillance, which, if unchallenged, means "each successive generation of workers is likely to be the most comprehensively monitored one in history."

Chapter Eight by Timothy J. Minchin elaborates on the historical context and struggle to organize workers at Amazon. Minchin, a labor and civil rights historian, opens his chapter with the news from 2022 of workers' winning the right to form a union at the Amazon fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York. Understandably, the positive media response to this victory suggested that its achievement foretold a future of many more wins for Amazon workers elsewhere. Minchin suggests that such a forward-looking assessment misdirected most commentary away from clear understanding of the actual mix of traditional (i.e., non-digital, face-to-face) and novel strategies (e.g., social media) practiced by organizers and Amazon alike, where the latter drew on the anti-union playbook of spies, "carrot and stick" anti-union enticements, firing of "able activists," fear mongering about "unwanted third parties," and compulsory meetings. He shows that there were two important features of this victory that merit attention—the continuities with past strategies and tactics and the regional conditions of possibility for organizing in a union town like New York versus the unionization fights that took place in the South. His main example is Alabama where Amazon's anti-union strategies beat back the unionization effort at the Bessemer fulfillment center. These regional disparities are illustrated by accounts of how organizers using some of the same principles and tactics that won in New York failed in a region where union density is

negligible. Minchin reminds us that Amazon's empire is a big threat to workers in the non-gig economy, from unionized workers in transportation, the Postal Service, to Whole Foods employees.

Chapter Nine digs into the history of China's high-tech industry with the expert analysis by Hongzhe Wang and Changwen Chen. The authors explore "the intricate, sometimes contradictory, relationships" of technology and labor politics through their study of the development of electronic computers in China, from the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to the post-Mao period from the 1978 onward. They detail how the "technological advancements, national policies, and ideological constructs" shaped the achievements of the Chinese electronic computer industry, showing how computers were designed and deployed as practical tools for revolution and development while also serving as cultural symbols. For them, the computer industry's history reflects "the interactive relationship between technology and labor relations" in different moments of technological advances. It is noteworthy that the authors draw on extensive materials from both official and unofficial sources including memoirs, oral histories, propaganda pamphlets, underground publications, and *People's Daily*. They contextualize the effects of contending forces of "Cold War technological competition, socialist revolution, and the nation-building efforts of developing countries." Their historical insights, for instance into the "Shanghai model" based on the mass line of Maoism, provide fresh understanding of the techno-politics of information and communication. During China's opening to the West, the authors argue that China passed through a brief period of socialist industrial democracy in technology and labor relationships, but because of neoliberal influences the labor-technology relationship became more like "the classic form of labor-capital confrontation in capitalist industrial modernity." Wang and Chen describe how, in the post-Mao period, American microcomputers came to symbolize digital technology bolstered by ideological influences of Cold War social sciences and the uptake of Taylorist factory management models based on data processing. They conclude that "the socialist tradition of techno-politics was left behind," replaced by technological determinism of "Third Wave neoliberalism."

Chapter Ten extends the study of China's digital technology sector with Jie Xiong's surprising detour into the history of worker democracy under Salvador Allende's Chile (1970–1973), where Xiong finds inspiration in the design and development of Cybersyn, probably the first attempt to apply cybernetics to the management of a socialist economy. The idea was to create a network of computers that could rapidly respond with solutions based on real-time information about such things as factory output, supply needs, transportation, food stocks, and communication to mobilize the population. The experiment in digital worker democracy ended with the military coup of September 11, 1973. In 1975, Pinochet's military government introduced neoliberal economic policy with help of the "Chicago Boys" and the blessing of the US government. In this chapter, Xiong challenges the idea of liberal economists that under socialism uniformity is pursued while diverse ideas are repressed, and that planned economies are unable to acquire and process dynamic economic data on a national scale. He explores the current technical and labor conditions in China's information technologies and asks whether the application of Cybersyn's goal of socialist economic calculation and planning could become a reality in China.

Chapter Eleven by Melissa Gregg focuses on Silicon Valley, the imagined ground zero where historical narratives of all-things-digital tend to begin. Gregg inquires into the reality of those beginnings through a cultural studies lens, finding the inherent instability of organizational models based on real and mythical efforts of the early technodisruptors, such as the emphasis on patriarchal hierarchies, symbolized in a famous photo at Fairchild semiconductors of white men in starched shirts and skinny ties huddled around their chieftain while women worked in the background. This would evolve into the disappearing or disparaging histories of women's groundbreaking work in computer technology and their mistreatment by heavily white, male-dominant engineers and entrepreneurs. And it didn't help that looser organizational models rigidified into lumbering bureaucratic vaults of iterative innovation that would materialize in the built environment of "campuses" emanating outward from Stanford University to the broader Bay Area and beyond. Gregg's essay evaluates the rise and fall of The Valley following the diminishment of its demographic weight during and after COVID-19. She cites the exodus of digital labor to "Zoom towns" in Bend, Oregon, Austin, Texas, and Denver, Colorado where remote work made attendance at the fancy campuses in the Bay Area less attractive.

### **Section Three: Laboring Under Digital Capitalism**

This section navigates through the uneven terrain of platform work and occupations under the influence of AI and big data industries. It provides readers with a rich set of case studies spanning both East and West, South and North. In Chapter Twelve, the research team of Antonio A. Casilli, Paola Tubaro, Maxime Cornet, Clément Le Ludec, Juana Torres-Cierpe, and Matheus Viana Braz offers a comparative analysis of the production of AI in four countries: Venezuela, Brazil, Madagascar, and France. The authors debunk the hype that AI comes fully formed from the brains of Silicon Valley engineers and executives. Their study demonstrates that most of the AI workforce is comprised of "micro-workers," "crowdworkers," and "cloudworkers" who train algorithms to perform certain jobs, like teaching self-driving cars to avoid hitting pedestrians, bikes, etc., or assessing AI technology outputs to identify malfunctioning programs, or replacing algorithms that cannot automate a task, for example, content moderation on social media. These poorly paid, labor-intensive jobs are outsourced to labor platforms and subcontractors around the world, reaffirming the unequal division of labor. Through case studies of AI production in the four countries, Casilli et al. provide a multisited analysis of the AI value chain, where low-income countries supply cheap labor while richer regions leverage greater decision-making power over the labor process. They highlight the importance of workers in non-English speaking countries who can shape the production of AI. The authors argue that AI should not be seen as an autonomous entity but rather as a product built under rarely acknowledged conditions of poverty characterized by coloniality and racial and gender inequalities.

In Chapter Thirteen, Jenny Chan presents a comprehensive overview of platform-mediated labor in China with an emphasis on informal employment, the role of the state, and labor politics. She draws from her fieldwork observing food and parcel delivery workers and her synthesis of recent studies on delivery and ride-hailing services. Comprehensive and perceptive, Chan's chapter considers the linkages between formal and informal labor as conceptualized in labor laws and policies. Through an intersectional analysis of class, gender, and migration, she offers a nuanced understanding of recruitment and experiences of workers in platform-mediated jobs, which are sources of both worker precarity and resistance. Chan shows how couriers at the tail end of the logistics chain rely on family members to complete their tasks, illuminating the emergence of "a less visible form of homework." The denigration of Chinese rural immigrants by the government and employers ensures ongoing neglect of their health and welfare in the informal platform economy, perpetuating class conflicts in China's state-capitalist development.

Chapter Fourteen further explores the working conditions of ride-hailing services and taxi drivers in China through the research of Yanning Huang, Hanlin Chen, Qinyi Chen, Ruotong Jia, Jiaming Liu, Xueer Yan, and Yushu Yin. They provide a brief history of structural transformation in China's platform economy and the government's interventions, then present findings from surveys and interviews with more than 300 taxi and ride-sourcing drivers, highlighting challenges these workers faced during the COVID-19 outbreak. Against a prevailing conceptual separation of working conditions for taxi and ride-sourcing drivers, the authors demonstrate how studying them together generates fruitful comparisons regarding their similarities and differences and what's novel within the labor processes of platform capitalism. They show that the ride-hailing industry took advantage of preexisting conditions of precarious platform work, continuing the capitalist tendency to deskill and devalue drivers through growing dependence on algorithms and the ongoing threat to replace them with driverless cars. While the Chinese state calls on new policies addressing the plight of platform workers, it has been struggling to regulate the industry.

Chapter Fifteen by Margherita Di Cicco examines one of the oldest professions, sex workers, and how their work is being reconfigured in the platform economy as well as the variations of platforms—synchronous webcam versus asynchronous streaming sites—used by sex workers, who share characteristics of both gig workers and platformed cultural producers. Di Cicco tracks the evolution of online adult content to the current domination by proprietary platforms. Both online and in-person sex workers depend on these platforms, which create working conditions that demand constant efforts to keep up with ongoing platform reconfigurations and changing regulations. Through interviews with workers, the author contrasts the differences between live, exhausting webcam work and asynchronous work on sites like Onlyfans, which give more scheduling freedom but come with competitive pressure to deliver new material while constantly marketing their content through social media. Di Cicco's interviews with Onlyfans workers underscore the emotional labor at the heart of their interpersonal interactions with users. In addition to emotional work, there are relational and aspirational forms of

labor associated with marketing and promotion, as when webcam workers move from free chat rooms to private interactions or when content creators move from offering free samples to paid subscriptions. Overall, sex workers engage in unpaid digital labor across numerous platforms.

In Chapter Sixteen, Cheryll Soriano explores social and communicative relationships supporting platform labor experiences in the Global South where she maintains that a form of “calibrated servitude”—characterized by creativity and care, accommodation, and resistance—helps workers survive conditions of laboring in platform capitalism. She underscores the decisiveness of postcoloniality and neoliberalism in her case study of cloudworkers in the Philippines who use calibrated servitude to help workers negotiate with clients and other workers. The chapter draws on Soriano’s digital ethnography and in-depth interviews to detail the working conditions, the material and immaterial rewards, and the strategies for getting jobs, gaining customers, and pleasing returning clients. She concludes that workers are not only compelled to use calibrated servitude to gain relative stability in cloudwork, but they also use it to soften the pain of pretending to be flexible under conditions of racialized power relationships and the absence of a social safety net.

Chapter Seventeen takes a similar path to analyze survival tactics of workers in the platform economy, using what the author Julia Ticona calls the “digital hustle.” She derives this concept from interviews with both high-wage and low-wage workers across the United States. Enabled by smartphones and other devices, the digital hustle helps workers get jobs, juggle schedules, and coordinate time between jobs and domestic life. For high-wage workers, digital technologies are often used to manage multiple clients; for low-wage workers, on the other hand, these technologies are used to deal with multiple jobs and living in precarious circumstances. Ticona observes that they share the practices of the digital hustle, but high- and low-wage workers don’t have the same opportunities and the same rewards, illuminating class structures. The interview subjects make it clear that dependence on personal tech puts them in a vulnerable situation if the internet is down or when on-site managers don’t allow workers to use their phones, an especially difficult situation when coordinating childcare and other domestic arrangements. She concludes that digital technologies can be helpful, but they require a level of skill and workload unrecognized and unpaid by employers on top of their personal expenses for the devices and service plans.

In Chapter Eighteen, Intan Suwandi examines global commodity chains and flexible production, subordinated by Taylorist management to increase exploitation of labor. She focuses on the Global South’s uses of digital technology, which many in the West have promoted as a panacea for developing countries. Suwandi offers critical analyses of this view as she explores globalized production through a case study of two Indonesian firms that exemplify how foreign capital controls both technology and the labor process. She details how making products cheaper by reducing labor costs results from asymmetrical power relationships between multinationals headquartered in the United States, Europe, and Japan, and their Indonesian suppliers and workers.