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***Comparing mining and call centre labour. A view from Italy and Portugal on the free-unfree labour debate***

Neoliberal discourse on the transition from industrial to post-industrial economy stresses a qualitative difference in the modes of deploying and mobilizing social labour – broadly popularized by the shift from “manual” towards “mental labour”, an emphasis on “freedom” and “responsibility” of workers, new patterns of cooperation and increased involvement of workers in the management of the labour process. However, striking similarities can be traced between patterns of control over the labour process in Fordist and post-Fordist work organization. This paper examines differences and similarities between Fordist and neoliberal patterns of labour process control and disciplining of the labour force, by comparing the call centre industry in contemporary Portugal and mining industry in 20th century Italy. It is argued that the comparison of an epitome of neoliberal “precarity” – call centre labour – and an emblematic example of Fordist heavy industry – mining, can provide a fruitful contribution to the free-unfree labour in neoliberal capitalism. At a broader level, this paper asks: does a comparison of the manual and service labour process provide a useful ground from which to re-examine the free-unfree labour debate in the context of the Fordist/post-Fordist transition? If so, and more specifically, does the passage to a neoliberal-driven post-Fordist regime of production entail a different kind of labour power exploitation, hence surplus value? Our comparative findings between the mining and the call centre regimes of labour tend to contradict the notion of a qualitative shift in the ‘post-Fordist transition’, while emphasizing lines of continuity in capitalist labour exploitation, surplus value extraction, and capitalism necessary imperative of articulating free and unfree forms of labour.

This is illustrated by referring to the themes of co-operation, teams and team-working, as well as mainstream narratives, discourses and representations of both miners and call centre labourers. We show that both in the mining and the call centre labour process, co-operation, teams and team-working among labourers, tough deployed according to distinct managerial ideologies and differently mobilized by workers, ultimately fulfil the necessary requirements for the profitable maintenance of each sector. Also, both miners and call centre labourers have often been portrayed as de-humanized subjects of production, the former as creatures working underground and the latter as humans disguised as robots. Nonetheless, as shown, these representations obscure capitalism continuous necessity of mobilizing the agentive components of labour power in both Fordist and post-Fordist realms of production. Consequently, it is suggested that the free and unfree labour debate can only prove to have analytical relevance when considered through a particular historical conjuncture, and the comparison of emblematic and apparently distinct labour processes and modes of labour force regimentation.