

## Christian Koller

**Massimiliano Mollona. *Made in Sheffield: An Ethnography of Industrial Work and Politics*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. 212 pp. ISBN 978-1-84545-551-4.**

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Massimiliano Mollona is an Italian social anthropologist with an economic background who currently lectures at Goldsmiths, University of London. In *Made in Sheffield* he focuses on the post-Thatcherist remainders of the once very remarkable Sheffield steel industry, which he describes and analyses through ethnographic methods. While a century ago cutlery from Sheffield was in use across the globe, the city today is dominated by big shopping centers, new leisure developments, and other facilities of the service sector, with the industry and its staff being socially and spatially marginalized. Mollona's monograph is based on the author's fieldwork as a worker for two steel companies, Morris Ltd. and Unsor Ltd., whose staff's working conditions, community life, and self-perceptions form the core of the study. This is skillfully related to broader economic and social trends and combined with class analysis and a critical engagement with current anthropological, sociological, and economic theories.

The book is divided into two main parts. "Artisans" provides an analysis of Morris Ltd., a small machine shop working with equipment stemming from the Victorian era, whose workers see themselves as artisans and craftsmen. "Proletarians," then, concentrates on Unsor Ltd., a large steel factory whose workers consider themselves proletarians. However, within the two companies there are further subdivisions, mainly between workers on "hot" and "cold" steel processes. The "hot" workers experience individual, uncodified, and ephemeral social-labor relations, whereas the "cold" workers are characterized by quantified, standardized, fragmented, and depersonalized knowledge relationships. Workers' consciousness consequently varies considerably according to their age, personal background, and location in the production process.

From these observations the author derives the argument that concurrent forms of class relations reflect the uneven form of capitalist development, which challenges all scholarly and ideological notions of linear processes. Even more, the privatizations and deregulations of the Thatcher government actually resulted in the return of Victorian forms of despotically ruled small-shop production, informalization, casualization, and subcontracting, turning workers into make-believe self-employed who often live in quite precarious circumstances. The social and cultural consequences of this tendency are carefully studied on the example of community life in the suburb of Endcliffe in the East End of Sheffield, where Morris Ltd. was based. The suburb is characterized by informal and often illegal economies, individualized poverty, kinship solidarity that not infrequently includes the exploitation of family members, face-to-face structures on the labor and welfare markets, as well as a dislike of official welfare institutions. Postmodernity thus becomes the spitting image of premodern and early industrial societies.

The workers' conditions at Morris Ltd. and Unsor Ltd. are sufficiently contextualized with historical information about the overall development of economic and social policies in the UK, the shift from nationalization to privatization, the evolution and demolition of the welfare state, technological change, medicalization of manual labor as well as changing trade union strategies. This allows the author not only to generalize his observations and identify overall trends but also to critically relate them to theoretical approaches. Unfortunately, recent findings of labor historians who increasingly turn towards "global labor history" and dedicate their research to the study of different formal and informal labor regimes across the globe are hardly made use of.

Mollona rejects both the notion of a "bourgeoisification" of industrial-core wage-workers and the thesis that the working class has been nearly wiped out since the 1980s by Western neoconservative governments' direct and relentless attacks. Instead he contends that Margaret Thatcher's deindustrialization policy increased the working class's fragmentation in ways that were difficult for the workers to comprehend and combat. As a consequence, workers still are often unaware of and in denial about their class condition.

On a macro level, contemporary Anglo-Saxon capitalism, very much like its Victorian predecessor, is characterized by a dual industrial system based on the coupling of transnational and petty capitalism. This system combines the skilled, flexible, and informal labor of small subcontractors with the deskilled, mechanized, and informal alienated labor processes of global corporations. Thus, Mollona claims that his findings reflect a broader capitalist trend: "It reflects a new despotic regime in which capital reproduces itself through the whole of people's lives so that coercion and consent—dependency and entrepreneurship, freedom and self-discipline and working-class poverty and middle-class aspirations—are hardly distinguishable" (177).

Regretting that the UK's political and academic community is allegedly "still trapped in the intellectual tradition of communitarianism, postmodernism and the 'retreat from class' thesis laid out by [Anthony] Giddens" (167–168), Mollona aims at reintegrating a formal Marxist sociological approach into political anthropology that would then have the potential of becoming a "central tool of class analysis" in the context of the "new despotic regime" in Anglo-Saxon capitalism: "By showing the human forces animating the 'laws' of capital and combining a critique of 'the capitalist subject' with a celebration of the lives of labour, it can open new spaces of self-realization both at work and in society" (177).

On balance, *Made in Sheffield* combines an excellent description of the experience of Thatcherism and post-Thatcherism on the micro level with far-reaching theoretical reflections about the general trends of Anglo-Saxon capitalism and their implications for the working class. Written towards the end of the New Labour project and published at a time when the British postindustrial economic model was deemed by many to be broken, the monograph's findings and theses become even more of note today in view of the neo-Thatcherist restoration of ideology-driven deregulation and relentless attacks against both the welfare state and the working people in the UK.