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DEMOCRATIC COMMUNIQUÉ

Book Review

Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age. By Nicole Cohen. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016, 323p. (hardback) ISBN 9780773547964. US List \$24.00.

Nicole S. Cohen's *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age* offers a much-needed intervention into the conventional wisdom that Canadian freelance journalism is just one more industry to be "freed" from the "bondage" of standardized practices of respect, fair contracts, and protected intellectual property. In contradistinction to the utopic "microentrepreneur" neoliberal narrative, the benefits that traditionally attracted writers to freelancing—control over working conditions, flexibility, and freedom—are now the capitalist shackles that have reduced most freelancing to Victorian-era piecework. In linking the concept of precariousness to Karl Marx's reserve army of labor, Pierre Bourdieu argued that the "existence of a large reserve army" makes all those who labor "feel that they are in no way irreplaceable" (in Jonna and Foster 2016, 1). As a means to discover why writers in Canada (and beyond) are still attracted to such work, Cohen takes a binocular vision to the deteriorating labor conditions of these media writers and their collective response to the increasing precarity. *Writers' Rights* would be of insight for both Canadian and U.S. scholars and students of journalism, journalism history, labor studies, and critical political economy, if not union organizers themselves.

Writers' Rights opens with two perplexing riddles: one, why a proliferation of media platforms in our digital age has fostered a diminution of economically viable opportunities for freelance journalists in English-speaking Canada, and by extension, for freelance writers across the globe; and two, why efforts at collectivization have been so unsuccessful for this group. As her analysis demonstrates, this Gordian knot requires pulling at a chorus of loose threads, not to succeed at untying it, but simply to reveal its hopelessly knotty core. Using a combination of empirical data (via qualitative survey), labor process theory, critical cultural studies, sociology and critical political economic analysis, Cohen uncovers the blind spot that anchors many freelance writers to the career despite its proximity to the gig economy: notions of freelance writing as prestigious intellectual work that rests at the core of

Canadian culture. And she highlights that these same idealizations about the entrepreneurial spirit of freelance is also what stymies collective bargaining.

Cohen's introduction and first chapter plot a course through the tensions that characterize freelancers' experiences. She offers a hopeful vision of freelancers' developing collective strategies, including guilds, agencies, unions, or an organizational combination of these. But, relying on a foundation of labor process theory, she also begins to theorize how the production of labor in an era of media conglomeration under contemporary capitalism is organized to undermine writers' collectivization efforts. Despite their sense of being a "creative class" unto themselves, freelancers' work is ultimately "volatile and project-based" (38). As a group, they are no less a part of the increasingly normalized precariousness that plagues all wage labor.

In the second and third chapters, Cohen outlines the legacy of proletarianization that has historically plagued journalistic labor. She underscores that the history of freelance journalists in Canada has yet to be written; thus, tracing the struggles of these journalists requires studying the history of all writers—from those in 16th century England to those in 20th century newsrooms in Canada and the United States—because what binds them is a "history of underpayment and insecurity" (57). Even more noteworthy to Cohen in chapter three are the social and economic relationships between the traditional reputation of Canadian magazines and the current fate of freelancers. Central to fostering the "development of a distinctive Canadian culture," these magazines have been imbued with a sense of status (60). By locating magazines (and newspapers) as "economically-frail" cultural endeavors, she argues, they are perceptibly removed "from the realm of commodity production" (111). Thus, it was magazines that established the dominant discourse on freelance writing as a "labor of love" or a proving ground for new writers, rather than as a form of wage work.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Cohen bares the tangled roots of what keeps freelancers in the industry despite social, economic, and technological pressures that work in concert to degrade the pay, prestige, and the all-important autonomy freelance work could potentially offer. In chapter four, she finds that the insularity and craft-mentality of freelance work predisposes writers to taking an individualized approach to managing wage and job security, which can only lead to improvement for a select few. And the chronic hustle of finding work, networking, and maintaining a brand-identity, among other activities, keeps freelancers siloed in the "social factory" that reaches ever deeper into their personal lives. Critically, she points out, "[M]any of the characteristics of freelance writing reflect the characteristics of an idealized neoliberal worker...solely responsible for her own output, productivity, training, and discipline" (131).

In chapter five, Cohen demonstrates the level of insecurity freelancers face under the pressure of the "attention economy" of digital journalism (153). Here, the freelancer is the buyer and popular

news sites like the Huffington Post or Forbes sell to writers the “exposure” of publishing through these well-known titles. By selling free work as “exposure,” publishers have reduced writers’ work to simply “content” that is judged by its performance, evacuating any notion of writing as a craft (160). Cohen astutely makes the connection that devaluing freelance work devalues all journalism; and emergent digital technologies facilitate the extension and depth of the commodification of media culture, “further transforming journalism into a substance valued solely for its ability to link advertisers to consumers” (161). Importantly, more fearless freelancers have themselves taken to using these online platforms to render visible such exploitative practices, which Cohen posits can “counter the competitiveness and individualization fostered among freelancers” (163).

In chapter six, Cohen probes more deeply into the forces that have put a chokehold on freelancers’ efforts to collectively bargain. Among these she finds are: policies that cast organized self-employed professionals as anti-competitive; arguments that journalists would cease to be objective if organized; and assumptions that unions’ traditional association with wage workers might undermine the perceived professionalism of journalism (174). It is here that Cohen deftly draws the reader to the crux of these rationales, which is also central to freelancers’ own resistance to collectivization: adherence to the doctrine of professionalism. However, in Cohen’s estimation, labor process theory and historical research clarify that freelancers resemble wage workers more than they do the small business entrepreneurs they hope to emulate. For much of chapter six, Cohen documents the variety of writers’ movements, organizations, and groups that have existed in both Canada and the U.S. since the early twentieth century and the mixed results they have achieved for their members. The greatest challenge to each is the ability to build a significant membership base that would foster the ability to protect and improve conditions for freelancers.

Chapter seven of *Writers’ Rights*, delves into the different forms that organizing has taken for freelance writers, including the Professional Writers Association of Canada (PWAC), the Canadian Freelance Union (CFU), the Canadian Writers Group (CWG), and the Canadian Media Guild (CMG). Even though none of these entities has been able to attract a critical mass of freelancers to its ranks, Cohen finds the experimental alliance between CWG (an author agency) and CMG (union) promising, chiefly because the CMG is a 6,000-member local of the Canadian branch of the Communication Workers of America (600,000 members). Any CWG freelancer can join the CMG in order to access benefit plans and other union resources; the resources of particular interest are the improvements in contracts the alliance would be able to negotiate (219). Following from Vincent Mosco, Cohen sees the convergence of media platforms as an opportunity for freelancers to collectively strike back against publishers and editors who seek to devalue freelance work.

Cohen's conclusion brings together critical political economy and critical cultural studies to stress that the broad structural conditions that underpin all labor—even that of journalists and freelance journalists—should be the subject of debate and reform. “Decommodifying journalism will require decommodifying all labour,” she argues, not the other way around. A basic universal income would ameliorate conditions for all freelancers, but is even more critical for women and people of color, whose work is often not featured in the “pages of the most prestigious, high-paying magazines,” where men's writing dominates (239). A basic income, Cohen argues, would not only begin to equalize wage labor, but would allow freelancers to tackle issues of more substance, especially the investigative reporting that even eludes staff journalists, but is key to an informed citizenry.

Without the possibility for collective representation and protection, the current milieu in which freelancers struggle means that publishers can benefit from a “pattern of labour oversupply and wage depression” that acts as a “soft form of control” over freelancers' writing and their rights to their own work (87, 46). *Writers' Rights* offers a meticulous analysis on the state of freelance journalists' labor and the possibilities open to them for avoiding the “precarity penalty” (232). In fact, as Cohen cogently concludes, bringing journalists into the fold of unions, particularly if those unions were radicalized toward long-term change, might be another necessary step toward moving policy frameworks closer to a basic income for everyone.

References

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