

The Warehouse

Workers and Robots at Amazon

Alessandro Delfanti

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Relentless

It takes just 15 minutes to drive from my hometown of Piacenza to the oldest and biggest Amazon warehouse in Italy. Taking the A21 highway westbound, the warehouse appears on the right just before the exit for the small town of Castel San Giovanni. Codenamed MXP5, the massive building is low in height but spans nearly 400 meters. Rectangles in different shades of gray decorate the exterior, capped by an orange line near the top—the same orange used for the smiling arrow that underlines the massive Amazon logo identifying the warehouse to passing motorists. Only a parking lot for the workers' cars and a designated yard for the continuous flux of trucks separate the complex from the busy highway. For years I used to drive by this place, back and forth, every day, to my workplace down the road in Stradella, before I moved to a new job and a new country. But back then the warehouse was not there. It appeared during an explosion of growth in the early 2010s, when an entire stretch of countryside in the Po Valley was reinvented as a sprawling logistics hub—strategically positioned to serve major markets like Milan and Turin. Hundreds of hectares of prime farmland are now covered by the warehouses of IKEA, H&M, FedEx, Zalando, and probably every other major global distributor you might think to name. Amazon's facility opened in 2011, and new companies edge in every year, bringing with them more concrete, more roads, more trucks, more workers, and more spotlight for the once forgettable Piacenza.

If I pulled over and got on my phone, it would take me mere seconds to open Amazon.it and order something. The place spits out hundreds of thousands of orders per day, probably moving up to a million items when running at full steam. For years its speed set the bar for Amazon warehouses all over Europe. This means a total of more than 3,000 workers organized in shifts, 24/7, under this roof. My order would not go straight to them, though. It would move at the speed of light

from my phone to one of Amazon's data centers, maybe the one in Ireland, where it would be analyzed by the company's algorithms in its cloud computing servers. If I were ordering something to my childhood home and the product, say a new notebook, was stored and available in MXP5, the algorithm would ask the workers inside the warehouse to retrieve, pack, and ship it. If I were a Prime subscriber, the item would be in my mailbox tomorrow. Most people encounter Amazon exactly in that way: as consumers. The very name it gives to its warehouses, "fulfillment center" or "FC," signals that the goal of the company is to fulfill people's desires, or to create new desires that can be fulfilled by e-commerce. Thanks to its ability to take care of everything, from sourcing products to last-mile delivery, Amazon is becoming synonymous with the market, pretty much in the same way in which Facebook tried to become the internet. Buy more stuff, faster, more conveniently, cheaper, no need to look elsewhere.

According to theories of consumption, it is desire that motivates us to purchase commodities. This desire can be thought of as either an artificial thing forced upon us by marketing forces, or as reflecting a need to define ourselves through the things we buy.¹ Not to mention much more mundane needs: as demonstrated during the coronavirus pandemic, the consumption of food, clothing, or pharmaceuticals cannot be taken for granted. Our ability to consume is contingent and depends on complex global supply chains that can break down. Wherever our desire for consumption comes from, it must be fulfilled. But who we are as consumers cannot be separated from the society we are entangled in, a society where Amazon works to position itself as a global fulfillment monopoly, to overcome the distance between its 300 million customers and the commodities they need and desire. Most of these customers are introduced to Amazon as a safe, convenient, and, in some areas, even necessary way to access the commodities they desire—the mainstay of today's one-click instant consumerism.

But this is not how I was introduced to the company. Before I ever ordered anything from Amazon, I had read countless articles in *Libertà*, the local Piacenza newspaper, heard untold stories from people who work there—including old classmates and friends—and discussed it ad nauseum at dinner parties and political meetings alike. Amazon is a constant presence in the territories surrounding its warehouses, from billboards advertising job openings and signs directing

truck drivers, to local news articles featuring both mayors who praise the creation of jobs and environmental groups who denounce the polluting effects of increased traffic. In Piacenza, Amazon became a heavy presence before the area was even an eligible destination for delivery. Boxes from MXP5 went out to the more modern and busier metropolis of Milan, while we got the jobs, the downward wages and working conditions, and the environmental degradation. Eventually, we got some national—and even international—attention as well. Who would have thought that a strike at a warehouse in Castel San Giovanni, or anything else happening near Piacenza for that matter, would make it into *The Washington Post*, the American mainstream newspaper owned by Jeff Bezos himself: Amazon’s founder, former CEO, and biggest shareholder?

But that’s just what happened. On November 24, 2017, hundreds of MXP5 workers went on strike. Unions had entered the company just a few months earlier. From the perspective of those in Piacenza, this looked like an unremarkable affair—yet another strike at a local logistics facility, an industry whose workers are in a perennial state of ebullition that at times erupts into open revolt. But from a zoomed-out perspective, this was more novel: MXP5 employees were among the first in the world to attack Amazon’s empire head-on. In the intervening years, organizing and strikes at Amazon have grown, both in Europe and North America, making it a hotbed of struggles—a symbol of both capital’s unchecked power and worker resistance. The first MXP5 strike coincided with Black Friday, the day when many retail stores offer sales and discounts, and a big day for Amazon in several countries, Italy included. On the very same day, Bezos’ fortune attained a whopping \$100 billion (US), making him the wealthiest person on Earth, at least at the time. Plenty of reasons for Piacenza to achieve momentary global fame.

UNBOXING AMAZON

In the opening lines of *Capital*, Karl Marx famously wrote that: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as ‘an immense collection of commodities.’”² Yet, of course, a collection of commodities is nothing without their movement from production to the market. With the warehouse, it is the immense *circu-*

lation of commodities that produces wealth. After all, if the warehouse is where commodities are accumulated, they must be moved around if they are to fulfill consumers' desire. They must be kept in flow, restless. If the stuff were stuck inside the warehouse, this would spell death for commodities and their value.

But commodities do not circulate by themselves. What lies in between your home delivery and Bezos' bottom line is a series of technological systems that organize the company's massive workforce, speed up work, and contribute to making jobs more precarious and unstable. It is human labor that keeps the commodities moving, in concert with and under the direction of a complex infrastructure of both software and machinery. When we receive a box from Amazon, we do not always think of all the planes and trucks, all the data centers, all the human labor that went into delivering it. We do not always think of workers like Giulia. When I first spoke with her, Giulia had recently lost her job at MXP5 after a few months as a seasonal worker. Hired through a staffing agency, her contract ended after the winter delivery peak and was not renewed. As we met in a coffee shop not far from the warehouse, she opened our conversation by explaining the mismatch she felt as both an Amazon customer and a former FC worker. Like many others, she had walked in both shoes:

If you think about it, those who [order from Amazon] don't know who's behind it, behind that package you receive at home. The only time I ordered something from Amazon, I received one of the boxes I used to pack. I hung it to the wall and added a caption: "lest I forget."

Giulia told me a story that I could have heard from any of the dozens of Amazon workers I've spoken with. Amazon's e-commerce operations rely on around 200 fulfillment centers globally. Each spans hundreds of thousands of square meters and employs several thousand workers known in corporate lingo as "associates," and informally as "Amazonians." These "modest-looking buildings," as an Amazon commercial describes the FCs, are often highly visible when you drive past them. But what happens inside or around them is often less clear. The warehouse's walls are not transparent, and capital always does its best to make workers, the human side of its operations, invisible. The fact of

automation, for instance, allows corporations to present what they do as the near-magical work of machines. But the removal of the labor of humans from the consumer's view has not made it disappear. In a book on the dark side of the digital revolution, Italian philosopher Roberto Ciccarelli reminded us that labor is “the faculty that feeds circuits and automatisms [...], the capacity that allows the production of a commodity and its value.” In other words, it is labor alone that allows a firm like Amazon to exist.³ And unlike commodities and machines, labor is something that no capitalist can fully own. It is workers' labor power that can be purchased, controlled, and disciplined, but its full potential can only be possessed by workers. Amazon does its best to purchase labor power. With 1.2 million employees as of early 2021, it is one of the biggest private corporations in the world, trailing only behind Walmart with its over 2 million workers. This number is even more astounding when you learn that just ten years earlier, in 2011, Amazon had only 30,000 workers. These workers are located across the globe. A home base in Seattle forms the center of a massive global network of offices, campuses, data centers and warehouses—like MXP5—that span North America, Europe, and Asia.

Making sense of the company is a titanic task, and not simply because of its size. Bezos often says that Amazon has a “willingness to be misunderstood.” That is to say, the company does not care if competitors, investors—or the general public—are unable to comprehend its strategies.⁴ Amazon directs this same party line at workers, unions, and public institutions alike. For instance, in an unprecedented move after the 2017 strike, MXP5's management no-showed a meeting called by a representative of the national government to discuss a possible agreement between unions and the company. They did not offer a rationale. “We do not expect to be understood,” is what they told union representatives as justification for shunning the meeting. Perhaps, then, we must go to the workers themselves and rely on their knowledge to help us unbox the reality behind the smiling arrow logo.

MXP5 associates represent but a small chunk of the company's global workforce, which is dispersed throughout its network of warehouses and other distribution centers. When they meet fellow Amazonians from other FCs, it is mostly at national or international union meetings, or in the online forums where thousands of workers gather to discuss their experiences, share tips for survival, and, often,

vent against the company. Nevertheless, their experiences are generalizable in a way that might not be true of other companies. Amazon is highly centralized in the design and operations of its warehouses, and thus the human costs accrued by the company's accumulation of wealth and power speak to a global system of exploitation—a system that one can find in many different local contexts, from a suburb in America to a de-industrialized European metropolis. Local differences matter, but workers in Castel San Giovanni encounter the same technology, workplace culture, and political strategies faced by Amazon employees in other countries and continents. They struggle against the same power structure and organization of labor. Everywhere, FC work is based on the use of Amazon's innovative technology and, at the same time, on archaic forms of despotism reminiscent of the factories of yore. The flashy corporate image familiar to customers is in fact only one side of the coin. Amazon incarnates the disruptive power of technology and the excesses of modern consumerism, and at the same time beckons a new degradation of work. Amazon capitalism, as the economic system underpinning the company has been called, is rapaciously predatory of workers, other businesses, and the environment.⁵ It can also be resisted.

AMAZON DOESN'T STOP

Amazon prides itself on being relentless. This is a recurring word in Amazon's corporate history and it appears over and over again in Bezos' speeches and annual letters to investors. In fact, Bezos once envisioned naming the company Relentless, and if you type in "relentless.com" in your browser, it will redirect you to amazon.com: the company still owns the domain. Amazon maintains that it remains relentless because, in Bezos' words, "it's still day 1." That is, one of the biggest corporations in the world still thinks of itself as a start-up company that needs to move fast and never settle for the status quo. And indeed the 24/7, always-on, crunch-time obsessed, burnout-prone culture that characterizes tech start-ups is rampant throughout the company, and is even impressed upon the company's warehouse workers. The technologies, management techniques, and cultural elements that impose productivity onto start-up coders in Silicon Valley campuses are increasingly applied to more and more sectors of the workforce. Bezos

has repeatedly emphasized his focus on making Amazon a lasting influence in the evolution of consumption, but he rarely describes how his company is also influencing the broad practice of work at a deep register. Amazon has the ability to reshape the fabric of our societies, redefine the role of corporate power, and shape the future of work to the advantage of capital.

The company has expanded dramatically from its rather unassuming origins. Bezos founded it in 1994 as an online bookstore, planning to take advantage of the new opportunities opened up by the commercial internet. His e-commerce ambitions were broader in scope, but books were a perfect test: brick-and-mortar bookstores are constrained by space and can carry thousands of titles, at best—a fraction of what you can squeeze into a warehouse. Books are also homogeneous in shape and weight and thus easy to store, and come with a well-established coding system. Initially, the company operated out of a single warehouse near Seattle. But the idea had always been much bigger. Bezos planned to digitize a business model that had been around for a bit: mail-order catalogs, a product of 19th-century modernity that created massive companies such as Sears in the US, Postalmarket in Italy, or Eaton Co. in Canada. By 1998, Amazon was already selling music and DVDs, to which it soon added home goods, toys, and video games. In the early 2000s it expanded to health and personal care products, gourmet foods, and sporting and outdoor goods. In 2005 it launched Amazon Prime, a subscription program that gives access to special services such as free one-day delivery—today, it is available in hundreds of cities worldwide. Amazon now sells everything, from cookies to electronics, bicycles and home appliances. In the US, it has grown to occupy about half of the entire e-commerce market, according to recent estimates—the quota is even higher in countries that lack competition. In Italy, for example, Amazon's market share reaches 60%.

But Amazon has become much more than just an e-commerce company. And e-commerce is not where the company's profits come from. This is an important, if difficult, reality to grasp. Indeed, Amazon's size and internal differentiation make it difficult to capture it in its entirety. Amazon Web Services (AWS) is the biggest provider of web space and computational power in the world. Services like Netflix, Pinterest, Airbnb, and Uber are run on these servers. Amazon also develops a number of commercial software technologies, such as its

“1-Click” online payment service. The service Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) allows businesses to hire remotely located “crowdworkers” to perform tasks that computers can’t perform without human intervention, such as identifying content in a picture, tagging and cleaning data, or writing product descriptions. The platform breaks down these tasks and outsources them to a distributed workforce—anyone with a computer connected to the internet can sign up and work for AMT.⁶ With its Rekognition program, Amazon sells surveillance technology to governments. It produces digital gadgets such as the Kindle e-reader and the Fire tablet. Its Echo smart-home device runs Alexa, a virtual assistant underpinned by natural language processing algorithms. Amazon also owns and operates a streaming platform, Prime Video, and has become a major producer of films and TV series through its Amazon Studios. It owns a chain of automated convenience stores called Amazon Go. Its many more subsidiaries range from game streaming platform Twitch to organic supermarket chain Whole Foods.

Amazon Web Services is the real money maker. Each dollar Amazon spends operating AWS generates ten times more profit than a dollar spent on its other ventures. That is to say, while the FC and services like Prime turnover more money than AWS, those services are not always profitable. AWS, on the other hand, generates a massive stream of money, enabling the company to expand its flagship e-commerce operation by relentlessly building new warehouses across the globe, steadily securing near-monopolistic positions in more and more national markets. Only Chinese e-commerce behemoths Alibaba and Tencent approach Amazon’s size.

Amazon applies its concentrated economic power toward technological change too. This simple fact means that it has the ability to deeply influence the way in which we work. Not only in its warehouses, but throughout our societies. The reason is simple: from the widespread robotization of its FCs to its deployment of algorithms to monitor workers and extract valuable data from their labor, Amazon is relentless in increasing the rate of technological innovation in its warehouses. And this means other companies adopt similar technologies in their attempt to catch up with Amazon and uproot the company from its dominant position in the market. New technologies, more sophisticated, more pervasive. More workers and more precarity, too.

Relentless, also, is the circulation of billions of commodities, which move across the globe to converge on the warehouse, where they rest for a few hours or weeks on its shelves, and then depart again to reach new destinations. Their movement must be seamless, fast, efficient. Frictionless, as economists would put it. Workers are the most problematic factor in this equation, and thus must be carefully controlled and governed lest they generate friction, slowing down or even stopping the movement of commodities.⁷ Amazon is at the forefront of digital capitalism, which means it excels in the corporate use of digital technology to maximize the private accumulation of power and money. But because workers play such a crucial role, Amazon is also at the forefront of a global offensive against labor. This offensive is fueled by the technology Amazon designs and deploys in the warehouse: Amazon has made precise choices to use technology in service of its obsession for control, for speed, and of course for money. Its technological infrastructure is aimed at workers' exploitation rather than emancipation.

The brutal reality of work at Amazon is no mystery. Even Amnesty International has issued a report about the poor conditions encountered by workers in Amazon warehouses, concluding that it is time for the company to protect the rights of its workers—for example, by respecting their right to unionize.⁸ The undercover investigation of an Amazon fulfillment center has practically become a full-fledged genre for journalists in both Europe and North America. And Amazon serves as shorthand for the awfulness of contemporary work in a rich tapestry of internet memes. In Italy, *Lercio* (an Italian sarcastic news organization roughly equivalent to *The Beaverton* in Canada or *The Onion* in the US) once titled an article: “Amazon employee boxes and ships herself home to get a few minutes of break.” These jokes do not come out of nowhere. Bezos himself has acknowledged repeatedly that “it’s not easy to work here,”⁹ emphasizing that sacrifice is a part of what’s requested of Amazon employees, from the warehouse all the way up to the shiny executive offices in Seattle.

Many books have been written about Amazon. Often they are those ubiquitous business manuals found in airport bookstores, targeted at corporate executives—or wannabe corporate executives (one provides a blank page at the end of each chapter for “Reflections and ideas to consider for your company.”¹⁰) The authors, who are typically business

journalists, consultants, or business school professors, tend to present Bezos as a contemporary hero of entrepreneurship and innovation—but even they cannot avoid mentioning his temper and disdain for workers. The white-collar workforce is subject to his ire, too, we are told. Business journalist Brad Stone, the author of one of the best of these books, reveals that Bezos is well known for screaming at employees in public or firing them in the elevator. Employees interviewed by Stone described the company's former CEO as cruel and lacking empathy, as someone who treats workers as expendable resources.¹¹ A 2015 *New York Times* article also unveiled a cut-throat and punishing workplace culture in Amazon's offices, a place where employees routinely cry at their desks and where metrics are used to evaluate and pit employees against each other. Amazonians told the journalist they felt like they had to leave the company because of health crises and pregnancies.¹² These stories, mind you, were about engineers and executives.

Now imagine warehouse workers. They work under physically punishing rhythms, dictated by distant corporate algorithms which organize their labor. A pervasive surveillance system monitors their productivity at every step. The valuable information generated by their labor is captured and monopolized by Amazon's software systems, and then fed to the machines that run the warehouse and organize fulfillment processes. Employee turnover is high, by design, as the warehouse quickly discards and replaces workers worn out by the dictated pace. Precarity is promoted and exploited by management, enabling it to adjust the size of the workforce to meet the always fluctuating demand of the market. Amazon's management techniques take explicit and subtle forms. Supervisors interface with warehouse workers both directly and with the aid of digital technology. Meanwhile, the company cultivates a workplace culture aimed at convincing workers that warehouse work is special and fun. A combination that can be unsettling. And this is just the warm-up: Amazon has plans for a future FC that is even more technology-intensive, where its domination over the workforce is even stricter, and the labor process is increasingly automated.

The coronavirus crisis has enhanced the visibility of these dynamics, as Amazon increased its workforce and e-commerce quickly grew to become one of the dominant areas of the retail industry. In a sense

this is nothing new, as corporations often exploit and benefit from systemic crises—Naomi Klein called it “disaster capitalism.”¹³ But few have been as successful at this as Amazon. Indeed, Amazon owes much of its success to maneuvers during three global crises. First, it survived the burst of the dot-com bubble in 2000, which put many competitors out of business and allowed the company to move out of its niche market position and into the center of the digital economy. The bubble had been created by massive influxes of venture capital into companies that focused their operations on the internet. Many were early e-commerce companies, such as the pet supplies retailer Pets.com. While others went belly up as the bubble burst, Amazon flourished, having managed to secure a sufficient pool of capital to allow it to float above the waves of bankruptcy and insolvency. In the fourth quarter of 2001, when hundreds of internet-based companies were folding, it turned its first profit, paying its owners one cent per share. Second, in the aftermath of the great recession of 2008, Amazon grew its workforce by tapping into a newly formed mass of workers made precarious by unemployment, debt, and the crumbling of labor rights that followed the crisis in Europe and North America. This new reserve army allowed the company to increase its global workforce from 20,000 in 2008 to over 100,000 in 2013, with a growth rate above 30% per year and up to 66% in 2011.

Finally, the coronavirus pandemic of 2020–2021 served as the ultimate perfect crisis for Amazon, as it had the dual effect of both multiplying the market for e-commerce and web services, and throwing millions of workers into unemployment. Amazon hired hundreds of thousands of new warehouse workers to cope with the bump in sales caused by the pandemic. In early 2021, it had grown its global workforce by 62% from 2019, and had increased its revenues from \$280 in 2019 to \$380 billion in 2020. Bezos’ personal wealth when he resigned from his CEO position in early 2021 approached \$200 billion: one of the vastest fortunes ever accumulated by a single human being in the history of human civilization. Amazon was perfectly positioned for the new reality brought about by the virus. The sharp increase in internet usage by those confined to their homes meant Amazon profited any time demand increased for a company that relied on its AWS servers. For instance, the teleconferencing company Zoom—an AWS client—multiplied its average daily users with offices and schools moving to

online meetings and lectures. Most importantly, widespread lockdowns and fears of contagion boosted online shopping orders across the globe, especially in countries where Amazon was already the dominant player in the e-commerce market.

Overnight, Amazon workers became essential. In March 2020, at the height of the first wave of the pandemic in COVID-19-ridden Northern Italy, a courier shot a cell phone video while delivering for Amazon. It quickly went viral over messaging app WhatsApp: “Amazon doesn’t stop,” the worker can be heard saying through his medical-grade face mask, “don’t worry, you will receive your damn Hello Kitty phone cover on time. Fuck you!”

Worker rage against Amazon consumers is understandable in this case. But what about rage against the company itself? Amazon’s revenue increased so vastly over the course of 2020 that at the end of the year Bezos could have personally given every single Amazon employee \$100,000 and still maintained his personal wealth at its pre-COVID-19 level.¹⁴ The pandemic hit MXP5 hard, generating more trouble, more sickness, more fear for the workers. Piacenza was one of the early epicenters of the global pandemic, with 1,000 deaths in two months in a small province with a population under 300,000, and the warehouse soon recorded cases of virus infection. Nevertheless, during the first lockdown, when the sound of ambulances roaming deserted roads was many citizens’ primary contact with the outside world, MXP5 was working 24/7 to keep up with the increased demand. But Amazon’s record year did not translate into major improvements for the workers. Thanks to union presence and to the 2017 strike, MXP5 hires remain among the small slice of fortunate Amazon FC workers who have managed to negotiate improvements, for instance, obtaining a substantial pay bump for night shifts. During the pandemic, like other Amazon workers across the globe, they received a minor salary increase (or “pandemic pay”) for a few months and a small cash bonus. But in spring 2020, MXP5 employees had to mobilize again, this time with a long strike, to win basic things like the provision of adequate personal protection equipment.

In the meantime, Amazon was just making more money. In the video game *You are Jeff Bezos*, players are tasked with spending his wealth, which is no easy task. Just 10% of Bezos’ wealth allows you to double every Amazon employee’s salary. What about the remaining

90%? For instance, you can end homelessness in the United States (for a mere \$20 billion), or even pay your personal taxes (a hefty \$57.72 billion).¹⁵ The company's accumulation of capital is even more incredible. Valued at \$1.65 trillion dollars, Amazon is worth more than the GDP of rich countries like Australia or Canada, and not far off from Italy's \$2 trillion. Barring antitrust legislation, the company is projected to grow even bigger. This beast, to quote Dante's *Inferno*, "can never sate her greedy will; when she has fed, she's hungrier than ever."¹⁶

AN OUTPOST OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM

Piacenza does not appear in this story only because it's my hometown. The city has found itself simultaneously at the center and at the margins of global networks of the trade before. In the late 16th and early 17th century, Piacenza was chosen by the all-powerful Genoese bankers to host their quarterly fairs. Soon enough, "the relentless heart [...] of the entire Western economy beat here at Piacenza," as put by French historian of modernity Fernand Braudel.¹⁷ These fairs were not tumultuous street festivals, but rather meetings where a few businessmen from all of Europe exchanged what we would now call financial instruments: letters of credit, debts, and remittances. This was a major episode in the fortunes of the Genoese bankers, who by then were funding the Habsburg after the royal house had defaulted, bankrupting the Fuggers, the German banking family, in the process. It was also a major episode in the history of capitalism: economist Giovanni Arrighi called the rise of finance under the Genoese bankers "the first systemic cycle of accumulation."¹⁸ Piacenza was chosen as the site of these fairs due to its convenient position at the crossroads between the Po river and the Via Aemilia. And probably also, added Braudel, for its "discretion."

Amazon must have had similar reasons in mind. Once again bustling and yet discreet and removed from the public eye, central and yet peripheral, today's Piacenza moves commodities rather than letters of credits. Finance is far away—in Milan, London, and New York. But Piacenza is still at the center of a network of highways and railroads that extends to urban centers in Northern Italy and beyond. It is now a major logistics hub right in the middle of the Po Valley, the relentless heart of a commodity flow that connects to other centers of the

global economy.¹⁹ Piacenza plays small cousin to other areas with a heavy Amazon presence, like the Inland Empire near Los Angeles, the Peel Region in the Greater Toronto Area, or El Prat de Llobregat near Barcelona. These metropolitan hinterlands, to use Phil Neel's term for the booming de-industrialized periphery, are spaces punctuated by logistics complexes, factories, sprawling suburban residential areas, residual rural areas and highways.²⁰ The warehouses, the relentless hearts of Amazon's e-commerce empire, are here, far from the downtown high-rises where commodities are designed or marketed.

MXP5 and many other warehouses in Amazon's network benefit from their proximity to wealthy urban markets. But their location is also meant to strategically exploit cheap labor forces, sometimes with startling implications. For instance, workers in Polish FCs may make as little as 3 euros per hour, and yet the packages they ship serve a German market where the same workers would make 11 euros per hour.²¹ In other cases, FCs are simply placed in areas where prospective workers are abundant. Many of the warehouses that service the Greater Toronto Area are located in Brampton, a rapidly growing town that is home to a major South Asian community. Thus it's these racialized folks who must bear the brunt of the environmental impact that comes with heavy traffic to and from warehouses, as well as the human impact of the COVID-19 outbreaks that have affected Amazon FCs in the area—crowded workplaces with limited access to sick pay. The company exploits and perpetuates the injustices that come with the geography of our cities and countries.

From the perspective of those working in MXP5 and other FCs, the company's Seattle headquarters feels distant and out of reach. So do the national offices in Milan, which veteran associate Peppino described to me as "an inexpugnable building full of security cameras and bodyguards," where suits who barely know what happens in the warehouse decide about workers' future. "You can't even get near them," he concluded. And yet Castel San Giovanni and Seattle are connected by a dense web of linkages that allow the circulation of things, people, data, and, of course, money. Because of its peripheral position, the warehouse needs an immense amount of infrastructure. Not only a hard infrastructure made of asphalt, concrete, and fiber, but also a "soft" infrastructure made of code and data. Taken together, these hard and soft infrastructures serve as what Ned Rossiter calls "logistical media":

technologies that coordinate and control the global movements logistics is based upon.²² They function as a logistics operating system that allows commodities to be moved efficiently. Bezos himself has said that the two cannot be disentangled. In his words, “fulfillment by Amazon is a set of web services API that turns [a] fulfillment center into a gigantic and sophisticated computer peripheral,” connected in turn to a broader logistics system.²³

This large operating system is relentlessly expanding. Beyond Seattle, the company has major headquarters and campuses in other cities, including Luxembourg in Europe and Hyderabad in India; offices and data centers in three continents; and a massive network of thousands of warehouses in Europe, North America, Asia, with planned expansions into South America. The FCs which serve as this operating system’s main peripherals are typically huge suburban warehouses staffed by workforces that vary between roughly 1,000 and 5,000 employees, depending on the size of the FC, the degree of robotization, and season. FCs are named after the main international airport in the area. For instance, the name of the Castel San Giovanni warehouse is MXP5 because MXP is the airport code for Malpensa, the main hub for the city of Milan. YYZ1, YYZ2, and so forth are the FCs around Toronto, whose main airport, Pearson, is labeled YYZ. SEA8 is near Seattle, BCN1 near Barcelona, EDI1 near Edinburgh, and so on. Fulfillment centers are further classified along other criteria. “Sortable” FCs store items that can be handled by workers, sometimes with a degree of robotization. “Non-sortable” FCs contain bigger commodities, such as bicycles or washing machines, and need to be equipped with specific robots.

Fulfillment centers must be positioned near the metropolitan areas where consumption is concentrated, but also placed far enough from the city center to facilitate expansive spaces and proximity to the airports and roads that allow commodities to be moved around. These hubs are complemented by thousands of smaller warehouses called sortation centers, receive centers, or delivery stations. The latter are positioned closer to customers—inside urban centers or in small cities where there is no FC. Guided by Amazon’s algorithms, these smaller peripherals receive inventory or packages from FCs and sort and deliver them to the final customer. The company doesn’t only add new FCs in service of geographic expansion. Each time it adds a new warehouse

or deposit, Amazon makes its network more dense and more flexible. MXP5, for instance, is now connected to a network of warehouses, including a robotized sortable FC near Rome (FCO1), a non-sortable FC near Vercelli (MXP3), and dozens of smaller warehouses that cover most major urban centers. Many more are being built.

Warehouses employ the majority of Amazon's global workforce, but the human and robotic engagements that move commodities inside FCs are not the only forms of labor that make possible the company's e-commerce operations. Many tasks are required to enable a customer to receive a commodity through an online order or a request to their Alexa. Thousands of engineers and coders work from Amazon's headquarters in downtown Seattle, and in other urban centers too, including Toronto and Milan. And they work alongside hundreds of employees focused on marketing, sales, management, and administration. Alongside the software code running in a global network of data centers filled with racks of computer processors, their labor underpins the functioning of Amazon's e-commerce websites and warehouse processes. And then there's delivery. In many countries, such as the US, UK, or Canada, this is outsourced to drivers employed through the company's gig economy app, Amazon Flex. Customers provide labor too, albeit unpaid, by allowing the company to use the data it generates by monitoring their behavior, for instance, when Alexa records their conversations or when they review products on Amazon.com or Amazon.it.²⁴ The complexity of such a division of labor is difficult to map out. Amazon itself relies on algorithms to coordinate this global chain, whose links are as geographically dispersed as they are interconnected by flows of data, money, and commodities.²⁵

Labor scholar Ursula Huws has defined this global division of labor "fractured." It involves not only core workers hired directly by a corporation—labor that Huws calls "inside the knot"—but also those brought in through outsourcing, working at a distance. And also many who move between these two categories.²⁶ While Bezos describes the FCs as peripherals, when it comes to labor they are more accurately recognized as the center of the entire company. When we think of work under digital capitalism, we tend to imagine urban, hyper-connected labor, regardless of whether it is coders in San Francisco, food delivery couriers in Berlin, or social media content moderators in Delhi. Piacenza is hardly on the map. But it is an example of the

suburban periphery where a new landscape of work is taking shape. This has been in development for a while now. In the 2000s, I was part of a precarious workers' collective that saw the suburban mall as a new outpost of contemporary capitalism. We thought that the mall's mix of consumerism on steroids for shoppers and full-time precarity for workers marked it as a crucial battleground in capital's offensive against labor, and thus crucial as a political target. Far from being what anthropologist Marc Augé had once called "non-places," we saw the mall, the airport, and the outsourced call center as the key sites of a new modernity.²⁷ Ground zero in the battle for labor.

As e-commerce becomes the dominant form of consumption, the warehouse supplants the mall. And so the warehouse becomes today's frontline of contemporary capitalism, both ideologically, organizationally, and politically. The current battle for the future of work is increasingly being fought in suburban warehouses. Amazon's warehouses in particular.

THE MYTH OF REDEMPTION

Besides the jobs, trucks and concrete, what Amazon brought to Piacenza and to the dozens of other suburban areas which host its warehouses is a myth: a promise of modernization, economic development, and even individual emancipation that stems from the "disruptive" nature of a company heavily based on the application of new technology to both consumption and work. It is a promise that assumes that the society in question is willing to entrust such ambitions to the gigantic multinational corporations that design, implement, and possess technology.

This myth of digital capitalism is based on a number of elements, including magical origins, heroes, and stories of redemption. Some are by now familiar to everyone: A couple of teenagers tinkering away in a garage can revolutionize or create from scratch an entire industry, generating billions in the process. The garage is an important component of this myth. Here we are not talking about the garages where MXP5 workers park their cars after a ten-hour shift in the warehouse, nor about the garages where Amazon Flex couriers store piles of boxes to be delivered. The innovation garage is the site where individuals unbounded by old habits and funded by venture capital turn simple ideas into marketable digital commodities. Nowhere does this myth

run deeper than in California: William Hewlett and David Packard's Palo Alto backyard shack is listed on the US National Register of Historic Places as "the birthplace of Silicon Valley," while the garage of Steve Jobs' parents' house (where he and Steve Wozniak built the first batch of Apple computers) has been recently designated as a "historical site" by the city of Los Altos. These garages have even been turned into informal museums and receive thousands of visitors a year, some even arriving with organized tour buses. For Californian historian Mario Biagioli, the garage has become an important rhetorical device in contemporary discourses, helping mythify the origins of contemporary innovation. Masculine innovation in particular, since the garage is a strictly male space.²⁸ Bezos himself started Amazon in a garage, albeit not in California—or so Amazon's origin myth goes: in 1994 he left his lucrative but dull Wall Street hedge fund job and wrote a business plan while driving cross-country from New York to Seattle, where he used his and his family's money to start the company.

The myth of the redemption and success of the hero entrepreneur trickles down to the warehouse, insofar as Amazon presents work to its employees through the frame of emancipation. The idea of redemption through work is nothing new. On the contrary, it is a damnation common to modern society. In the early 1960s, militant sociologist Romano Alquati pointed out that the culture of mid-20th-century Italian factories included the construction of a "myth" or "cult" of emancipation. In this instance, it was directed at the masses of migrant workers who, following World War II, moved from the rural south to the north of the country to find manufacturing work with the flagship companies of the Italian postwar economic boom, such as FIAT or Olivetti. Redemption from the backwardness of rural life was ensured not only by steady paychecks and the prospect of a pension at the end of the line, but also by participation in technologically advanced production processes—the assembly line of industrial capitalism. Amazon simply repeats and updates such promises. In Italy, for example, Amazon positions itself as an employee-focused company that brings stable employment back to a precarized labor market—a boon to a labor market hit by financial crises, lackluster growth, and lack of opportunities for retraining and upskilling. So Amazon continues a historical trajectory of Italian capitalism, but imports onto

the local context novel characteristics borrowed from the American digital corporation model.

Indeed, digital capitalism updates industrial capitalism's promise of economic and social emancipation with some novel elements of its own. Rather than simply swapping out the assembly line with the robot or the algorithm, the culture of digital capitalism mixes libertarian ideology with entrepreneurial elements. At the core of this myth lies a form of individualism. The combination of new information technologies with free-market dynamics enables emancipatory potential for the entrepreneur.²⁹ Furthermore, digital capitalist companies state that they exist to change the world, to make people happy, to create value for everyone and not just for investors—technological optimism at its apex.³⁰ After all, how could you deliver a bad outcome when your first principle is *don't be evil*, as Google's old slogan famously put it.

Amazon extends this old myth to all its workers. Indeed, in corporate documents, the company goes so far as to state that everyone is an “owner” at Amazon. While this is quite literal in the case of engineers and executives who receive shares of the company, it can only be understood at the level of mythology for warehouse workers. A figurative or spiritual commitment to the company's destiny. Managerial techniques used in the warehouse contribute to building this myth, as associates are asked to have fun at work and help Amazon *make history*, as one of its corporate slogans goes. The myth brings with it the idea that there is no alternative to digital capitalism. Only co-optation, or failure for those who can't keep up or won't adapt or submit.

Myths are not just old stories or false beliefs. They are ideas that help us make sense of the world. The myth of digital capitalism itself is not simply fictitious, but instead has very concrete effects. For Big Tech corporations, this myth projects a positive contribution to the world, helping to attract workers and investment, and boost corporate value on financial markets. But it has other concrete effects as well. In different areas of the world, and in different communities, the myth of redemption stemming from participation in high-tech production has impacted economies and cultures. Feminist media studies scholar Lisa Nakamura recounted how, in the 1970s, electronics manufacturers operating on Navajo land in New Mexico justified the employment of indigenous women. Labor in microchip production was presented as empowering for the crafty and docile Navajo women—assump-

tions derived from racist stereotyping.³¹ Italy is completely different from the Navajo Nation, and yet the idea that an imported version of American digital capitalism can be a force for collective modernization and individual emancipation is alive and well there too. Belief in this myth is evidenced in many different and even contrasting ways. Some bring resources, like the \$1.5 billion state-owned venture capital fund launched in 2020 by the Italian government to support start-up companies in the hope they will foster economic growth. Others sell resources off, like when mayors of small towns with high unemployment compete to attract the next Amazon FC, offering the company both farmland newly opened up for development and a local workforce ready to staff the warehouse. Over the years, the mayors of Castel San Giovanni have described the presence of MXP5 as a force of “development” and a source of “pride” for the town. This is not unique to Italy. American mayors are routinely quoted praising the arrival of a new Amazon facility as a “wonderful” or “monumental” thing for their town.³²

Amazon’s corporate slogans also hedge up its myth. Central is the valorization of disruption—the idea of a hero entrepreneur defeating the gods of the past. Some of the slogans (the so-called Leadership Principles) are repeated time and again and painted everywhere in the warehouse. While Aboutamazon.com, the company’s corporate website, describes them as “more than inspirational wall hangings,” that is exactly what they sound like. *Customer obsession* is perhaps the most famous one, a slogan that captures the strategic goal of focusing on customers’ needs: the rest (profits, power) will follow. It also signals that workers are by design an afterthought. Other slogans are even more predictable, like *Leaders are right a lot* or *Think big*.

Amazon’s myth trickles down to fulfillment centers like MXP5 in many ways. Amazon routinely conducts marketing operations aimed at finding new workers, not new customers. Billboards sporting smiling warehouse workers, recruitment events, and glowing articles commissioned by staffing agencies in the local newspaper are common sights in Piacenza, as in the areas surrounding other FCs. Social media multiplies the message. Amazon encourages employees to join its army of “ambassadors”—workers who plaster social media with positive stories about their job or videos in which they happily dance inside the warehouse. Like the FC’s walls, all these practices are soaked with the

Leadership Principles: at a recruitment event near Toronto, slogans, such as *Fulfilling the customer promise*, were projected as part of a slideshow filled with smiling arrow logos, accompanying a presentation of more mundane details like job descriptions or benefits. “Every Amazonian who wants to be a leader,” we were told, should focus on “customer obsession” and “never settle,” and let’s not forget that Amazonians “are right a lot.” The event wrapped up with free pizza.

AMAZON’S RESERVE ARMY

Top-down myths like those advanced by Amazon are not always accepted uncritically. Myths are malleable and plastic and can be challenged. The reality on the ground in Piacenza and elsewhere has led many to question Amazon’s promises of emancipation and modernization. Take, for example, Southern California’s Inland Empire. Today, Amazon employs about 20,000 workers in the region, and while unemployment has dropped since Amazon’s arrival, the share of people living in poverty has increased. In the US, journalists and scholars alike have reported how many Amazon workers rely on food stamps to make ends meet, and after the opening of a new fulfillment center, household incomes in the surrounding area tend to drop. In 2018, an Economic Policy Institute report titled *Unfulfilled promises* showed that most Amazon FCs create jobs in warehousing but do not lead to an overall growth in local private-sector employment, as many other jobs are lost.³³ The warehouse tends to monopolize employment: “It’s either Amazon or nothing” is a common sentiment expressed by FC workers globally. Even *The Economist*, based on data from the US, claimed that Amazon warehouses do not boost wages for workers in warehousing. Amazon, the magazine suggested, can pay less than its competitors because it employs young and inexperienced workers with minimal qualifications.³⁴

Back in Castel San Giovanni, MXP5’s influence is evident. It has become by far the most important employer in town, if not in the entire province. The warehouse’s doors are open to anyone who is looking for a job and is in possession of now-common skills: Marx would have called it the “reserve army” of capital. In his time, industries needed workers who could show up on time, follow the schedule, and respect the employer’s property—it took mass enrollment in

schools to train generations of workers to follow the rhythms of the factory rather than the cycles of farming. The basic skills required of today's workers have changed, becoming much more sophisticated. But modern education obliges. Huws describes the reserve army of the digital economy as “a plentiful supply of computer-literate workers who can be taken on when needed and dropped when they are no longer required.”³⁵ Local high schools in Piacenza offer certificates for logistics technicians, but those higher skills are not what the mass of associates need.

When I went through the selection process to become a seasonal associate through the local staffing agency office in Castel San Giovanni, I was asked to complete simple tests with about ten other applicants. Tasks involved the recognition of colors and shapes, and decisions about whether to share information with peers—there were fewer copies of the instructions than people in that room. I also went through a quick interview with two Adecco staff, but in other countries the process is even simpler. In Toronto, for instance, we were told there were no one-on-one interviews for fulfillment positions. All that was needed was the completion of an online personality test (many FC job ads mention a “positive attitude towards work” as an asset), a high school diploma, and, of course, the ability to lift heavy weights and stand or walk for 10–12 hours a day.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, it was not difficult for Amazon to find a plentiful supply of people to staff its newly opened warehouse, MXP1—the larger and more technologically advanced MXP5 would later be built on the other side of the highway. The crisis had generated a big local mass of unemployed people willing to take up a minimum-wage job. It is then that some of my friends started working there, people in their 30s or 40s who had lost their jobs during the crisis and certainly had a positive attitude about working in a multinational Big Tech corporation offering full-time contracts.

With the crisis also came relaxed labor laws, ready for Amazon to exploit. In fact, not all workers come to Amazon on equal terms: perhaps the biggest distinction is between the seasonal, temporary and the full-time workers. To fulfill the needs of a market that functions according to year-round cycles, Amazon adopts a dual employment model across its global network of FCs: it has a core group of workers employed directly by the company, and a flexible workforce provided

by staffing agencies, who can be hired en masse in the Fall and let go in January after the main seasonal peak of work has passed. The position of a full-time associate can be appealing, as it comes with the potential for desirable benefits. In Italy, for example, labor rights won in the 1960s ensure that workers hired directly by Amazon access a national contract that provides minimum wage and steady paychecks, contributions to the national pension fund, six weeks' vacation per year, and a bonus worth one month's salary in December. On top of that, they cannot be fired without cause. In other countries, like the United States, some of these benefits are lacking: there is little protection against job loss, and forget the extra salary in December. But Amazon offers benefits such as health insurance, two days of paid time off, and a \$15 per hour baseline salary.

On the contrary, the position of temporary workers is precarious to the max, as they are hired to cope with peaks around Prime Day or Christmas, when orders balloon. These workers have little to no job security. At MXP5, the provision of temp workers is outsourced to major multinational agencies such as Adecco and Manpower. In some countries, public institutions are involved too, as in the case of Germany's *Arbeitsamt* (Job Centers).³⁶ The contracts of these workers may last as little as weeks, and even the hours of work are uncertain. In Italy, their precarity is the result of political choices, such as the introduction of "MOG" contracts (*monte ore garantito*) that provide a baseline of guaranteed hours of work, say ten per week, for a minimum of one month. Workers can be asked to put in more time but only as decided by the company and with a 24-hour notice. Adecco itself markets this contract as providing "cost reduction with the ability to use labor power only when needed" and "great elasticity"—for firms, of course.³⁷

Workers, regardless of their employment status, are also able to take on substantial amounts of overtime, especially during seasonal peaks, when MXP5 runs at top speed. Piacenza is still a rural province, meaning seasonal workers have more historically loaded up hours in this way by working night shifts at one of the many local canned tomato factories, processing the product we still call "red gold." The produce needs to be processed 24/7 in July and August to keep up with ripening, making seasonal work plentiful. Today, logistics has eclipsed food processing when it comes to the number of people it employs, but it serves a similar role. Many of the young seasonal associates I met

while researching this book expressed appreciation for the money that comes with the countless overtime hours they put in at MXP5 around Prime Day or Christmas—and may still can tomato in the summer.

In both industries, the composition of the workforce has been shifting dramatically since the early 2010s. When Amazon first arrived in Piacenza, the wide majority of workers were people like me—white Italians born and bred in the region. But today's warehouse is staffed by a highly diverse population. Amazon has all but exhausted the local population drawn from both the infinite series of small towns that punctuate Piacenza and the nearby provinces of Pavia and Lodi. As I was told by Peppino, who lived in one such small town, “everyone from around here has worked at Amazon or in one of the other warehouses. Everyone.” And yet fulfillment requires bodies, a continuous flux of fresh bodies. During production peaks, the company cannot rely on the local workforce to sustain shifts that can require up to 3,000 workers, about twice as many as the full-time associates who work at the warehouse year-round. Every year, hundreds of thousands of temp workers are hired across the world. To catch up with its need for flexibility, the company has enlisted more workers in its reserve army by looking beyond Piacenza and incorporating migrant labor. During peak seasonal periods, unbranded “Amazon buses” run by temp agencies drive dozens of precarious workers from neighboring cities like Alessandria or Parma, and from suburban working-class neighborhoods in Milan (one hour away from MXP5) to work peak shifts.

In their early days, industrial capitalism and manufacturing relied upon labor from masses of assembly line workers. They both tended to machinery and engaged in manual labor, taking up processes that could not be mechanized. In the US, factories in the industrialized East coast and Midwest replenished this workforce from the continuous influx of migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, and the arrival of freed Blacks from the South. In Italy, factories in the industrialized north benefited from internal migrations, such as those of peasants from Southern regions in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today's workforce composition is different, but some dynamics overlap with the old days of industrial capitalism. For instance, Amazon's fast expansion means it needs to onboard masses of new workers every year. Its employees thus tend to be young: data from the US Census Bureau suggest that nearly half of its American ware-

house employees are under 35. These new younger workers tend to be members of racialized minorities. Data from the company shows that as of late 2020, Black and Latinx workers were overrepresented in Amazon's workforce, accounting respectively for 26% and 22% of the total. At about one-third of the total, white workers are underrepresented in the entire workforce, but the picture flips when it comes to management, where Amazon reports they occupy 56% of the positions. Power is also more commonly in the hands of men, who represent over 70% of Amazon's managers globally.³⁸ These numbers are consistent with the unequal distribution of power and money in contemporary racial and patriarchal capitalism, of which Amazon is a bastion.

The racial nature of Amazon labor is visible in Piacenza too. You only need to drive by the local Adecco chapter to see the young workers of color who wait on the sidewalk for their turn to apply for a job at MXP5. Many are migrating for the second or third time, as they relocate from other parts of the country to Piacenza for Amazon. More than once, friends from Southern or Central Italy who knew I was working on this book asked me for help finding housing for new MXP5 workers who were moving to the area. For instance, someone from Apulia in Southern Italy texted me to ask for help finding a home “for my friend from Senegal who is about to be hired by Amazon in Castel San Giovanni [...] He couldn't find any new job in Bari [...] so he spent a couple of months in Veneto as a farm worker and now got a job at Amazon!” Amazon FCs are such powerful attractors that it has become common to hear stories about workers living in their RVs in the warehouse's parking lot during seasonal peaks—and being let go in January once the peak is over.³⁹

This demographic push is not without consequences for local politics. Migrant workers from the Maghreb and young women form the backbone of SI Cobas, the militant union that organizes most warehouses in the local logistics industry, with the notable exception of MXP5. But while it can prove fruitful for some unions because it brings in new members ready to take up the fight, this demographic composition does not necessarily bode well with the white Italian inhabitants. Castel San Giovanni has one the highest migrant populations in the region, and also one of the most right-wing electorates. Here, in the 2019 European elections, the xenophobic far-right party Northern League, whose racist anti-immigrant rhetoric has a strong

grip on the precarized white working and middle class, received over 50% of the votes. The city used to be significantly more progressive, back when the Communist Party still ruled the Emilia-Romagna region where Piacenza is located. Before the Berlin Wall came down, a song from legendary 1980s punk/new wave band CCCP called Emilia “province of two empires,” its lifestyle influenced by America and its politics and economy connected to the Soviet Union. Now Amazon links the local economy to the US, and is threatening to deal the last blow to the remnants of the past era, such as the Ipercoop mega-malls federated with a different league, the League of Cooperatives.⁴⁰

After all, many things have changed since the fall of the Wall. The hyper-precarious MOG contract used by MXP5’s staffing agencies was introduced in tandem with a package of reforms that made it easier to fire even full-time employees. Known as the *Jobs Act*, the reform was sponsored by the fiercely anti-labor government of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, then secretary of the center-left Democratic Party, and Labor Minister Giuliano Poletti, the former President of the League of Cooperatives. It could have been worse: in Spain and the United Kingdom, workers have reported being hired through a zero-hour contract that asked them to be available without any guarantee that they would even have the opportunity to work and earn a wage. Amazon exploits and pushes the boundaries of local labor laws to fuel its global system of precarious work.

THE WAREHOUSE IS THE NEW FACTORY

Most of the workers who enter the gates of the gigantic fulfillment center every day have never worked in a factory. Nevertheless, many compare MXP5 to a sweatshop and describe the work as assembly line labor. Factory comparisons are what first came to mind for me as well, the first time I ventured to MXP5’s parking lot. The flow of dozens of young workers in and out the gates of the warehouse between shifts instantly reminded one of the masses of workers walking into a factory. This is simply a personal impression, albeit shared by many. But it also resonates with a broader reality: the Amazon warehouse does indeed incorporate and renew some of the dynamics of the industrial capitalism of yore. In this sense, Amazon continues and extends a process that began with the industrial revolution. But insofar as the warehouse

can be likened to a factory, it is a digital one, a fruit produced from the grafting of contemporary logics onto the trunk of industrial capitalism. In this tension between the old and the new, Amazon adds futuristic technology to its arsenal of tools for organizing labor, and at the same time reproduces old-fashioned ways of controlling the workforce. In a sense, it is the digital version of the tumultuous heyday of early industrial capitalism.

For German sociologist Moritz Altenried, we are witnessing the emergence of a digital factory where new forms of automation are responsible for inserting human labor in production processes based on machines, and of course for extracting value from it.⁴¹ At Amazon, the assembly line has been replaced by the algorithmic organization of the labor process, but both are used to standardize tasks, optimize processes, and reduce the time needed to train new workers. Robots and software systems intensify labor and make it more dangerous rather than facilitating it. Like in a factory, workers must be convinced and motivated, and to this end Amazon relies on a despotic and paternalistic workplace environment. But management is augmented by the use of digital surveillance to monitor labor and control workers' performance, and by organizational techniques built upon the myth of progress offered by the high-tech corporation. The clockwork has been replaced by the algorithm, but workers still have to synchronize with the rhythms of work dictated by machinery. Like early industrial capitalism, Amazon relies upon a highly precarious workforce that can be onboarded and discarded at will, and at times must be even bused in. But Amazon plans their obsolescence more carefully, as it encourages (or forces) workers to quit the warehouse in ever-faster cycles. In its projects for the warehouse of the future, Amazon imagines and desires a workplace where these trends are expanded and where human labor is even more subordinate to machines.

In a very different Italy from the one Amazon operates in today—the economically booming Italy of the early 1960s—Italian theorists of *operaismo* (workerism) such as Romano Alquati, Mario Tronti, and Raniero Panzieri set out to understand the transformations of labor and the evolving relations between workers, capital, and technology.⁴² My own work is indebted to that story. When I started researching labor in the logistics district around Piacenza I noticed many similarities to what this small group of intellectuals had identified in factories.

For instance, they thought that the industrial working class' central role in the evolution of capitalism was being overlooked, and thus its revolutionary potential was being overlooked as well. At the core of their analysis was capital's struggle for control. Capital, they thought, must control workers' natural unrest and mitigate their refusal to cooperate with corporate goals. For this reason, capital had a "plan," and technology was a key component, although the workerists saw labor, not capital, as the real engine of change. It's an old tension resurfacing in novel ways. Warehouse workers demand political changes: a reduction of flexibility and work rhythms; a just, healthy, and safe workplace; and a redistribution of the immense profits accumulated by Amazon; among other things. The corporation offers technological fixes, from wellness apps to AI-powered social distancing cameras, and union-busting techniques to prevent worker organizing.

Rhetoric about technology's potential to enact radical change, or the myth of digital capitalism's disruptive potential, fails to acknowledge that change in the workplace is a political process. None of this could be possible without the decades of precarization, diminishment of workers' power, expansion of globalization processes, and rise of the financial market that have made digital capitalism possible in the first place. Theorist Ruha Benjamin says that technology is but one of the factors that contribute to capital's ability to "innovate inequity."⁴³ The development and application of new technology is part of a broader project, at least under capitalist relations of production in which it is designed and used by capital itself. Amazon's technological power would be nothing without its economic and political power—and without its relentless drive to accumulate capital. It is also on a collision course with workers and their communities: how long will it be until Amazon's empire collapses?

MXP5 may be just a small cog in the company's transnational money-making machine, and yet like other fulfillment centers it can be used as a lens to understand the company and its role in the evolution of contemporary capitalism. Such knowledge can only be built in concert with workers, who alone experience the organization of labor under Amazon and imagine forms of resistance to it. They work in a single warehouse but are connected to the rest of the Amazon workforce through national and international worker-led organizations. They experience standardized processes and managerial techniques

imported from the United States, as Amazon replicates them everywhere in its global network of warehouses. They encounter other associates from around the world in online spaces where they can find each other and overcome the distance created by the transnational nature of the company and by managerial control inside each individual warehouse. Like the factory, the warehouse is not isolated from society. Quite the opposite: its logics are expanding to other spheres of our lives, other jobs and other industries. But to understand Amazon's impact on work and imagine an alternative to its plan, we must first descend into it, this new factory of digital capitalism, cross its gates, and meet those who work in the warehouse.

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