



Cornell University
ILR School

ILRReview

Volume 65 | Number 4

Article 13

11-26-2012

Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy by Kiran Mirchandani

Winifred Poster

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview>

Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy
by Kiran Mirchandani

Keywords
book review

Second, Doellgast outlines the implications of her findings for unions and policymakers in the final chapter. Although her calls for institutional reform to expand unions' roles in management decision-making at the workplace level and for more encompassing bargaining at the industry level would certainly go a long way in improving outcomes for workers at the bottom of the labor market, these proposals seem utopian, at least in the U.S. context. As Doellgast herself notes, despite continuing calls for reforms to U.S. labor law, attempts to do so have consistently failed. Given the difficulty encountered by the Employee Free Choice Act and the recent attacks on public sector collective bargaining in the United States, it is hard to imagine that legal reforms to provide workers with a greater say over management decisions and to extend collective agreements will be implemented in the foreseeable future. Instead, it would have been more fruitful to provide deeper discussion of the ways in which unions and other worker representatives could achieve these goals outside the legislative realm. In this regard, the author briefly mentions unions' efforts to partner with community organizations and to create global coordinated campaigns across supply chains, but this discussion makes up a small part of an already small section on possible union and policy responses.

Despite these minor drawbacks, *Disintegrating Democracy at Work* is a mandatory read for anyone interested in understanding the relationship between national institutions, management strategies, and worker outcomes in the expanding service sector. High-involvement employment models can provide benefits to both employers and employees, even in peripheral workplaces where there are considerable pressures to reduce costs and rationalize work. Adoption of these models in such workplaces, however, and the resulting improvements to job quality and labor market inequality depend on industrial relations institutions and labor strategies more generally.

Tashlin Lakhani
PhD Candidate
ILR School
Cornell University

Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy. By Kiran Mirchandani. Ithaca and London: ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2012. 192 pp. ISBN 987-0-8014-7767-6, \$23.95 (Paperback).

Indian call centers, which handle customer phone services for many U.S. companies, have become a curiosity for scholars and the public alike. They have appeared in films (*Slumdog Millionaire*), television shows (*Outsourced* on NBC, *30 Days* on Bravo, *Mumbai Calling* on BBC), and news programs (*Independent Lens* on PBS, *60 Minutes* on CBS), not to mention documentaries, plays, and fiction. Academic research on Indian call centers spans the fields of labor, management, economics, sociology, geography, development and international studies, gender and ethnic studies, linguistics, communication and media studies, art and photography, science and technology studies, health and medicine, and much more. Indeed, few types of labor have captured the attention of such a wide audience, across so many continents.

What strikes a chord are the many shocking and sometimes deeply personal developments in these workplaces: Why are *white-collar* jobs going overseas rather than the blue-collar factory jobs of previous eras? Can a person answer several hundred calls in a single shift and still sound pleasant? How can a country with such massive amounts of poverty, such as India, create office environments that are as lavish as those in Silicon Valley? Are these jobs oppressive or fun, privileged or exploitative? Why are Indian workers asked to adopt American behaviors for their work, and can they actually pull it off? *Phone Clones* delves into many of these compelling issues with artistry and skill.

Many U.S. and UK firms choose India as a destination for outsourcing because of its large, young, highly educated, English-speaking—and inexpensive—labor pool. With a workforce of 2.8 million, and contracts representing 50% (or more) of Fortune 500 firms, this industry has become a formidable presence in the global economy. Yet, by no means is it replacing the U.S. workforce: Indian call center employees make up a small fraction of those in the United States. Nonetheless, employment growth in the Indian industry is continuing to rise, while it

seems to be leveling off or declining in many industrialized countries such as the United States.

Kiran Mirchandani stepped into this world right when the industry was emerging. Over the period of 2002 to 2009, she conducted 100 interviews with workers in the cities of Delhi, Bangalore, and Pune (collectively representing the north, south, and west regions of India). She became one of the industry's earliest experts, publishing a well-cited series of journal articles and shorter pieces. In this monograph, she synthesizes this (nearly) decade-long research program.

In *Phone Clones*, Mirchandani provides one of the first in-depth, ethnographic studies that is both multisited and longitudinal, as well as one of the first rigorous analyses of the many fascinating issues surrounding identity. It goes beyond the surface story about Indian call centers, especially the euphoria about cost-savings, social uplifting, and creating a "flat world" as Thomas Friedman argues in *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2005). Mirchandani uncovers the more insidious side of the call center work experience—the control of emotion, time, race, gender, and nation. She presents an insightful analysis that recognizes power structures in the labor process, as well as how they are transformed.

The title of the book refers to the organizational process of making American "clones" out of Indian call center workers so that they become familiar to the customers with whom they talk in the United States. Mirchandani reveals a transformation in this process over time. Whereas workers were originally asked to mask their location by presenting themselves as American (or British), something I noted in my own research (e.g., Poster, "Who's on the line? Indian call center agents pose as Americans for U.S.-outsourced firms," 2007), they are now asked to display something more complex: an imagined ideal of a call center worker by those calling from the West. The analysis reveals how managers have shifted their strategy from stating a false identity to a more subtle and covert practice of enacting Americanness through recruitment and training, demeanor and scripting, office ambience and architectural decor. The concept of "authenticity work," offered in the Introduction, describes the seemingly contradictory tasks: for workers, in being Western and Indian at the same time; and for managers, in carrying out outsourcing for U.S. firms but also hiding it from U.S. consumers and responding to their backlash.

Phone Clones enters a field of research that is now solid and growing. For example, Aneesh places Indian call centers in the larger context of "virtual migration" in his book of the same title (2006), alongside the higher-skilled employees in software services. He shows that firms use transnational networks and information and communication technology to create an alternative form of global labor from that of physical migration. Noronha and D'Cruz have written in *Employee Identity in Indian Call Centres* about the role of professionalization as an organizational strategy for Indian call centers, in altering employees' concepts of themselves, thereby "enhancing their self-esteem" (2009, p. 72). Several monographs have focused on women workers, such as Tina Basi's *Women, Identity and India's Call Centre Industry* (2009) and Reena Patel's *Working the Night Shift* (2010), which illustrate the profound impact of this industry on women's lives outside of work as they navigate urban spaces. Shezad Nadeem has the most recent text, titled *Dead Ringers*, which explores the implications of cultural mimicry in making "dead ringers" out of Indian workers (2011). All of these books are excellent resources to the field.

Three things distinguish *Phone Clones* from this literature and make the book particularly enjoyable. First, Mirchandani provides a comprehensive summary of the many unique features of Indian call centers that have preoccupied a host of scholars over the last decade. She outlines the nascence of global service work and the rise of the outsourcing industry in India (Chapter 1); the complex training process centered around English language and American accents (Chapter 2); the role of ethnocentrism (Chapter 3); the hyper-routinized and Taylorized control of work, combined with narratives of professionalism and fun for distraction (Chapter 4); the intense demands of emotion work for customer phone service (Chapter 5); and the difficulties, especially for women, of working in an industry run almost entirely at night (Chapter 6). It is a mini-tour of the key dynamics in transnational outsourcing.

Second, Mirchandani documents *change* in the labor processes of Indian call centers. She notes, for instance, how managers have reduced the use of scripts (thus giving employees more discretion over their tasks), but at the same time, they have increased the monitoring of calls (thereby intensifying employee accountability). By looking at the transformations in

authenticity work, Mirchandani shows how national identity management (see Poster 2007, above) endures in different forms. She illustrates the capacity of firms to maintain these practices through re-invention. Furthermore, Mirchandani revisits her sites and her informants over time in her methodology, which provides an enriching understanding of workers' experiences. An employee interviewed in 2007 and again in 2009 reports that her salary has basically stayed the same, increasing only slightly. What these jobs will hold for workers in the long-term is a lingering question explored, for example, by Vira and James in "Building cross-sector careers in India's new service economy? Tracking former call centre agents in the national capital region" (2012) and by James and Vira in "Labour geographies of India's new service economy" (2012).

Third, and most important, what marks this book as unique is the intersectional perspective that considers gender, class, race, and nation in a holistic fashion. These themes run throughout the text. For instance, in Chapter 2 Mirchandani describes how class and regional background work together in these firms to construct employees from southern states of India and nonaffluent backgrounds as "deficient workers" (p. 36). Several chapters highlight the importance of race, ethnicity, and nation in the construction of these jobs. The politics of nationalism, "hate," and ethnocentrism in the backlash to outsourcing from the global north are examined in Chapter 3. The role of abuse by customers is outlined in Chapter 5, along with the way "customer prejudice as a legitimate expression of individual preference is characteristic of neoliberal racism" (p. 113). And while gender is noted in many places in the text, Mirchandani goes beyond the analysis of "women workers" to consider the gendering of work itself. She notes that even though men dominate this work in India, the tasks are feminized through their association with caring and servitude.

Phone Clones is, overall, a delight to read. It draws from a refreshing compilation of ethnographic materials, such as scribbles from workers' notes in training sessions, which are quite revealing of their internalization—and resistance against—the authenticity project. Mirchandani interweaves perspectives from diverse fields and intellectual traditions, engaging both theoretical and empirical sources, to provide a captivating adventure for the audience. This book will be valuable for the classroom, for scholarly research, and for the joy of reading.

Winifred R. Poster
School of Social Work
Washington University

Borrow: The American Way of Debt. By Louis Hyman. New York: Vintage Books, 2012. 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-307-74168-4, \$15 (Paperback).

Louis Hyman's lively new book, *Borrow: The American Way of Debt*, traces the emergence and eventual dominance of new forms of consumer credit from approximately 1920 to the present. *Borrow* follows closely on the heels of Hyman's more-academic *Debtor Nation*, published in 2011 by Harvard University Press. *Borrow* shifts Hyman's focus from the changing institutional structure of debt to Americans' perceptions about borrowing. This makes for an engaging book that bridges business and cultural history, describing how businessmen and regulators have approached debt and how individual borrowers have thought about it.

Hyman opens *Borrow* with the story of "Dick" and "Jane" Smith, who "flush with love and short on cash" take out a balloon mortgage only to find themselves unable to refinance when house values plummet (p. 3). The story reads as contemporary, but it occurred during 1932. The ensuing chapters strike a similarly foreboding tone as Hyman describes the unfolding of new forms of debt. A growing list of personal purchases could be financed by borrowing, from cars to houses to durable goods such as appliances, and eventually, almost everything. Installment plans and later rotating credit enabled retailers to tap into larger consumer bases, and the securitization of mortgages and eventually credit card debt, offered lenders access to new pools of capital. Financial instruments such as Collateralized Mortgage Obligations (CMOs) and Mortgage Participation Certificates (PCs) rendered personal debt tradable, connecting individual borrowers with high finance.