Lavoro, Tecnologia e Libertà. Tempo e spazio del lavoro nell'era dell'intelligenza artificiale. Anna Maria Ponzellini. Milano: Guerini Next, 2023. Pp. *166.*

by *Salvatore Cominu*[*]

The de-standardisation of workspaces and working hours, where standard refers to the 'norm' of industrial society, the eight-hour, five-day pattern distributed across factory shifts and nine-to-five office schedule, has gained momentum in recent years both from the development of technologies enabling remote interaction between people, places and objects, and from the implementation – accelerated by remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic – of alternative schedules and hybrid ways of performing work.

The eight contributions in this publication by Anna Ponzellini, a sociologist of work and a long-time researcher in the field of industrial relations and organization studies, are an open construction site on the changing relationships between technology, quality of work and the spatial and temporal structures of the workplace. The author takes a pragmatic approach to this line of research. To put it in Zuboff's terms, she is not particularly concerned with the 'puppet' (the characteristics of digital technologies) or the 'puppet master' (the power relations structured by platform capitalism): technological development does not in itself produce freedom *in* or *from* work, but it does increase the possibilities of deciding "*when* and *where* to work" (p. 10), beyond the "tyranny" of the time card that marks the boundaries between social life and spaces dedicated to production. This is the focus of the book, which combines advocacy (indeed, it calls for new balances between work and "the rest of life") and theoretical proposals (the aforementioned possibility of choice as a component of quality of work), also in light of the limited attention paid to this dimension

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even by approaches aimed at expanding job design towards broader social aspects (e.g. Morgeson and Humphrey, 2008).

In the second chapter, Ponzellini outlines, with regard to working time, three major periods in the history of industrial relations: the first, lasting a century and a half, marked by the struggle for the reduction of the working day and the achievement of standard hours; the second was characterized by the drive towards differentiated working hours; and the current one, defined by a polarization between underemployment and overworking, but also by the perception of "daily time that is never enough" (p. 52), a dynamic whose gendered dimension remains evident. Elsewhere in the volume (p. 151), she suggests that a transformation is underway comparable to the one that once led peasants and homeworkers to leave their homes and fields for factories and offices. This 'return to the future' results from multiple movements: on the one hand, firms seeking greater flexibility, of course, but also, on the other hand, the aspiration for new work-life balances expressed first by "subjects other than the standard worker" (women, but not only) and now by wide segments of the workforce.

The field in which Anna Ponzellini operates is defined by precise methodological positions, beginning with her explicit debt to the socio-technical systems approach and to the job design school, which structured her professional trajectory. She makes sparing use of broad social categories (focusing on professional groups and individuals rather than classes or strata) and of generalizations: "those who study work" (p. 9), she argues, must counter easy enthusiasm or dystopias -the usual companions of technological leaps - with the disenchanted gaze of the analyst, who "splits" the observation between productivity and quality of work, marking the insurmountable boundaries of organizational design. Finally, the volume gives careful attention to subjectivity and to the ways in which people shape their environment, as well as being shaped by it.

The contributions revisit texts published between 2018 and 2023; the chronological order allows the reader to appreciate a trajectory that, once the theoretical and political 'stakes' have been established, remains open to ramifications, new acquisitions, and partial reconsiderations. In Ponzellini's pragmatic realism, new technologies act as levers for more advanced work-life balances, but as the analysis unfolds, it progressively incorporates more critical issues. The first chapter, drawing on a 2018 text, attributes to digitization a superior ability to foster richer and more engaging forms of work. The third chapter examines the possibility that such technologies may be employed for control purposes bordering on surveillance or for *algorithmic management* schemes (Stark and Pais, 2020), all of which

require investigation in terms of their practical effects. In any case, digital technologies remain a resource for promoting closer integration between work and life: the volume describes some innovative patterns of work organization, with increased possibilities for choosing, depending on the case, shifts, schedules, and locations, or remote and hybrid options for office employees and industrial maintenance workers.

Ponzellini does not shy away from the problematic issues that emerged beyond the "Rubicon" of the pandemic, when theoretical reflection could finally engage with the empirical outcomes of mass remote working. The author focuses on three risks. The first concerns the 'organizational social capital', since workspaces are symbolic places where ideas and interactions accumulate, and their impoverishment, in addition to raising efficiency concerns, produce broader effects on *sociability* (Simmel, 1908). Second, the possible recourse to forms of neo-Taylorism, driven by the need to coordinate activities in the absence of the actual and latent relationships that define the *real organization* (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). Third, the 'collapse of boundaries' between home and office, a theme in which engagement with feminist critique becomes richer and more open to ambivalent perspectives. Ponzellini recognizes the risks of the 'colonization' of life's spaces and times by work, but does not consider a return to rigid separation desirable: indeed, this very mixing could make more visible «all the work necessary to live» (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 2009), both for the market and for social reproduction.

In my view, two 'lessons' emerge from this exploratory journey that are worth highlighting. The first is a call for regulatory restraint. At the end of the proposed path, the caution regarding potential regulatory levers to support greater freedom to self-determining workspaces and hours may appear somewhat disappointing. The author advocates an "innovation pact" (p. 149), in which, for example, an exchange between efficiency and a moderate reduction of working hours could be experimented with. She nevertheless maintains a distance from stringent regulations, while emphasizing the need for organizational innovation: we are engaged in a process of collective learning, and it is advisable (for scholars, social forces, and policy makers) to adopt an attitude of "experimenting, observing the impacts, and selecting the practices that work" (p. 150).

Second lesson: the importance of the subjective factor in the theoretical formalization of the concept of quality of work. This cannot, in fact, be separated from the 'extrinsic' dimensions concerning employment rules, material rewards - wages, as Bruno Manghi states in the introduction to the volume, remain "a measure of work in people's troubled journey" - and

symbolic recognition. However, if we acknowledge the multidimensional and 'mobile' nature of the markers of 'good work', we cannot overlook the evaluations of what individuals consider important for themselves and their peers. The interplay of individual and 'aggregate' behaviours - specific to certain professional or social groups - molecularly transforms the structure of work relations and, with it, their representations. The possibility of choosing working hours and workplaces can be recognized as a component of job quality, not on the basis of separate reflection, but in relation to micro-negotiations, the current difficulties of employers in imposing their own schedules, and the widespread drive towards new work-life balances. Perhaps this is why the author's initial aim of producing a "short manual of good organizational practice" has evolved into a "story" of the possible, albeit partial, liberation of work from certain constraints.

Anna Ponzellini, with her 'ground-level' observations based on case studies and qualitative interviews, captures many aspects of the transformation of working relationships that more systematic approaches fail to detect. A deeper exploration of certain themes, already present in the volume though not foregrounded, would likely enrich this perspective.

The first one, and perhaps most obvious, concerns collective action. In this volume, Ponzellini deliberately does not focus on her usual field of industrial relations. Nonetheless, it is useful to recall that, since lasting change is driven by the actions of "individuals", substantive improvements in working conditions for broader groups of workers have historically been achieved – in specific periods – thanks to their capacity to form coalitions. Otherwise, the benefits of freedom of choice will inevitably go to individuals with the most sought-after skills and to sectors covered by collective bargaining, where, not surprisingly, good practices tend to concentrate. While the book frequently refers to office work, digital devices are employed to organize (assist? monitor?) a far wider range of activities, including in low-skilled services. It is worth asking whether it is precisely in terms of spatial and temporal characteristics that the gap between high-quality and lower-quality jobs is widening.

One final issue concerns the relationship between quality of life inside and outside the 'walls' of the enterprise: does increased freedom of choice actually translate into better quality of life? On the one hand, this is also the result of a different distribution of other time: Ponzellini notes, in one passage, to the "upside-down world" of workers (men, but not only) who extend their working hours to escape reproductive and care work. On the other hand, the desirability of greater choice over workspaces and hours would likely need to be examined in conjunction with the transformations

that are intensifying the perception of time scarcity (Rosa, 2010) at all levels of social life.

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Cubed. A Secret History of the Workplace, by Nikil Saval. New York: Doubleday, 2014. Pp.352

by *Sara Recchi*[*]

With rigor and narrative flair, Nikil Saval reconstructs the long genealogy of office spaces and clerical labour, from the nineteenth-century counting houses to today's flexible and digitized workspaces. Written in a sharp and often ironic style, *Cubed* is a deeply interdisciplinary contribution. The book functions simultaneously as a history of architectural design, a cultural narrative of everyday office life, and an academic investigation into how capitalism has shaped—and been shaped by—white-collar work. By combining classical sociological references with insights from cinema and television, the author conceptualises the office as a symbol of American capitalism, engaging with themes that have long been central to organizational studies and the sociology of work. Acknowledging the explicit influence of C. Wright Mills's seminal *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951), Saval elucidates the mechanisms of alienation and control inherent in white-collar work, as well as the (often unfulfilled) promise of social mobility it entails. The author also explores the economic and cultural shifts that underpin post-industrial society, implicitly referencing seminal sociological interpretations (e.g., Bell, 1973; Sennett, 1998; Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). In the book, the evolution of office design itself serves as a lens through which Saval constructs his historical account of American cognitive capitalism. In this way, *Cubed* can be seen as an innovative contribution, demonstrating that the office—far from being a neutral space—has functioned as a key instrument in shaping specific values and organizational demands. Although not explicitly framed in these terms, Saval's work resonates with a broad body of organizational studies that emphasize the symbolic as well as the material role of office design, from

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Acker's (1990) reflections on gendered organizations to insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS), which highlight how material artifacts and physical environments shape workers' behaviours (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008).

The book is organised chronologically. The opening chapter traces the emergence of the clerical class and the late nineteenth-century counting houses: small, male-dominated workplaces that housed accountants, Initially, these professionals were regarded with suspicion in a society that was still based on manual and productive labour. With rapid industrialization, however, clerks gradually gained prestige. Saval illustrates this cultural shift through Melville's novel *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), where the main character embodies resistance to the growing bureaucratization and routinization of work.

The second chapter analyses the emergence of the modern workplace in the early twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1920, office work was increasingly regulated by Taylorism principles: technologies such as typewriters, telephones, and filing systems enabled greater specialization, while managerial strategies were developed to enhance efficiency and control over work. Workers' commitment was reinforced through the metaphors and symbolism of post-war industrial development. Architectural design mirrored these organizational logics: skyscrapers accommodated standardized open-plan offices for clerical staff alongside private offices for executives, materializing efficiency, hierarchy, and surveillance. This consolidation of clerical labour established the foundations of the modern capitalist work ethos, shaping both the prestige shift from blue- to white-collar workers and the institutionalization of work content and power relations central to contemporary capitalism.

In the third chapter, Saval turns to the massive influx of women into offices in the early twentieth century, drawing on novels such as Sinclair Lewis's The Job (1917). Women became an essential workforce, yet they were confined to low-paid, repetitive roles, such as typists, stenographers, and secretaries. These roles were considered "natural" for women, seen as cheap labour subordinated to male authority. Therefore, the office became a space in which stereotypes of servility and sexualisation were reinforced, leading to a gendered organisation of work (Acker, 1990). Saval further highlights how organizational dynamics and spatial arrangements were intertwined in shaping feminized roles, expectations, and behaviours, thereby disciplining women's participation in the labour market.

The fourth chapter examines the consolidation of the skyscraper as a symbol of mature capitalism. From the 1920s onwards, steel-and-glass

towers, which housed modular workspaces for employees alongside prestigious offices for executives, materialized organizational hierarchies. It was during this period that, drawing on Mills (1951), the term 'white-collar workers' was coined to denote a class of employees defined by bureaucratic routines, corporate loyalties, and conformity. However, following the Great Depression, architects such as Le Corbusier sought to integrate efficiency with worker well-being, laying the foundations for the open-plan office model that would later become dominant.

Chapter five examines the evolution of modern architectural style in the post-war workplace, a period marked by the expansion of large corporations and the ascendancy of the Human Relations School, which framed employee motivation and a sense of belonging as instruments of managerial strategy. Designers played a pivotal role in creating office environments featuring modern furnishings and communal spaces, intended to attenuate hierarchical distinctions. Drawing on Whyte's seminal *The Organisation Man* (1956), Saval highlights the emergence of a collective work ethic that fosters employees' well-being and consolidates corporate stability. This is what post-war critical sociologists defined as soft totalitarianism: the semblance of freedom concealing mechanisms aimed at disciplining, integrating and retaining the workforce.

The sixth chapter focuses on the 1960s and Robert Propst's *Action Office,* developed in response to the rise of "knowledge workers" (Drucker, 1962), white-collar employees whose expertise became increasingly specialised amid the structural and economic shifts of the post-industrial era (Bell, 1973). This context prompted the emergence of office designs intended to foster creativity, flexibility, and mobility, epitomized by the open-plan office. Boltanski and Chiapello's (1999) analysis of capitalism's capacity to turn critique to its advantage help us to explain the rationale behind this managerial and cultural shift: the rhetoric of flexibility and creativity, which promises autonomy, is used to hide labour discipline mechanisms.

This work ethos is analysed in the seventh chapter, where the author shows how Propst's *Action Office* was rapidly transformed into a cubicle in response to cost-efficiency and standardization demands. Originally conceived as an evolution of the Action Office, by the 1970s, Cubicles had become its negation. Mobile and flexible desks in shared workspaces are being replaced with closed desks designed to maximize workspace density. Therefore, the promise of autonomy was supplanted by a spatial logic prioritising productivity and efficiency. In this sense, cubicles exemplify the rationalisation and routinisation of white-collar work, which, as Braverman (1974) emphasises, becomes deeply entrenched in mature capitalism.

The last two chapters trace the transformations of the workplace since the 1990s. First, the rise of the new economy, dominated by dot-com firms reliant on the internet and telecommunications technologies, gave birth to the first generation of virtual offices. Silicon Valley companies epitomized these playful, horizontal, and informal office designs, which at first appeared to foster creativity and freedom to the new class of knowledge workers. However, Saval argues that these open, flexible, and informal workspaces played a key role in shaping white-collar work during the era of labour deregulation, fostering blurred work-life boundaries, longer working hours, and the expectation of total commitment to the firm. This trajectory aligns with Sennett's (1998) argument that flexibility undermines stable identities and biographical continuity. Finally, the concluding chapter, *The Office and its End,* interprets the recent evolution of work and office workplaces. After the dot-com crisis, the re-emergence of cubicles signalled renewed alienation and disillusionment, outcomes of ongoing processes of flexibilization and work casualisation, further intensified by digitalization. Since the 2000s, a cognitive precariat has emerged, encompassing freelancers and false self-employed professionals increasingly burdened with the responsibilities of self-entrepreneurship. New way of working, including home-based-work, have also expanded. In this context, workspaces become a central regulatory device. On the one hand, activity-based offices promote flexibility and mobility, reshaping the boundaries of presence, productivity, and control. On the other hand, Coworking spaces function as reterritorialized infrastructures of cognitive and mobile labour, where the promises of autonomy but also bottom-up collaboration between workers conceal intensified competition and the individualization of risk. In both cases, space not only reflects but actively co-produces the logics of neoliberal capitalism, in which the rhetoric of autonomy functions as a discursive device legitimizing the dismantling of standard employment and the normalization of occupational instability.

As the book summary clearly emphasises, Cubed stands out for its ability to connect the material history of offices with broader societal and capitalist transformations in the United States. It succeeds in demonstrating that the office is never merely a functional or neutral space, but rather a laboratory in which capitalist dynamics are enacted and reconfigured. The history of the office mirrors that of capitalism, from Taylorism to corporatism and from neoliberal flexibility to digital capitalism. The office has always embodied ambivalence, promising mobility, autonomy, and emancipation while simultaneously reproducing subordination, hierarchy, and alienation. Moreover, the book's strength also lies in its ability to connect architecture, cultural narratives, film, television, and sociological classics, making it

accessible to a wide audience while offering a valuable contribution to the academic debate on the transformation of work and workspaces. Cubed reminds us that, whether physical or virtual, the office continues to be a central device of contemporary capitalism: a space that simultaneously offers the promise of emancipation and the reality of subordination, and a prism through which we can understand not only the transformations of work, but also the contradictions of contemporary society.

Nevertheless, some limitations remain. The narrative is centred on the United States, leaving unexplored the diversity of office cultures in different national and institutional contexts. Furthermore, while Saval effectively reveals the disciplinary logics embedded in office design, he pays less attention to bottom-up forms of resistance or alternative workers' practices. A stronger focus on how workers contest and reshape office environments could have enriched the analysis further.

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