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> ICOR

**RESEARCH
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EMPOWERING CHANGEMAKERS FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

“BEYOND DESPOTIC CONTROL: ALIENATION AND CONSENT BY ‘LIBERATED’ WORKERS IN THE AMAZON WAREHOUSE”

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on Marx’s theory of alienation to investigate the role of consent under techno-economic despotism, a coercive regime of control combining algorithmic management and precarious employment. Our analysis of extensive narratives of workers of an Amazon warehouse in Poland shows that engagement in alienating work turns workers into deeply contradictory subjects, who are not only mortified but also, simultaneously, ‘liberated’. In line with Marx’s understanding of alienation as a condition harboring not only negativity but also novel potentiality, we show how Amazon workers’ deep estrangement from the work process, the handled commodities, social relations with other workers and themselves also entails, respectively, becoming owners over their labor power, consumers of commodities, universal human beings deserving respect, and citizens holding rights. Together, these four double-sided dimensions of alienation show how alienating wage work does not only mortify workers. It also disembeds them from traditional oppressive social relations, ‘liberating’ them as capitalistic subjects, albeit subordinated to capital. Our study advances current accounts of workers’ control in global warehousing by foregrounding how, even under techno-economic despotism, alienating work fosters the emergence of a capitalist subject consenting to its own exploitation. Marx’s double-edged notion of alienation under capitalism is essential, we argue, to theorize the complexity of control in warehousing and contemporary workplaces more broadly.

