

The Embodied Realities of Cognitive Work

Sareeta Amrute:
Encoding Race, Encoding Class. Indian IT workers in Berlin. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 268 pp.
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When thinking about the global software industry, what kind of images spring to mind? Do you picture Silicon Valley and hi-tech start-ups, for example? Or faceless corporations like Microsoft and Google? What both images have in common is the idea of immaterial goods being produced relatively free from the constraints of time, place, and embodied realities. Images aside, however, to what extent are the realities of the global software industry really free from embodied constraints?

According to Sareeta Amrute, Professor of Anthropology at

the University of Washington, the sociological literature on the “new” cognitive labour – whether it is conceptualized as knowledge work, immaterial labour, post-Fordism, or any of the other related concepts – shares the problem of imagining cognitive workers as “generalized individuals, an unmarked category of educated, middle-class knowledge experts without race and gender” (p. 27), thus obscuring the embodied realities of cognitive work. This critique is Amrute’s starting point in her book *Encoding Race, Encoding Class. Indian IT Workers in Berlin*, in which she analyses the work and leisure of Indian programmers in Berlin. At the very core of Amrute’s analysis lies the contradiction between the Indian programmers’ position as racialized migrants, and as middle-class subjects. Analysing the categories of social class and “race”/racialization together is still rather rare in social sciences, and thus such an approach is warmly welcome to the field.

Encoding Race, Encoding Class is an ethnographic study. Amrute – American-Indian herself – has followed a group of Indian programmers, working on temporary visas in corporate offices, during their working days (and nights) but, just as significantly, during their leisure time, socializing at home, in parks,

and at parties. Theoretically, Amrute draws most significantly on Marxist theorists such as Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Paolo Virno, but emphasizes the need to extend their analysis to encompass race and class. Rather than defining a fixed meaning for race in advance, Amrute defines her task as being to trace the local production of race, to “see where formulations of race as social process lead.”

The book is divided into two parts: *Encoding Race* constitutes the first part and *Encoding Class* the second. In the first part, *Encoding Race*, Amrute analyses the ambivalent position Indian programmers occupy in the German racialized hierarchies. On the one hand, they are seen as “good migrants” as opposed to the allegedly problematic ones, such as the Turkish guest workers, embodying skills, and cultural knowledge useful for the corporations. On the other hand, they represent a neoliberal threat to German jobs and the German lifestyle. The images of Indian programmers combine ideas of cheap labour and “natural” ability, or at least willingness, to engage in machine-like, repetitive coding work for long hours. In this context, the Indian programmers struggling with short-term contracts, glass ceilings, and visa and migration policies “must strategically de-

ploy the stereotype of the good Indian coder without allowing themselves to be reduced to being merely a cheap, fast and replaceable workforce” (p. 106).

In the second part, *Encoding Class*, the focus is on the process of establishing an identity of a middle-class Indian, on negotiating and experimenting with what middle-classness itself is and might be. While this process is analysed mainly through the experiences and narratives of the programmer-protagonists in Berlin, it is thoroughly contextualized with the historical background concerning the Indian “new” middle class and the significance of technology in the Indian national imagery. Such contextualization is all too commonly ignored in studies on migrants in Europe. Yet the historical Indian context is crucial to our understanding of how the pursuit of individual (middle class) achievement and the wish to contribute to the nation’s development align with the programmers’ diasporic coding work.

Unlike in the first part of the book, in *Encoding Class* much attention is paid to leisure time, consumption, friendships, family relationships, and competing loyalties in the lives of the programmers. Hence, the focus shifts from work to life around work. The concept

of *eros* (a term originally borrowed from Herbert Marcuse by Franco Berardi), or a vision of the good life, is important for Amrute in her analysis of the programmers’ leisure time and its relationship to their working life. According to Amrute, the leisure-time practices of the programmers are ways of exploring alternative middle-class lifestyles, and although they may often be conceptualized as preparation for work, they are simultaneously profoundly about seeking pleasure. Amrute argues against the simplistic idea of work colonizing leisure and defines *eros* as “part of a critical utopian project that is neither free of capitalist constraint nor completely within the control of workplace demands” (p. 149). According to Amrute, the relationship between work and leisure in the lives of the programmers is continuously reworked and reimagined, rather than being characterized by the triumph of work over leisure. In the precarious position that the Indian programmers in Berlin find themselves in, leisure is also a way to question the demands of the work.

Encoding Race, Encoding Class is recommended reading for all those interested in the sociology of work and in the relationship between work and leisure. It also provides a good example of read-

able, yet theoretically ambitious and convincing ethnographic research. Even more crucially, the book marks an important attempt to bring together the categories of race and social class in a study that can also be situated in the field of migration studies, and analyse them in a way that takes into consideration both the European and the Indian context. While migration studies are burgeoning, questions related to class seem to be largely overlooked in this literature, at least in the Finnish context. Attempts to bridge this gap will go a long way towards increasing our understanding of inequalities in the globalized world.

Marja Peltola