

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



**Katie Hindmarch-Watson, Serving a Wired World: London's Telecommunications Workers and the Making of an Information Capital (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020)**

Catherine McKercher

Volume 89, printemps 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090059ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0038>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

McKercher, C. (2022). Compte rendu de [Katie Hindmarch-Watson, *Serving a Wired World: London's Telecommunications Workers and the Making of an Information Capital* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 89, 344–346. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0038>

and in the theoretical framing of its argument, as well as its willingness to investigate, both empirically and theoretically, the means with which resistance can be effective in addressing the contradictions of the neoliberal project and its political support for corporate accumulation at the expense of workers' safety and health.

DAVID WALTERS  
Cardiff University

**Katie Hindmarch-Watson,**  
*Serving a Wired World: London's  
Telecommunications Workers and  
the Making of an Information Capital*  
(Oakland: University of California  
Press, 2020)

AMONG THE THOUSANDS who took part in the public celebrations of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 was a hand-picked corps of 100 teenage boys. Dressed in smart uniforms signifying they were in Her Majesty's service, carrying carbines on their shoulders, and marching in the close-order drill on the massive Horse Guards Parade, they looked like well-trained military cadets.

They were not. They were telegraph delivery boys, and they worked for the post office. Less than ten years earlier, in 1889, telegraph boys had attracted attention of a different sort. Police discovered that some of them were being given money for sex at a gay brothel on Cleveland Street frequented by aristocrats, including a personal assistant to the Prince of Wales. The ensuing scandal presented the boys as victims of corrupt aristocrats, but it also had the effect of cementing them in the 19th-century imagination as objects of homoerotic desire.

The General Post Office's (GPO) approach to managing the telegraph boys is one of the most fascinating aspects of Katie Hindmarch-Watson's 2020 book on Victorian-era British communications

workers. Covering the years between the nationalization of the telegraph in 1870 and the middle of World War I, and focusing mainly on telegraphy, the book explores how the prejudices and fears at the heart of Victorian society were reflected and refracted in the division of labour in the nascent telecommunications system.

Gender and class were the most significant fault lines in the telecommunications workforce, but others were at play too: rural versus urban; technical work versus work that relied on affect; the need for private communication versus the demands of communication over a public utility; age versus experience.

Hindmarch-Watson draws on a wide range of sources, but most heavily on the archives of BT (formerly British Telecom) and the Postal Museum (formerly the British Postal Museum and Archive). The book reflects the sources. It pays more attention to how the GPO managed its workforce than how its workforce resisted – or adapted to – being managed. It addresses trade unionization, but occasionally and sometimes even obliquely. Rather, her goal is to provide what she calls a “bodied labor” history, by which she means “the active negotiations between workers and the powers they are subject to.” (4) Those powers range from the personal to the political, cultural, social, sexual, economic, and, of course, the bureaucratic.

A goodly number of the bodies she studied were female, and Hindmarch-Watson describes in detail the contested position women held in the telegraph and telephone systems. When the telegraph was nationalized, the men who had been working for private companies hoped they would become government clerks – civil servants with all the perks that went along with that position. The men saw the growing number of women telegraphers the GPO hired as getting in the way of that ambition. They also saw women as objects

of sexual desire – their own or those of their customers. Management’s approach was to control the women. The pay was low, with starting salaries at one-third of those of the men. Only single women were allowed to work, and they were only allowed to work during the daytime, not at night. Male telegraphers, believing that women knew nothing about politics or business, handled the more important telegraph lines, including those going to the newspapers or government offices. Most women worked only for a few years until they married and had to abandon their jobs. At the same time, women’s affect – including their appearance and their accents – mattered more than those of the men. Front-desk workers and telephone operators were the face and voice of the telecommunications system, and the system was itself the embodiment of the social and political order.

However, compared to telegraph boys, female telecommunications workers were relatively easy to control, mainly because they worked under supervision and in offices. The boys – usually hired at the age of 14 and weeded out a few years later – had the run of the city. Their starting salaries were even lower than those of the women, though by the age of 17, senior telegraph boys could out-earn female telegraphists. A repeated complaint from GPO authorities was the need for “a better class” of boys. Especially after the Cleveland Street sex scandal, the GPO applied a number of management techniques to correct or improve the boys’ behaviour. These ranged from education and recreation programs to mandatory drill routines that pacifist critics saw as militarizing the boys. The natural progression for a telegraph boy who wanted to stay on with the GPO into adulthood was to become a postman, but again, the GPO enacted policies aimed at disciplining potentially unruly young workers. At one point, it ruled that telegraph boys

could become postmen only after a period of military service.

The stories of the various groups of workers are deeply researched and fascinating, but at times they get lost in Hindmarch-Watson’s larger project of studying all the forces that influenced “bodied labor” from the late Victorian Age through World War I. By attempting to cover so much ground, the book suffers from a kind of piling on. An epilogue that stands in the place of a final chapter takes up how three rebellious constituencies – feminists, Irish nationalists, and worker organizations in India as well as Britain – saw the GPO as manifesting the social and political order of Britain and sought, in a variety of ways, to undermine or dismantle it. All of these rebellious movements have been the subject of book-length treatments in their own right, but here they appear almost as afterthoughts, further broadening the discussion rather than bringing it back into focus.

Meanwhile, the Union of Post Office Workers – the result of a 1919 merger among three separate postal unions that had been founded between 1881 and 1890 – appears only once, three pages before the end of the book. This union, as the author notes, was the largest civil service union in the UK throughout most of the 20th century and continues to operate as the giant Communications Workers Union. In 1920, she writes one of its first acts was to go after the telegraph boys’ drill, arguing that it was militaristic and contrary to the general role of the post office. The union won that one, and many more struggles besides, though you will not find much discussion of that kind of struggle here. Hindmarch-Watson contends that while telecommunications workers pushed back against being seen as transparent conduits of information, “[t]heir corporeality was both their most valuable asset and their undoing” (2).

Thoughtful and engaging as this book is, its concentration on “bodied labour” tilts more heavily toward managing the bodies than toward the labour of resistance.

CATHERINE MCKERCHER  
Carleton University

**Nichola Khan, *Arc of the Journeyman: Afghan Migrants in England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020)**

DESPITE REPRESENTING one of the world’s largest refugee groups in the world, Afghan migrants remain an understudied population. Unfortunately, scholars of migration studies have paid little to zero attention to the everyday experiences of Afghan migrant communities. Therefore, much of the existing information about Afghan communities comes from the mass media and popular literature, which often associates Afghans with terrorism and religious extremism. However, *Arc of the Journeyman* by Nicola Khan attempts to fill this important gap in the literature.

The key aim of the book is to distance itself from the typical Orientalist stories of “Anglo-Afghan relations” that perpetuate the colonial myths of Afghan “traditionalism, obscurantism, and isolation.” (224) Instead, the book provides a humane depiction of Afghan refugees in England. It is based on extensive fieldwork and multiple qualitative methods such as life-history work, dream sharing, and historical, literacy, poetic, and imaginative research. It focuses on a group of Afghan male refugee taxi drivers whose families live as refugees in Pakistan. They come from the Pashtun ethnic group of Afghanistan who migrated to England as asylum seekers to seek economic mobility. According to the author, however, it can take up to ten years from the time they seek asylum and start their

taxi-driving careers to finally settle their families in England. The book provides a multidimensional narrative of this journey across five chapters.

In Chapter 1, the author reports on one of the significant aspects of this journey: demands for remittances from migrant men’s families in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The author argues that one of the fundamental reasons these men migrate is not just to experience individual mobility but to build family capital through remittances. Sending remittances is a coping mechanism for Afghan families whose lives are impacted by decades of war and poverty and thus have no other option but to rely on the labour of their migrant taxi-driver sons. The migrant sons bear the responsibility of remitting hundreds to over a thousand pounds per month. They work weekdays and weekend nights to meet this responsibility. Some men succeed, while others fail. Some men negotiate the amount of remittance, while others end up borrowing. Most migrant taxi drivers mainly remit money to their father, who traditionally exercises special authority over their son for a lifetime in Afghan culture. If they fail to remit, their father can neglect their families (i.e., wife and children).

As producers of remittances who work on weekends and most weekdays, the migrant taxi drivers live an isolated social life. As former asylum seekers who did not have favourable encounters with state bureaucracies, they avoid interaction with the local government. Moreover, they are racially abused by their taxi customers. Their occupation has also been racialized by members of the host society who protest that taxi driving has become “an immigrant business.” (63). Hence, they rely on friendships exclusively involving fellow Afghan male taxi drivers who pray, rest, and eat at halal restaurants together. Some weekdays, after spending