

The Conversational Firm: Rethinking Bureaucracy in the Age of Social Media. *By Catherine Turco*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 272 pp. Appendix, notes, references, index. Hardcover, \$37.00. ISBN: 978-0-231-17898-3.

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Reviewed by Casey Eilbert

Through rich ethnographic methods, Catherine Turco's *The Conversational Firm: Rethinking Bureaucracy in the Age of Social Media* embeds readers in TechCo, a pseudonym for a real-life company in the United States that provides social media services to other businesses. Its workplace model is posited as the antithesis of bureaucracy; the company rejects vertical hierarchies, centralized decision-making, and formal rules and guidelines. Emblematic of TechCo culture are its periodic "Hack Nights," which Turco describes in the opening pages of the book. At these events, mostly twentysomething employees fueled by beer and pizza puzzle over pressing company issues. Unlike in traditional companies, where decision-making is done privately at the top, TechCo's founders make employees aware of the company's problems and invite their input in resolving them.

For Turco, TechCo represents just one of many "postmodern" companies that have taken this form, which she dubs the "conversational firm." While in practice these companies are neither explicitly bureaucratic nor antibureaucratic, they are marked by a continuous dialogue between employees and company leadership. Turco attributes the proliferation of these types of workplaces to social media, through which employees (many of them millennials) and customers alike have come to expect open communication with companies and their leaders.

These findings come from Turco's ten-month ethnographic study of TechCo's practices. Across nine chapters, she describes the organization and culture of this novel "conversational firm" and what its policy of "radical transparency" looks like on the ground (p. 30). In virtual chat-rooms that resemble social media, executives share high-level, even confidential information with employees, who are encouraged to offer feedback whether positive or negative. The company has no formal hierarchy (as symbolized by the founders' refusal to create an "organization chart"), no human resources department, and only one policy: "Use good judgment." This is the only guidance applied to employees' personal social media use, where they are able to speak freely but with the awareness that they are always representing the company. TechCo's essence can be deciphered in the physical features of its office layout: employees of all levels work communally in a shared workspace, suggesting a lack of

hierarchy and allowing for easy communication, while also marked by chaos, discomfort, and surveillance.

Each of TechCo's efforts toward radical transparency has a tradeoff: the free exchange of ideas is not without self-censorship, nor does it translate to the wide distribution of decision-making authority. TechCo's lack of rules and hierarchy often leads to confusion, and the company's transparency makes it obvious when its professed ideals do not apply to all employees equally. But on the whole, Turco views the conversational firm positively. Though not entirely absent bureaucracy, TechCo is novel in that it maintains continuous dialogue with its workforce. The conversational firm is not flawless, but it is able to address challenges and to navigate through change and growth.

The book offers a nice balance between description and analysis; Turco has a light touch, guiding the reader through theory and argumentation while letting the ethnographic research speak for itself. And while the book highlights its contemporary relevance in its emphasis on social media, it also discusses issues that have long been important to scholars of work and capitalism. Turco offers readers a portrait of what postindustrial, white-collar work looks like in practice. She uses TechCo as a case study to explore the relationship between employer and employee control, individual and collective worker protest, and questions about what makes work free and meaningful. The historical scholarship applying these issues to the postmodern workplace is scarce; given this paucity, Turco offers some valuable insights as to the nature of contemporary work.

The book is foremost an organizational study and bears the marks and limitations of one. (Turco is a sociologist by training and on the faculty at MIT's Sloan School of Management.) It does not consider the historical trends (welfare capitalism or deindustrialization, for example) that might have given rise to modern work structures, instead attributing them to social media and the presence of millennials in the workforce. Moreover, the book focuses on a narrow conception of internal company culture and does not address its larger sociopolitical implications. Turco acknowledges that TechCo's executives are self-described "red-blooded capitalists" who pursue this organization simply because "it's good business" (p. 15). But the book does not discuss the consequences of the organizational structure they advance. There is little or no mention of TechCo's equal-opportunity policy (or lack thereof) or of its compensation, retirement, or healthcare benefits. Race is not mentioned at all in the nearly two-hundred-page study, nor is class a category of analysis. Gender is mentioned twice in brief, pertaining to women's lack of participation in company virtual chats and issues with inconsistent maternity policy. Turco's analysis might

have easily lent itself to questions of work-life balance and attendant inequities (for instance, she frequently mentions after-hours company events and dinners), but the book includes no such discussion.

Turco names the new “conversational firm” and gives readers some insight as to how it operates. The addition to our still-opaque understanding of the contemporary workplace is welcome; readers gain a sense of how employer-employee relations (and the tensions inherent in them) function in this increasingly popular corporate form. Without consideration of the material implications of this new organization—and what it means for workers’ well-being and for workplace equity—our understanding remains incomplete. More work will be necessary to understand the full significance of this new model of work that Turco sheds light on in *The Conversational Firm*.

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