

Book Review

Bridget Kenny (2018) *Retail Worker Politics, Race and Consumption in South Africa: Shelved in the Service Economy*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan. ISBN 9783319595518. xv+282 pages. Hardcover €115, eBook €95

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[In July of this year, the Global Labour Journal organised a panel of book review presentations at the International Sociological Association's World Congress of Sociology in Toronto, Canada. This review was first presented there – Editor.]

Retail Worker Politics, Race and Consumption in South Africa offers searing insight into the contested world of retail work and labour politics over the past century in South Africa. Drawing upon twenty years of ethnographic engagement, Bridget Kenny shows how retail sector workers' struggles for rights and dignity in the workplace have decisively shaped the terrain of political belonging in South Africa, despite sweeping transformations in the racial composition of the workforce, the contractual nature of work and employment, and the global organisation of the retail industry. Given the book's ambitious historical scope and research agenda, its contributions are manifold. In this review, I highlight the book's cutting-edge interventions in the context of burgeoning scholarship on precarious work and labour politics. I also elaborate how the study's rigorous method generates indispensable analysis of the "enduring emotive power of the labour relation as political terrain", as Kenny (p. 12) puts it, and its implications for understanding the everyday lives and political subjectivities of precaritised workers in contemporary South Africa.

Since the latter decades of the twentieth century neo-liberal counter-offensives and the global assault against workers, the changing nature of labour organisations and labour rights has compelled labour scholars to develop a new research agenda. In particular, scholars have devised a new set of questions to examine the persistence and proliferation of informal and precarious work across the Global South and North. They have also sought to understand the limits of existing labour laws and trade union organisations in protecting this institutionally vulnerable workforce. Notably, many scholars have directed attention to the factors and conditions that facilitate union revitalisation and change as well as the organisational forms and power resources that enable workers stripped of basic rights and leverage to challenge the proverbial race to the bottom. While these questions address seemingly urgent problems for workers and unions, Kenny argues that they rarely, if ever, encourage us to take a step back from the crises of the present in order to re-examine the efficacy of core analytic categories and assumptions guiding our analysis. This tendency towards ahistoricism, Kenny points out, has implications. Not only does it tend to reduce labour's troubles to strategic and instrumental dilemmas, but it also

impedes our ability to take stock of the deep conjunctural crises facing workers and labour politics today.

To shift the direction of the current research agenda, Kenny begins her study with a provocative question. “Why do retail worker politics *endure*”, she asks, at a time when the population of labouring people is shrinking, work itself is diminishing and many leading thinkers dismiss outright the ongoing relevance of labour for politics? Kenny responds by reminding us that work is much more than a labour or employment relation. Rather, she emphasises that work is, first and foremost, a *political relation*. Struggles over work are not only legally and discursively circumscribed, but they are also shaped by the mutually constitutive forces of race, gender, law and nation, continually redrawing the boundaries of who is and is not considered a “worker” with claims to rights, dignity and the benefits of political membership.

Affective investment in the term *abasenbenzi* (workers) is a case in point. Drawing upon Stuart Hall and his analysis of “histories of relations and meanings”, Kenny argues, “South African retail workers’ ongoing labour politics are constituted out of a longer history in which the collective political subject *abasebenzi* came to contestation over forms of political belonging” (p. 3). Kenny emphasises that the term *abasebenzi* does not stand outside of history. If during the apartheid period it mobilised excluded groups of black workers to successfully claim the rights and dignity afforded to white citizen workers, Kenny argues that in the post-apartheid period of global neo-liberalising capitalism, it operates on less stable political and material ground, idealised in labour law and the memories and sentiment of South Africa’s historic labour movement.

The book’s sharp theoretical interventions cannot be understood without foregrounding the study’s rigorous method and conjunctural analysis. Kenny highlights three interrelated arenas that have shaped how and under what conditions retail workplaces have operated as contradictory arenas of political struggle over the past century: retail spaces as discursively produced sites of nation and belonging; the role of labour law in shaping claims for rights and dignity; and the mutually constitutive dynamics of gender, race and class in shaping the contours of political belonging.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide essential context for understanding the discursive significance of retail spaces as sites of nation and belonging. Kenny details how, well before the first decades of institutionalised racial apartheid under the National Party, the glamorous shopping districts of Johannesburg’s city centre became synonymous with the political project of white nation-building. Through vivid stories of white consumer desire and white national belonging from the 1930s to the 1960s, these chapters elaborate how retail workplaces operated as contradictory sites of political recognition and affective investment for a new generation of white female shop workers. On the one hand, white female shop workers, recruited to work as a cheaper, feminised labour force, came to reject their secondary status by utilising labour unions and workplace strikes to secure key material and status gains. On the other hand, by policing the boundaries of wanted and unwanted racial encounters, these same female shop workers reinforced a hegemonic discourse that equated social respectability for white women with all white social spaces untainted by everyday bodily contact with blacks, whether as consumers or workers.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Kenny takes us to the changing world of retail workplaces during the 1970s and 1980s, as iconic retailers like OK Bazaars hired more and more black workers to staff their expanding hypermarkets across the country. In this context, it is not surprising to learn that white women exited the retail workforce *en masse* as newly hired black workers were incorporated into retail workplaces at lower wages and with weaker labour protections. In these chapters, Kenny lucidly describes the everyday practices of surveillance, harassment, policing and criminalisation that low-paid black retail workers were subjected to by white customers and

management alike. Workers vividly recount being accused of theft, poor work habits and mistreatment on a routine basis, despite amassing more skills and experience as retail workers and greater responsibility and respect as shop-floor supervisors. Yet, as was the case for the previous generation of white female shop workers, Kenny shows how the retail workplace became a crucial site of political contestation as black retail workers turned to labour unions and workplace strikes to assert their collective political identity as workers, and to demand the rights and recognition afforded to them as such. It is during this period of both intense shop-floor racialisation and union mobilisation that we see the formation of the explosive political subjectivity *abasebenzi* and the collective uplifting generated from the vibrant culture of movement solidarity shared with militant student protests and a rising Black Power movement.

Before elaborating how appeals to the law and the political subjectivity of *abasebenzi*, which were the driving force of black working-class militancy during the latter decades of the apartheid period, became a more fraught terrain of division and exclusion beginning in the 1990s, it is crucial to provide a brief summary of Chapter 4. In this chapter, Kenny skilfully outlines how the legal definition of “employee” as a “standard-bearer of rights” was continually reworked in the context of nearly a century of struggles over gender, race and precarity. One notable trend in this history is the way in which militant worker collective action, whether by female white shop workers or low-paid, racialised black workers, resulted in socially determined legal divisions that were then dismantled by the next generation of worker struggles demanding new lines of legal inclusion. For example, the struggles of black workers in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in labour law revisions that eliminated the subordination of black workers as “servants, natives, and labourers”, explains Kenny (p. 108). However, while changes in the law may have eradicated racialised traces of colonial domination and servitude, they have reproduced their effects in deeply masked and deracinated ways, through the creation of new employment forms such as casual work and labour-brokering.

Kenny’s astute and rigorous legal analysis is foundational for understanding the crisis of the present for the South African labour movement. As hypermarkets proliferated across the global retail landscape during the 1990s and 2000s, revolutionising modern retail as sites of accelerated capital accumulation and financialised capitalism, they generated a new set of contradictions for both workers and their collective organisation. In the contemporary period we see how the state and corporate retailers have portrayed big-box stores as new havens of political belonging, particularly for low-income black citizens who have been denied access to affordable and safe consumer products. We also see how unions have contributed to the legitimisation of casual work as an acceptable category of downgraded employment by treating it as an aberration from the idealised sphere of full-time, permanent unionised work. Ironically, Kenny finds that workers and unions continue to embrace the affective force of *abasebenzi* and its rich action repertoire to challenge the dismantling of work as a source of livelihood support and dignity, despite its manifold contradictions and exclusions. Chapter 7, in particular, reveals why such affective investments have such resonance for South African workers where “work” directly engenders the ongoing “becoming of persons”, as Kenny (p. 186) puts it, and its capacity to activate meaningful social relations with others. Kenny elaborates how the “praxis of providing” is a powerful sentiment that motivates people to continue to seek out work as a source of dignity, sociality and self-worth, despite the eroding structural and institutional foundations of work itself.

Chapter 8 wraps up this impressive historical account by bringing us to the complex workings of mega-global retailer Wal-Mart in South Africa. Kenny shows how battles over race and the ongoing harassment and criminalisation of black workers on the shop floor overlap with the persistence of divisive and exclusionary categories of casualised and contracted work. Wal-

Mart's mass commercialisation practices strip workers of the most basic ways to feel a sense of dignity and self-worth on the job. Despite this, affective attachment to the subjectivity *abasebenzi* endures, Kenny remarks. Precaritised retail workers demand the same rights and dignity as full-time, legally protected workers in lieu of devising alternative ways to improve the working conditions and livelihoods of the predominantly female, black casualised retail workforce.

As we confront the sobering realities of our present, Kenny's book leaves us with a key question about the stakes and the political horizons of labour politics forged during previous eras of struggle. How do workers get outside the fraught terrain of the law and its regulatory forces for creating the kinds of social and political ruptures that *abasebenzi* did in the 1980s? In other words, what other potential sites can outline and guarantee institutional protections for workers at a time of legally authorised precaritisation that can serve as a source of both material and political belonging? This vexed relation between worker politics and the law is not only relevant for South African workers but for workers around the world confronting similar dynamics.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JENNIFER JIHYE CHUN is Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at the University of California Los Angeles. She has published widely on the changing world of precarious work and labour politics, with a focus on the intersections of gender, race, class and migration in comparative and global perspective. She is the author of the book *Organizing at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States* (Cornell University Press, 2009). [Email: jj.chun@asianam.ucla.edu]