

Book Review

Anne Lisa Carstensen (2019) *Das Dispositiv¹ Moderne Sklavenarbeit. Umkämpfte Arbeitsverhältnisse in Brasilien [The Dispositive of Modern Slave Labour: Contested Employment in Brazil]*. Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag.
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Since the 1990s Brazil's position as an important geopolitical agent has been consolidated. On a political as well as an economic level, the largest of the Latin American states gained a crucial local as well as global position and Brazilian policy-makers emphasise the country's significance. This self-perception, based also on historical arguments, refers to a certain autonomy inside the Latin American context, but at the same time Brazilian politicians seek universal cooperation with various other regions and agents in the world (Birle, 2019: 335–337). Recently, however, this image has changed. Since 2014 the country has faced economic problems and political turmoil – for example, in the context of the controversial impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), the arrest of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, or the social and political polarisation due to the Jair Bolsonaro administration since 2019. Within this context of macropolitical and economic turbulence, Carstensen's study points at the topic of modern slavery as a form of unfree labour, which she interprets as an important feature in the current discourses about economic development and social policies, especially when it comes to human and workers' rights (p. 15). Due to Brazil's importance for the region, the study is of vital importance.

Carstensen divides the book – which was also her PhD project – into seven chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the topic and develops the research question. The goal Carstensen sets is to disentangle how modern slavery, as a form of unfree labour, affects power relations and creates resistance in different employment relations. The following chapter elaborates the method which is, as Carstensen points out, a dispositive analysis, coming from discourse analysis, and represents more a perspective than a static theoretical concept or analytical method. The case studies are then presented in Chapters 4 and 5, the first of which

¹ *Dispositiv* is a term coined by Michel Foucault. It is translated variously, but often as “apparatus”. He explains the term in his 1977 interview, “The Confession of the Flesh”, when he answers the question, “What is the meaning or methodological function for you of this term, apparatus (dispositive)?”: “What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.”

zooms in on charcoal production in the Carajás region in north-western Brazil and the second on the textile industry in the state of São Paulo. In Chapter 6 Carstensen summarises her findings. The last chapter contains the bibliography, tables and a list of the interviews she conducted.

One of the book's strong aspects is the use of a wide range of literature, ranging from sociology, political science, history and anthropology to postcolonial studies. The sources include different text types, like policy papers and media reports. Additionally, Carstensen has conducted interviews with experts, mainly members of the National Commission for the Eradication of Slave Labour, as well as people affected by working conditions that can be described as modern slavery. She also includes participant observation as a methodological tool, documenting her involvement at several conferences and public events of organisations active in the context of the eradication of slave work. For the reviewer, it was not clear why this was included in the study. The anticipated outcome of this observation was to gain expertise and to look at interactions between different agencies in the process. The latter appears to be a useful and important asset, but in the case of gaining expertise, it is questionable if the implication about participant observation is actually necessary; the study would not lose any of its value by not including it.

Indeed, this book is dense and comprehensive in content, describing empirical research as well as in its theoretical and methodological operations. Modern slavery is employed by Carstensen as an analytical tool embedded in the Brazilian political and historical context. Based on Foucault's notion, modern slavery is seen as a *dispositive* in the sense that it mobilises a "cheap" and 'compliant' workforce through temporary migration and a (discursive) degradation of the human body" (p. 15). However, the marginalised workers are not presented and analysed as mere victims but as active agents inside global production networks. This can be described as a set of links between various local and global agents who participate in the production, development and commercialisation of a product. But what has modern slavery to do with this? Carstensen stresses that the dispositive of modern slavery is relevant when production networks are identified according to their effects on a world-wide scale, for example via outsourcing. Thus, workers in their daily lives and work are aware of the global production networks. The interchange between them and their sharing of experiences help then to formulate a political and – in the best case – a legal framework to tackle inequalities locally (pp. 17–23).

In the empirical Chapters 4 and 5, Carstensen focuses on three debates in which the dispositive of modern slavery is at work. The first concerns the topic of migration and the development of work relations inside global production networks, the second deals with the research on unfree labour, and the third focuses on actions and strategies of resistance by subaltern agents. The regional selection of two different regions – the periphery of north-western Brazil (the Carajás region) contrasting with an inner centre (São Paulo) – demonstrates the divergent policies and discourses. In both cases the agents (workers as well as organisations fighting for workers' rights) are aware of the fact that modern slavery is inherent in production systems as well as in migration networks. This is one point where civil society organisations engage and formulate demands to policy-makers as well as the legal system in general to act against this historically long-lasting system of exploitation.

Carstensen's language is sometimes quite technical and a more reader-friendly editing process would have been a welcome asset. Especially for the non-expert audience, the book will be challenging because the content ranges from different interpretations on modern slavery to Brazil's position in the regional and global framework. Nevertheless, especially in the empirical part, the well-positioned sources and interviews highlight not only Carstensen's arguments, but in fact give the workers a powerful voice which then meets one of the central goals: to see them as

active agents in their struggle for dignity and justice. Given these points, Carstensen has definitely written a powerful and critical book.

References

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