

Book Review

Alessandra Mezzadri (2017) *The Sweatshop Regime: Labouring Bodies, Exploitation and Garments Made in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781107116962. 246 pp. Hardcover £75.00

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The exploitation and oppression of workers within export-oriented production networks coordinated by corporations is a defining characteristic of contemporary globalisation. This remains the case despite various regulatory attempts on the part of governments, international organisations and private actors to improve labour standards within these “workshops of the world” located within the Global South. This begs the question of why labour exploitation remains endemic within global production networks in spite of such interventions. *The Sweatshop Regime* by Alessandra Mezzadri sheds light on such questions through a feminist political economy approach which is informed by the labour geography and global commodity chain literatures. Through this framework, a Marxian–feminist analysis of how and why the sweatshop continues to exist in its highly exploitative form is developed. Specifically, Mezzadri employs the concept of the sweatshop regime to illustrate the ways through which the organisation of the global apparel industry comes to structure production “as a complex regime of exploitation and oppression, organised in a joint enterprise shaped and commanded by multiple global, regional and local lords that link processes of surplus extraction to different realms of social reproduction of the workforce” (p. 185). Such analysis is vital in bringing together some of the more traditional Marxist approaches (which tend to focus on the workplace as the predominant site of oppression) with a feminist political economy committed to illustrating the centrality of social reproduction to the wider processes of capital accumulation within the global political economy.

Within the realm of social reproduction theory itself, Mezzadri’s contributions can be linked to the ongoing efforts of Marxist feminists to replace the “dual systems theory” of social reproduction – comprised of two component aspects (the production of commodities and the reproduction of labour power) – within a unitary framework. This is a difficult and arduous task, but the book achieves it through rigorous empirical research exploring the linkages between the physicality of producing specific products (such as knitwear or hosiery) and how differences between these processes shape social reproduction itself. Mezzadri is concerned with addressing how three particular constructs – class, caste and gender – become entangled within the particular ways in which surplus value is extracted from the workers. This is central to the analysis, as the ways through which social differences are exploited both reproduces unequal shopfloor relations as well as facilitating profit maximisation.

The empirical detail offered throughout the text is impressive. Mezzadri focuses on the lived experiences of female and male workers labouring in India’s garment factories and draws upon a

decade of research which allows the reader to gain a detailed understanding of how apparel production is organised within the factories, the micro units and the homes of workers. Mezzadri therefore spans the formal and informal spaces of work within the Indian garment industry. Importantly, such analysis is linked to geographical differences, and the book explores the ways through which space itself influences the sweatshop regime by exploring working lives across the major garment clusters located in the National Capital Region (NCR), Baricilly, Ludhiana, Jaipur, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai and Tirrupur. Crucially, the book illustrates the tangible linkages between the physicality of particular products produced in the apparel industry and the specific forms of oppression and exploitation which they generate. For example, knitware production and hosiery work differ substantially in terms of the type of worker and their working conditions. Processes of circulation, oppression and exploitation within the production of particular products and/or in particular geographical regions then play an important role in shaping social reproduction and the degree to which social costs are externalised.

In relation to broader development debates, *The Sweatshop Regime* critiques contemporary discourses surrounding the benefits of integration through trade for developing countries. In particular, Mezzadri criticises the continued legacy of modernisation theory which has a significant influence within development studies and continues to permeate mainstream economic policy today. An important critique of economic orthodoxy throughout this book focuses on time, as mainstream development policy often plays with the concept of time to justify particular policy pathways to industrialisation. Prescriptions related to market reforms often refer to the long-term (rather than the immediate) benefits which are the imagined or intended result of particular interventions. Therefore, there is often a sense that exploitation and misery can be tolerated in the pursuit of a broader project of economic reform or “progress”. Mezzadri focuses in on such a case by using the oft-cited notion of cheap labour as a “comparative advantage” for industrialising countries. While influential mainstream economists such as Paul Krugman have argued that the industrial development resulting from such “advantages” would inevitably lead to the betterment of working conditions and pay, Mezzadri offers a powerful antidote to such grand narratives, which can be thought of as processes of myth-making.

Instead, Mezzadri argues that the sweatshop regime “already is our industrial modernity”, expanding and re-spatialising within rural areas of developing countries as well as travelling backwards into industrialised countries through the employment of migrant workers. Modernity, therefore, is not aligned to any sense of diachronic progress but instead is linked to forms of capital accumulation; this appears at once to both overwhelm as well as evade any sense of structure or containment. A second reflection within the book on the importance of time relates to the inevitable aging of labouring bodies. Mezzadri argues that even if workers do benefit from higher wages in relation to factory work, they are often forced to move out of such jobs as they age, and to return to other, often more informal patterns of labouring. Mezzadri therefore challenges the use of time within our analysis of labour and exploitation, and asks us to take seriously the reality of post-work in the garment sector given that the majority of workers leave the factories before the age of thirty. Once again, the book forces readers to expand their analysis beyond the dual-systems theory and to imagine the continued impacts and legacies of work in the realm of “post-work” life and livelihoods, and the entanglements between production and reproduction, their histories and their futures.

The Sweatshop Regime will be of interest to anyone who is fascinated by contemporary debates surrounding the impact of globalisation on developing countries, the ways through which global production networks shape regimes of exploitation and oppression, and how gender, caste and

class intersect with capital in order to produce and reproduce inequalities within the workplace and within the wider lives and livelihoods of labourers in India's garment industry. Mezzadri goes beyond the typical analyses of India's garment cluster by moving beyond the "chains" of production themselves, and taking seriously the questions of social reproduction which are intrinsically bound up within the sweatshop regime. The book is perhaps less orthodox in its structuring than other academic texts, but the idea to frame each empirical chapter around specific analytical concepts works well. Given the rich data within the book, a framing of each empirical chapter with a specific set of analytical frames helps to guide the reader and to better realise the relationships between the conceptual and the empirical.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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