

Book Review

Maurizio Atzeni and Immanuel Ness (eds.) (2018) *Global Perspectives on Workers' and Labour Organizations*. New York: Springer. ISBN 9789811340161. xvi+173 pp. Softcover €85

Reviewed by
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[In February 2021, the Global Labour Journal organised a panel of book review presentations at the International Sociological Association's World Congress of Sociology held online and in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The panel was titled Authors Meet Critics. This review was first presented there – Editor.]

This volume, through its nine well-crafted chapters, explores with much empirical wealth and theoretical elaboration the multiple forms of precarious work and the organisation of workers in a variety of sectors in both the Global South and the Global North under changing configurations of financialisation, deregulation, the technological turn and redistributive practices. In their introduction, the editors highlight that the transformations of global labour have been articulated with internal and international migration, which have contributed to what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) have called the “multiplication of labour” through processes of intensification, diversification and heterogenisation of labour forms and ever more elaborate assemblages of political economy. The various chapters of the book address both how these changes have produced new patterns of class fragmentation on the one hand and how emerging modes of political socialisation, resistance and organising are being carved out by workers at the individual and collective levels. All chapters in this volume speak distinctively and inform these processes which have shaped new patterns of “vulnerability and empowerment” (Qiu, 2016).

The book is organised in two parts. The five chapters of Part I (“Life Reproduction in Urban Spaces”) focus on a number of sectors which have been key in sustaining urban life, such as domestic work, recycling, waste-picking, garment and retail. The four remaining chapters in Part II (“Value Production in Industries”) focus on labour and labour relations in more traditional industries such as construction, manufacturing, the automotive and electronic industries, and the rising field of digital labour.

The main strength of *Global Perspectives on Workers' and Labour Organizations* lies in the conceptual coherence of the nine chapters of the book. This coherence is buttressed by the short but conceptually insightful introduction by the two editors of the book. Adding their insights to a growing body of social science literature on conceptual definitions of precarious labour and recognising the fact that precariousness has now become “the norm” in most parts of the globe (p. ix), Atzeni and Ness argue that the question of “precarity and precarious work is central to any emancipatory discussion within the current capitalist dynamics” (p. x). They ask whether precarious labour can be “seen as the new common ground around which different and newly emerging

subjectivities mobilize”, and in which respect it is reconfiguring the very nature of workers’ politics, of representation, and of the organisation of solidarity and resistance (p. ix). Do the various forms of precariousness, exploitation and indignity that characterise the contemporary moment enable us to think of a “common language of dispossession and oppression” (p. ix)? In Chapter 1, MacDonald points to the fact that, in the face of the generalisation of various forms of precarious work, it is the very Fordist paradigm of unionism which needs to be rethought. Such a reversal is extended to encompass not only forms of precarious working conditions but also “precarious access to the means of life”; this, he argues, requires the reinvention of forms of labour organisation but also the investigation of which political (state-led) means reproduce precarity (p. 4). MacDonald rightly emphasises the determining role of state policies in fostering greater labour market participation through specific policies that push people to accept greater flexibility and that hamper their access to social welfare, such as limiting the period of unemployment allowances. (p. 8).

Atzeni and Ness also call for an investigation of precarious work grounded in political economy which pays attention to workers’ grassroots struggles and identity formation in its many forms. In doing so, they argue for approaches that move beyond Fordist trade unionism, asking that the question of how workers organise themselves while facing increasingly pervasive processes of working-class fragmentation be investigated seriously. Highlighting the limitations of the traditional union-centred point of view, they argue that this paradigm “does not allow to delve into the complexity and richness of the social processes and mediations conducive to collective organizations and to identify the contextual structural factors, material circumstances, and concrete possibilities affecting precarious workers’ daily reality” (p. x). As a matter of fact, what all contributors do theoretically and empirically in their respective chapters is indeed to question the very nature of what can be defined as workers’ struggles, workers’ organising, identity formation and workers’ representation by delving into the everyday grassroots forms of workers’ politics. In her contribution on the constitution of “communities of coping” among domestic workers in London (Chapter 2, “Organizing Immigrant Workers Through ‘Communities of Coping’: An Analysis of Domestic Workers’ Journey from an Individual Labour of Love to a Collective Labour with Rights”), Jiang argues “that the further development of collective mobilization in informal and individualized sectors may require creative leaps of sociological imagination in locating and nurturing ‘communities of coping’, wherever they may be occurring” (p. 25). In a similar vein, O’Hare (Chapter 3, “Waste Pickers in Uruguay”) calls for a more “inclusive approach to social analysis and labour theory” in efforts to redefine the very nature of labour struggles (p. 59). MacDonald identifies the potentialities of “a more urban and politicized form of union organization” that articulates traditional claims around workers precariousness with claims centred on housing, civil rights and access to public welfare. He also calls for a full reversal of strategies by workers’ organisations, inviting them to “begin with the demands of the most precariously employed workers and develop within their membership an understanding of precarity as a political and class phenomenon” (pp. 4, 18). These and other chapters in this volume raise the fascinating issue of how to conceptually articulate everyday forms of grassroots and sometimes low-profile political socialisation and identity formation with more visible and larger-scale mobilisations such as strikes or collective bargaining.

Another important element adding to the coherence of the volume pertains to the great attention paid by the authors to a wide spectrum of employment forms, with workers in various sectors situated on a continuum of degrees of precariousness from the most formal to fully informal workers, from permanent workers to unfree labourers; in this process, they always problematise the various positions of workers within this continuum as fundamentally connected

and impacting each other. As MacDonald argues, various kinds of temporary workers can be thought of as playing a “regulatory function on the urban labour market” as they somehow assist firms’ relentless efforts at restructuring their workforce and as they add pressure to the permanent workforce (pp. 6–7). In this volume, the centrality of this co-existence of various forms of more or less (un)free labour conceived of along this continuum provides a key lens to understanding global capitalism’s redeployment and extraordinary capacity to reshape new forms of politico-institutional configurations.¹ This argument is made most convincingly by Bressán in Chapter 4 (“Local Sweatshops in the Global Economy: Accumulation Dynamics and the Manufacturing of a Reserve Army”). Bressán delves into the role of “unfree labour” through the widely practised recourse to subcontracting and the return of local sweatshops in large cities in both the Global North and South, examining the garment industry from the late 1970s on. He argues that “forced labor is not only compatible with capitalist accumulation, but ... can also be critical for the survival of capitalism” (p. 65). For Bressán, as permanent formal workers are increasingly becoming an exception, “the manufacturing of a reserve army of precarious workers and vulnerable migrants in specific economic sectors could be the point of entry of new – worse – legal working conditions in the whole economy” (p. 73). As Woodcock points out in Chapter 9 (“Digital Labor and Workers’ Organizations”), the current trend towards the platformisation of the economy and of society in the garment sector further increases the dependence of employment forms and modes of production on highly volatile consumer demand, as has recently been documented in China.² In Chapter 6 (“The Collective Resistance of China’s Industrial Workers”), in a context of rarefaction of young and highly flexible workers in the Chinese labour market, Jenny Chan provides an illustration of the great capacity of redeployment of global capitalism in producing novel politico-institutional configurations that enable the shaping of cheaper and more precarious pools of workers – that is, student interns within the automotive and electronic industry.

The strong conceptual coherence all through this edited volume and the fine-grained case studies it brings together will doubtless be of great interest to scholars and students in sociology of labour and migration studies. It sheds light on and discusses some of the most pressing questions shaping workers’ lives and struggles in the contemporary moment and for the decades to come.

References

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¹ For useful discussions on this argument see for instance Cohen (1987), De Genova (2002), Fassin (2011) and Stanziani (2020).

² Fan (2021) shows how platform-mediated consumer demand has pushed production modes of the initially chiefly vertically integrated garment industry towards a greater reliance on a variety of small production forms such as highly casual daily-wage workers or family-based workshops, all characterised by extremely informal employment forms.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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