

## Book Review

**Felix Hauf (2016) *Beyond Decent Work: The Cultural Political Economy of Labour Strategies in Indonesia.***

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The author analyses the discourse around the ILO's decent work agenda with reference to labour-related campaigns and trade union struggles in Indonesia. His theoretical approach is based on the semiotic materialism developed by Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop, and more specifically on their concept of "economic imaginaries". Since almost half of the book is devoted to the theoretical framework, I will first address theoretical issues, and then move on to Hauf's case study.

The cultural political economy (CPE) of Sum and Jessop aims to integrate semiotic and discursive aspects of reality into a material-structuralist account without collapsing into a radical constructivism assuming that there is no outside of discursive processes. Economic imaginaries such as the semiotic aspects of accumulation projects are seen as necessary precursors of successful accumulation and, if the accumulation projects take off, as their political justification.

There are two aspects to this approach to CPE that seem problematic. First, ideology is replaced with semiosis in the account of Sum and Jessop, and this is not explicitly addressed by Hauf. This substitution of terms creates conceptual problems that remain unaccounted for: Whereas the concept of ideology, particularly in an Althusserian vein, shows how acts of signification are integrated into practices of apparatuses, semiosis once again separates language and meaning from the so-called objective and institutional realm. Compared with an Althusserian conception of ideology, the CPE of Sum and Jessop seems to be a more descriptive-analytical approach – even if they concede that "the 'imaginary' refers not only to semiosis but also to its structural supports" (cited in Hauf, p. 60).

It is striking that Hauf's definition of economic imaginaries resembles Louis Althusser's concept of ideology:

Lived experience of the real is shaped by an imaginary relation to it that reduces complexity and makes it calculable. The two moments of complexity reduction translate 'the actually existing economy' (the chaotic sum of all activities) into an 'imagined economy'" (p. 38).

Hence, the question is whether or not Althusser's emphasis on the material character of ideology actually represents a more radical rupture with the dualism of 'structure' and 'ideas', highlighting the materiality and structuredness of language and signification, and thus the material existence of ideology in institutional apparatuses.

While the first problem may be due more to the overall approach of Sum and Jessop, the second stems at least in part from Hauf's interpretation of their approach. According to him, CPE

follows the “linguistic turn” insofar as it assumes that language, semiosis and signification are material practices (43), and that they have their own structure and objective existence. However, this is at odds with a recurring theme in Hauf’s book. He assumes that the semiotic-discursive aspect of social reality constitutes culture, subjectivity and agency, while any other aspects are relegated to economy, objectivity, institutions and structure (p. 37). Jessop’s notion of structures as results of earlier strategies goes beyond a dichotomous approach to the material and ideational that locates agency and subject in the area of discourse and structure and object in the area of the non-discursive.

An interesting innovation is that Hauf, together with Claes Belfrage, applies CPE to field research. They call their approach Critical Grounded Theory. It is about “analysing discourses in terms of the social practices they are entangled with” (p. 61). For such an integrated analysis, ethnographic methods are required. An understanding of Grounded Theory that is informed by Critical Realism (as developed by Carolyn Oliver) is useful for such an integrated analysis: Hauf and Belfrage propose approaching the research field with certain pre-theories and then testing these against rich empirical data. In his book, Hauf basically wants to look at how imaginaries are enacted in social practices – that is, at how overarching imaginaries are interpreted and appropriated, and how they mutate in specific contexts.

All in all, Hauf provides a convincing analytical framework that can be used to investigate how decent work is enacted in Indonesia. His research is focused on three strategies in the footwear and garment industries, which he assumes respond to the decent work agenda. These industries have attracted much international attention in the past due to consumer campaigns exhibiting rampant violations of human rights, over-exploitation and violence against workers in factories that produce for global brands like Nike and Adidas. In line with his CPE approach, Hauf demonstrates that all three strategies are based on distinct economic imaginaries.

The first project evaluated is Better Work Indonesia (BWI), managed by the ILO and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). It is designed to encourage employers to comply with certain labour standards. For example, BWI’s 2014 report, evaluating the third year of its implementation, states that in 11 out of 67 factories in the programme workers are not allowed to join the union of their choice, 25 out of 67 do not pay the minimum wage, and 50 out of 67 do not offer overtime payments. Hauf contrasts these findings with data that he has gathered through interviews with various trade union activists. He argues that BWI’s technical approach obscures the reality of workplace politics: Local unions were not involved in the programme at all; it was implemented by the ILO and the employers. The focus on the presence of unions in factories does not address the problem that there is a predominance of yellow unions that stem from the time of the Suharto regime, and that the BWI programme may even be used to oust progressive unions from factories. Hauf concludes that the BWI is based on a hegemonic “decent work from above” imaginary (pp. 149–158).

The second programme, The Play Fair Alliance (PFA), is coordinated by the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF), which is today part of IndustriALL, as well as by Oxfam Australia and the Clean Clothes Campaign. Meetings were held with major producers like Nike and Adidas, and several trade union bodies from Indonesia. The unions agreed to focus on freedom of association, and a protocol on this issue was drafted in June 2011. It covers only “tier-1” factories in the footwear industry. Four firms that produce for Nike, Adidas and Puma have signed the protocol. While it is a novel development that unions are integrated into negotiations of this type, Hauf argues that they only effect minor changes, which is partly due to the exclusion of “tier-2” factories from the protocol. At the time of the research, a second protocol was being planned to

enforce permanent contracts for workers. The participating NGOs are aware of the problems caused by the focus on tier-1 factories, but see this as a necessary compromise. Hauf emphasises that banning temporary work in tier-1 factories may negatively affect workers down the supply chain due to further subcontracting and outsourcing. Representatives of Adidas interviewed by Hauf emphasise that they hope the signing will result in fewer strikes and industrial actions. Hauf sees this second project as an alternative appropriation of the decent work discourse, and views it as a sub-hegemonic “decent work from below” imaginary. It was initiated by trade unions and NGOs, and challenges some aspects of the neo-liberal labour regime, but does not effectively change the social relations in the workplace (pp. 158–173).

The progressive trade union KASBI participated in the PFA. This was an important reason why it split soon after, which demonstrates that decent work initiatives can have unexpected negative effects. The radical faction had been criticising the top-down bureaucratic organisation of KASBI for some time, and eventually founded its own federation called KSN, which was joined by eleven out of twenty regional federations of KASBI. Hauf explores the contribution of workers’ resistance to the current political orientation of KSN. The garment factory PT Istana, which has 1 000 workers, was declared bankrupt by its owner in 2007, and workers occupied the factory to demand compensation. They went on to produce collectively for one year, but then had to abort the project after a flood destroyed the factory. This was only one of many occupations of this type, which are also frequently organised by rural workers. Notably, KSN has a larger geographical coverage than KASBI. It includes industrial workers from the garment and electronics sectors, but also workers from state-owned enterprises and plantation workers, while KASBI is focused on industrial and urban areas in Java. The link between public and private sectors, and between urban and rural workers, is a novelty.

KSN became part of a bigger movement alliance called the Indonesian People’s Movement Confederation (KPRI), which brings peasants, rural workers, indigenous organisations and industrial workers together. It has existed since 2003 and aims to establish a closed market between occupied plantations and occupied factories. Hauf identifies another imaginary at work here that is not directly linked to decent work: the “alternative economy”. The idea behind KPRI is to establish an exchange of agricultural and garment products among workers that is outside the capitalist market, and to take control of steps of the supply chain – that is, to pre-process rubber or to roast coffee. These projects are most advanced in the agricultural sector. In 2013, landless workers with the union Serikat Pertani were cultivating 500 000 hectares of land. They grow coffee and tea, which they then sell to industrial workers via the alternative network. Their work is not focused on the production of goods, but is also about erecting buildings and setting up schools and training centres for adults. KPRI has projected four stages of workers appropriating the social and political process: (1) production, (2) consumption, (3) collective ownership, and (4) institutionalisation. In some areas, coffee production has reached stage two by reorganising distribution and consumption. The aim of KPRI is that the workers earn higher wages with the alternative network than they would on the market. The strategy for this is to produce high quality goods and to evade the control of multinational corporations and advocacy NGOs that are present in the Fair Trade networks. What Hauf deems a counter-hegemonic alternative economy imaginary is certainly one of the most advanced political projects to reclaim economic power by workers today. Hauf calls it a recovered imaginary since it is silenced by the campaigns of advocacy NGOs and international institutions. One of his main findings is that projects like this one, which target the market and capitalist power, do not connect with the decent work agenda, and are not addressed by actors promoting decent work (pp. 181–202).

The book closes an important gap in the research on trade union strategies in Indonesia by going beyond a focus on the workplace and discussing initiatives that are routinely silenced by the more powerful actors involved in the decent work agenda. Another important insight is that whereas the ILO advances the private regulation of labour relations under the heading of ‘decent work’, Indonesian trade unions have recently been successful in making claims against employers on the grounds of national law. This suggests that the decent work projects in Indonesia can be seen as strategies to protect employers from the implementation of national law. The innovative project of a Critical Grounded Theory codifies research practices that are well-known, adding guidelines that acknowledge how field research has to move back and forth between prior assumptions and findings in the field.

Hauf’s application of Sum and Jessop’s CPE leaves open some theoretical questions and shows how the recognition of the importance of semiosis does not automatically go beyond dichotomous understandings of social reality. Despite this, the book is an important and innovative contribution to the field of global labour studies.

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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