

Book Review Symposium

**Edward Webster and Lynford Dor (2023) *Recasting workers' power: Work and inequality in the shadow of the digital age.*
Bristol: Bristol University Press, ISBN: 9781529218794
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My heart is heavy and resistance great to reworking the paper I gave at the celebration of Eddie Webster's last book, *Recasting Workers' Power* (written with Lynford Dor). I was so lucky to be in Johannesburg to attend the festivities in October 2023 organized by Eddie's colleagues and students, to commemorate his lasting influence, his shaping of generation after generation. It was a glorious event – connecting the past to the present, at every moment exuding Eddie's inexhaustible energy. We had no inkling that his future would be curtailed, that Eddie would not be with us five months later. We couldn't imagine, and, at that time, we didn't have to imagine, a world without Eddie, continually reinventing himself. He was a permanent fixture, supporting and inspiring so many.

How does one write a review of a book when the author is no longer around? Who are reviews for, after all? Are they for the reader who does not want to read, who has no time to read? Or are they intended to inspire the reader to read the real thing? Reviews should tell us what the book is about, contextualize it in relation to other works, and perhaps add some thoughts about its limitations. There are too many books to read so we need reviews. But I also think of the review as a conversation, or even a critique – an engagement with the author. Last time I reviewed one of Eddie's books I overstepped the mark and got into a lot of hot water with his friends (Burawoy, 2010a). This time I want to project Eddie's sociological legacy into the future by interrogating *Recasting Workers' Power*. But that requires acquaintance with his earlier trajectory. On the occasion of Eddie's formal retirement in 2010, I wrote an extended tribute to a life of rare accomplishments (Burawoy, 2010b). Here I can only give a capsule summary.

I first got to know Eddie in 1968. That was before he became a sociologist, but even then, he had a propensity for sociological adventure. We took an unforgettable trip to the Transkei, knocking on the doors of politicians late into the evenings, listening to Afrikaner administrators tell of their (dubious) achievements, peering into the politics of a "model" Bantustan. A field trip with Eddie, as his students will testify, is always exciting, illuminating and often hilarious. "Critical engagement" doesn't quite capture his mode of inoffensive probing. He perfected the interventionist, ethnographic interview. Through joint ventures in the field as well as his lucid teaching, Eddie has brought so many young South Africans – of all races – into sociology. No one has influenced South African sociology more than Eddie Webster – an influence on full display in *Recasting Workers' Power*, whose chapters embody his pedagogy of collaboration and dialogue.

Eddie's turn to social science began in 1969 at Oxford where he took an MA in Philosophy,

Politics and Economics (PPE). He moved to York University to start work on his PhD dissertation, which, at that time, focused on the Durban “race riots” of 1949. That led him to take up a position at the University of Natal, where he arrived in February 1973. It was a fateful moment, just after the Durban strikes had beckoned a new order that was absorbing the attention of his colleagues, especially Richard Turner, a young philosopher who had recently returned from the Sorbonne as a New Left visionary, committed to participatory democracy. Eddie and Rick became close friends and together they turned their attention to the emerging labour movement. Rick would be assassinated by the apartheid police in 1978 and Eddie, too, would have run-ins with the apartheid state. During their short time together, however, they hatched a vision of an Institute for Industrial Education that would advance the Black working-class movement through worker education, labour research and a journal. Eddie would carry out this vision at the University of Witwatersrand, which he joined in 1976. In 1983 he created the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP), which would soon become a world-renowned institute for labour studies. He was also a founder of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, locus of the great debates about labour strategy under apartheid and beyond. He became a friend of the burgeoning union movement, training shop stewards and undertaking research on their behalf.

Along with institution building, Eddie was writing his University of Witwatersrand dissertation that became *Cast in a Racial Mould*, a history of the transformation of the racial division of labour in the foundry industry (Webster, 1985). This is an account of South Africa’s “racial capitalism” – yes, Eddie was using that concept 40 years ago – in which a “caste” of white workers held on to their privileges, despite the deskilling of their labour process. At the same time, the lower “caste” of the segregated labour market, made up of Black workers, was beginning to organize itself into a powerful industrial union. The balance of forces shifted with technological and legislative changes that gave Black workers the opportunity to advance their interests. Further changes in the politics of production and the organization of work would foment changes in the wider society that would eventually lead to the dismantling of apartheid – dimly visible on the foggy horizon.

If there is a defining question of Eddie’s research through the decades, it is the connection between labour process and labour movement – a connection so many lost sight of as they switched from one to the other. *Recasting Workers’ Power* is now Eddie’s final attempt to come to terms with the transformation of the racial division of labour in post-apartheid South Africa. Under the neoliberal dispensation, capital developed new strategies for deskilling, outsourcing, casualization and informalisation of work in South Africa. The result is a “precariat” presumed to be unorganisable – gig workers, manufacturing workers, municipal workers, teachers. To study the conditions under which organizing was possible, Eddie and his collaborators developed the “Power Resource Approach” (PRA) (Schmalz et al., 2018). They extend the ideas of Erik Wright and Beverly Silver, among others, who distinguish between structural power and associational power (Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000).

Structural power refers to the resources that workers possess by virtue of capital’s dependence upon them within the division of labour, whereas associational power refers to the resources they develop through collective organization. To these two forms of power Eddie adds two more. Societal power involves actors that share interests with precarious workers. Service workers such as teachers, garbage collectors or small traders can, for example, appeal to the interests of their clients. Institutional power relies on rights inscribed in institutions that protect labour. Changes in the Labour Relations Act, for example, set temporal limits on the outsourcing of labour, empowering worker organizations.

The various case studies in *Recasting Workers’ Power* show how these resources, individually and in combination, give precarious workers the capacity to stage protests and strikes to defend their

material and working conditions. Not coincidentally, the analysis harkens back to *Cast in a Racial Mould* in that both deal with three actors: capital, high priced labour and low-priced labour. In 1985, the racially segregated labour market was already breaking down and white workers were being displaced; today Black labour has continued to make substantial inroads into the upper tier of the labour market while the lower tier has won some formal protections. Still, a task that awaited Eddie was to examine how the split labour market not only varies across sectors of the economy, as described in *Recasting Workers' Power*, but how it has changed historically between apartheid and post-apartheid.

Like so many proponents of PRA, *Recasting Workers' Power* gives short shrift to the “power resources” of employers.¹ How can one appreciate the power of labour without examining the power of capital, both the resources it commands directly and the constraints it sets on what labour can do? (Offe and Wiesensthal, 1980). This is no easy task for those studying precarious workers as the employer is often invisible. Nevertheless, how can one begin to probe the changing character of gig work, for example, without understanding the hidden abode of production, defining the “platform” that creates the conditions and incentives of “independent contractors”? (Shestakofsky, 2024). Behind the platform stand different forms of financial capital.

Furthermore, can one study the dynamics of the split or segregated labour market without studying the formation of interests of the different fractions of labour, important both in forging labour alliances and in shaping strategies of contesting capital? When does the lower tier fight for itself, when does it team up with the upper tier? What is the effect of casualization on the proclivity of the upper tier to find common cause with the lower tier? Can one study the mobilization of resources, that is working-class “capacities,” without studying the articulation of interests – material and political, short term and long term? Can one approach these questions without examining the regime of production which organizes both the capacities and the interests of the different actors and the relationship of the regime of production to the state? Can one reduce the politics of production to the study of the working class, just one side of the struggle?

Eddie was always interested in the specificity of South Africa – we were always joking about spurious claims to South African exceptionalism. While *Recasting Workers' Power* focuses on South Africa, there are similar studies in other countries. Rina Agarwala shows how informal workers (construction workers and tobacco workers) can exercise their power by appealing to the state and NGOs (Agarwala, 2013). She finds that, in those Indian states that have a competitive political system (competing parties) or are more market oriented and less dominated by trade unions, informal workers are better able to protect their conditions of work. In other words, institutional and societal context can have unexpected effects.

Eddie was always eager to pursue comparative labour studies. He did so through his pioneering contributions to the International Sociological Association and the Global Labour University, and, after all, it was Eddie who started the *Global Labour Journal*. His intense engagement with students and colleagues in South Africa extended to other countries, Germany, US, India, Brazil, South Korea and more. Just as he pioneered the concept of “social movement unionism” long before it reached Northern shores, it is already apparent that *Recasting Workers' Power* provides new vistas for studying precarious workers of the North.

Eddie was an inveterate and instinctive optimist; his sociology of hope carried us through what seemed to be the most hopeless of times. He taught us there is always a way forward. He has left us with a daunting task – to fill the void he has left. His legacy is moving on.

¹ For a critical assessment of PRA along these lines, see Ruth Milkman (forthcoming).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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