

Book Review

Marcel van der Linden and Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (editors) (2023)
***Power at Work – A Global Perspective on Control and Resistance.* Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter Press. 353pp.**
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Written by twelve authors, *Power at Work* examines the role of global labour in India, China, Turkey, New Zealand, Yugoslavia, South Africa, Belgium and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Marcel van der Linden and Nicole Mayer-Ahuja have divided their edited volume into ten chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion.

Van der Linden starts his historical perspective by emphasising that “already in 1685, the French *Code Noir* provided a legal framework for slavery” (Van der Linden, 2023: 2). Two things are noteworthy on this. First, this sharply contradicts the apostles of neo-liberalism’s make-believe that deregulation of business is the prevailing mode of operation. In reality, work has been regulated for a very long time. Second, law makes managerial domination over workers possible. All too often, law is merely an accessory for capitalism (Pistor, 2019). Unlike the many anti-worker and anti-union laws that underwrite capitalism, “workers have generally been in favour of restricting employer’s discretionary power as much as possible” (Van der Linden, 2023: 3). In essence, what is assumed to be “discretionary power” actually boils down to management’s despotic caprice, arbitrariness and whims.

Page 3 covers what the entire book is all about, namely, the “constant shifting [of the] frontier of control” (Van der Linden, 2023: 3) between workers and management. In great and often highly illuminating detail, the book explains these shifting frontiers. Not surprisingly, “Karl Marx referred to this as the silent coercion of economic circumstance, which reduce workers’ capacity to confront management” (Van der Linden, 2023: 4).

To camouflage this, the ideologues of neo-liberalism put up a “ceremonial façade” (Van der Linden, 2023: 5) of supposedly free labour freely entering into the labour market – unless, of course, one wants to be exposed to meagre rations of a constantly diminishing welfare state. The French Nobel Prize winner Anatole France once explained, “the law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under *bridges*, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread”.

Meanwhile, and despite the known power asymmetries in the labour market (Offe & Wiesenhal, 1980) that structurally disadvantage workers and greatly advantage management, the author correctly notes that “where there is power, there is resistance” (Van der Linden, 2023: 6). Yet, managerial “coercion still exists” (Van der Linden, 2023: 6), as can be observed from an Amazon warehouse to a Bangladeshi sweatshop.

However, Van der Linden also writes that “absolute control is impossible” (Van der Linden, 2023: 12). As a consequence, “managers always need some degree of voluntary cooperative effort from their workers” (Van der Linden, 2023: 11). On the other hand, “even today, workers resort

to violent means” (Van der Linden, 2023: 17). Perhaps they do this to counter what is known as “the structural violence” (Farmer, 1996) that is enshrined in capitalism and despotic work regimes (Klikauer, 2016). All this pretty much leads to the inevitable conclusion that “power relations at work can therefore, not be studied in isolation [as they are] shaped by wider society” (Van der Linden, 2023: 25) and by capitalism.

Based on this, Behal’s chapter looks at ‘labour in the Assam valley tea plantations’ (Behal, 2023: 27) that established “a special plantocracy ... under the obnoxious indenture regime [giving] planters extra-legal authority over their labour force” (Behal, 2023: 49). In other words, wherever capitalism makes a showing, very quickly there are laws that legally secure the domination of management over workers. Yet, and as Eyferth shows in the case of “Chinese collective farms, 1956 to 1980” (Eyferth, 2023: 52) where between 180 and 320 million workers were employed (Eyferth, 2023: 51), “Chinese rural workers were unfree [meanwhile] work under the collectives come to resemble factory work” (Eyferth, 2023: 74).

This story continues in Ju Li’s “Labour resistance history of Chinese state workers” (Li, 2023: 77) where workers are facing the market while fighting without a trade union. The situation gets even worse in Akgöz’s chapter on the “gendered labour control regimes in Turkish textile and tobacco industries” (Akgöz, 2023: 99). The chapter concludes: “low wages, harassment under gendered disciplinary regimes, unhealthy conditions, punishment for minor infringements, and work intensification conspired to make the factories a living hell for women” (Akgöz, 2023: 132). Well, all those things did not just “conspire” to make “life hell”. These horrific conditions were all set up by management.

Virtually the same can be said about “the politics of and in (re)production in an eastern Indian company town” as Strümpell (2023: 135) shows when arguing that “changes in the politics of production point to important differences in the sphere of reproduction” (Strümpell, 2023: 159). As much as production and reproduction are linked, both need to be understood, Strümpell argues. Both need to be understood in the context of “the politics of production” (Strümpell, 2023: 159). Even though production is generally presented as an engineering and manufacturing issue, production remains inherently political.

This also applies to the “destructuring [of the] meat processing industry” in New Zealand, as Boraman (2023: 162) shows. Boraman also says that “destructuring was enabled by the state deregulating the industry and abandoning its centralised employment relations system” (Boraman, 2023: 186). With the neoliberal reregulation of labour laws “for” business, it is not surprising to find that “employers gained the upper hand” (Boraman, 2023: 186). This is the *raison d’être* of neo-liberalism as imagined by mini-royal “von” Hayek (1944) and his deeply ideological apostles at the Mont Pelerin Society.

Meanwhile, Sabine Rutar’s chapter on “resistance and regulation on the self-managed shop floor in Yugoslavia” (Rutar, 2023: 187) provides an historical overview. More interesting is Ahuja’s adjacent chapter on “industrial cyclops and native stokers: British steam shipping and the attractions of racial management (c. 1880-1930)” (Ahuja, 2023: 211). It illustrates not just the tools of the trade (Ahuja, 2023: 214), but also outlines how the management of shipping used “management-by-race” on “coal-fuelled steamers” (Ahuja, 2023: 237). Most importantly, Rutar notes that “management-by-race ... prolonged the super-exploitation of stigmatised black gangs in the stokehold” (Rutar, 2023: 237). This is not at all surprising, as the “invention of the white race” and the origin of racial oppression (Allen, 2021) developed in a way not unconnected to capitalism.

The story of racism, labour and the frontier of control continues in Hyslop’s “southern Africa, maritime labour, and steamship imperialism c. 1875 to 1948” (Hyslop, 2023: 239). Here too, the author argues that “the racial politics of steam-era seafaring” (Hyslop, 2023: 260) left its mark. This

racial politics did not simply come from “steam-era seafaring”. Instead, it was, as Sabine Rutar says so pointedly, another clear-cut case of “management-by-race”. This is management using race to push the frontier of control in their favour by cranking the issue of “race”. As a little byproduct, it diminishes the issue of “class”. Having people focusing on race instead on class and capitalism is something that the apostles of neo-liberal capitalism continue to value today.

This story is somewhat repeated in Tödt’s “power after work: the unfree time of Congolese seafarers in the Belgian Empire (1910-1940)” (Tödt, 2023: 261). Beyond the historical fact that Belgian colonialism in the Congo can hardly be surpassed by its sheer brutality, “the racial segregation on the steamship defined the ways in which maritime labour was organised, performed, negotiated, controlled, and coerced” (Tödt, 2023: 286).

In the concluding section of the book, Mayer-Ahuja returns to the issue of “dividing the workforce along the lines of ethnicity” (Tödt, 2023: 303). Only later in its history did management start to talk about the socio-cultural term “ethnicity”, sidelining its previous use of the rather biological-deterministic term “race”. Management-by-race was not about ethnicity. It was – and still is – about race and, foremost, managerially administered racism (Jenkins, 1986; Daniels, 2022.). Being asphyxiated inside the structural violence of capitalism that is all too often spiced up with racist management, the neoliberal notion of “free wage labour” (Tödt, 2023: 309) becomes an ideology designed to camouflage the realities of despotic working regimes.

Finally, there still is a rather widespread “segmentation between groups of working people” (Ahuja, 2023: 316). This assists management in dominating workers. Despite everything, ‘the frontiers of control are contested’ (Ahuja, 2023: 317) as people look through the racist smokescreen put up by management (Klikauer, 2013). In very few cases this might even lead to the “overthrow [of] all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, and despicable essence” (Ahuja, 2023: 317).

Overall, Marcel van der Linden and Nicole Mayer-Ahuja’s *Power At Work – A Global Perspective on Control and Resistance* is an exquisite addition to the body of knowledge on key issues that impact on the lives of working people around the world, namely, “management-by-race” and the ever shifting “frontier of control”.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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