

Neoliberal Capitalism and Precarious Work: Ethnographies of Accommodation and Resistance

Rob Lambert and Andrew Herod (editors), Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham (UK) and Northampton (USA), 2016, xi + 336 pp, ISBN 9781781954942 (hardcover), £90.00.

Recent decades have seen the resurgence of 'precarious work'. This refers to employment characterised by insecurity and uncertainty, measured objectively by legal status or subjectively by experience (p. 6). Low earnings, poor access to social and regulatory protections, and a compromised ability to shape one's working arrangements are all hallmarks of precarious work (p. 7). Precarious work is rising in both developed and developing economies, and in both 'low-end' and 'high-end' services, often attributed to globalising economic competitiveness, dismantling of the welfare state, eroding labour organisation, technologies of mobility and the time-space compression of neoliberal capitalism. As this text highlights with damning detail, precarity is the dark side of 'neoliberalism's flexible work model' (p. 303).

This edited collection from Rod Lambert and Andrew Herod makes a welcome contribution to our understanding of the shifting landscapes of work. Aligned with a neo-Marxist tradition, Lambert and Herod see precarity as a 'means for employers involuntarily to shift risks and responsibilities on to workers' (p. 6). Their emphasis on how 'workers make their own geographies but not under the conditions of their own choosing' (p. 24) is familiar terrain (Herod 1997), but it is certainly compatible with the ethnographic sensibility of the text. Whilst not all contributions are traditional ethnographies, the collection nevertheless offers readers both diversity and richness in the experiences and contestations of precarious work. The book is presented in two parts. Part I captures the past and present lives of precarious workers in a range of industry and geographic settings, while Part II examines emerging forms of resistance and new ways of organising labour. This is a division of emphasis, however; almost all the chapters address both themes.

Part I opens with Chapter 2, in which Joynt and Wester document a growing precariat in the clothing industry in inner-city Johannesburg and call for trade unions to build associational power with influential social organisations like the church; in Chapter 3, Chauvin focuses on immigrant industrial day labourers in Chicago and shows how secondary shaming can influence powerful client companies even in a fragmented supply chain; and in Chapter 4, Hattatoğlu and Tate detail the gendered dimensions of home-based work in Turkey and Bulgaria, and how these workers are organising internationally. The next two chapters are witnesses to the violences of precarity. In Chapter 5 Ngai and Huilin present a political economy of labour subcontracting in the construction industry in China, revealing the cultures of violence that emerge; in Chapter 6, Cock and Lambert describe the slow violence done to a South African community from environmental pollution caused by steel production, and call for an alliance between labour and environmental movements. Part I closes with a particularly strong contribution from Garvey and Barreto who trace the historical and contemporary processes that have (re)produced precarity for those who cut and transport sugarcane as part of the international commodification of 'green' ethanol. Part II offers additional stories of precarity from subcontracted automobile manufacturers in Korea (Yun, Chapter 8), as well

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as corporate restructuring (Gillan and Lambert, Chapter 9) and cleaners (Aguiar, Chapter 10) in the Netherlands. Many of the authors are local to their stories, and seven of the 16 contributors are women.

There are common threads that will resonate with geographers. First is a shared concern with the geographies of neoliberal capitalist accumulation, including the decentralisation and peripheralisation of economic activities in the pursuit of a new 'spatial fix'. This occurs internationally as global production networks are fragmented and offshored to reduce labour costs, and locally when work is pushed to the edges of cities or into homes, out of sight and out of mind. Second is how eroding worker conditions intersect with wider processes of social stratification, disempowerment and struggle. Precarity is not blind to gender, with women disproportionately experiencing work insecurity; nor to class, with the poor often pushed to occupy unsafe living and working conditions. Precarity is perhaps least blind to immigration status: there is a devastating cycle of dependence and abuse written in these pages, in which illegal workers vulnerable to exploitation are conflicted in pursuing improved working conditions if that also attracts the attention of immigration authorities. Third, on the theme of (in)visibility, these ethnographies chart the myriad struggles of precarious workers to be recognised and represented; meanwhile large corporations are shifting production to a series of intermediary operators, outsourcing reputational risk and hiding accountability for working conditions.

This is the genesis of the text's corollary interest in new modes of labour organisation and representation that collectivise the precariat and leverage new forms of influence. These include: coalitions between unions and faith-based organisations (Chapter 2), worker centres and informal unionism (Chapter 3), international solidarity networks (Chapter 4), partnerships (Chapter 10), corporate standards (Chapter 11) and global union frameworks (Chapter 11) as well as secondary shaming (Chapter 3), international scrutiny (Chapter 7) and multi-scaled public campaigns (Chapter 9). The contributors reveal the challenges the precariat poses to the traditional trade union movement enacted in everyday workplaces through struggles over who speaks for the precariat, divided loyalties between secure and precarious workers, and the ongoing negotiations of self-interest and collective identity. There are also systemic challenges, tracing back to the somewhat accommodating relationship that the authors argue has emerged between unions and capital. They call for the trade union movement to engage with social and environmental movements, with global networks and with a new politics that is capable of fundamentally challenging neoliberalism.

In its concluding remarks, the editors reflect that 'these ethnographies illuminate the experience of the insecurity captured by the researchers who entered these workers' workplaces and living spaces to record and reflect upon their attempts to resist and reclaim their humanity' (p. 304). This book certainly achieves this aim. There are few shortcomings to this collection as a stand-alone text, although its ensemble contribution would have been strengthened by clearer positioning within ongoing debates in the precarious work literature and Australian and Asia-Pacific readers will notice the absence of case studies from the region. The text will appeal to scholars and students of

employment and workplaces, of labour movements and of broader trends in the restructuring of capitalist relations of production. It is also highly accessible for readers with a general interest in the contemporary politics, economics and cultures of work. Geographers will find many resonances with contemporary debates in the discipline, not least of which are those tracing the rippled effects of the Global Financial Crisis and the unfolding immigration crisis.

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