

## Review

E Webster and K Von Holdt (eds) (2005) *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace – studies in transition*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press

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This edited volume is a valuable contribution to industrial and economic sociology. As someone who teaches an undergraduate module on organising the labour process and a graduate module on globalisation, flexible work and trade unions, it has often been difficult to find a single volume of case studies that deal with the South African workplace in its many forms and the labour process, equity, and power issues therein.

Webster and Von Holdt have included 17 in depth case studies in this volume. The volume works from the premise that in order fully to understand the workplace, one has to have a 'broader understanding of societies and economies' (2005:ix). As such, the editors attempt to broaden our understanding of what the workplace is and who workers are, as well as the relationships between workers, workplaces and changing forms of work with 'wider social processes and social structures' (2005:ix). The 17 case studies are all theorised within Webster's conceptualisation of South Africa's triple transition towards political democracy, economic liberalisation and post-colonial transformation and the tensions (particularly for workers) inherent in such a transition.

The book draws on several directions of labour studies theory. The first of these directions is a focus on the labour process approach to theorising the world of work. Simply stated, this entails understanding how work and workplaces are organised. Fordist and post-Fordist ways of producing and organising, the skilling and deskilling of workers, class, race and equity relations are some of the key subjects of study in this book. The focus also

investigates the workplace as a site of struggle and control as well as managerial strategies to obtain the control and consent of the workforce in the workplace. The number of case studies in this book that use this approach to understanding the workplace is evidence of its continuing popularity in South African labour studies.

The second theoretical direction of this volume is a focus on class, race and equity. In this sense it draws on the classical labourist belief in ‘the point of production as the key to all questions of work, exploitation, and organisation’ (Walker 1998:xii). At the same time, however, the editors and their case studies attempt to go beyond the point of production in their understanding of the ‘new workplace’. The editors state explicitly that the world of work needs to be understood within the broader changes at local, national, regional and global levels. In this regard the editors attempt (less successfully) to engage with a third type of theorisation that engages with workplace issues that traditional class and labour process theories cannot adequately address. As Walker (1998: xii) points out: ‘Capitalism suddenly and unceremoniously revolutionised the landscape of industrial production, rendering obsolete any number of articles of faith about the course of mechanisation, deskilling, corporate concentration and the nature of work’. Whilst this collection of case studies is seminal in many ways, it is also a clarion call for new scholarship to expand South African industrial sociology beyond the workings of the workplace. As the editors suggest, the scale of analysis needs to be shifted outside the workplace to local, national, regional and global scales of analysis. In sum, the spatial or geographic analysis of work, workers and workplaces needs to come more to the fore in future studies.

The book is divided into six themes as an attempt to capture fully the transition of the post-apartheid workplace. The themes are:

1. The end of the racial division of labour? Skills, workplace discrimination and employment equity;
2. Employee participation and productivity;
3. Working in the service sector;
4. The growing trend of casualisation: is a new work paradigm needed?;
5. The self employed: working poor or potential entrepreneurs?;
6. Negotiating workplace change in the public sector.

The findings of the various case studies are organised and discussed by the editors in their introductory Chapter One, ‘Work restructuring and the

Crisis of Social Reproduction'. According to the editors the collection of case studies suggests the following: workers are becoming increasingly differentiated into three zones – the core of stable workers in the formal economy; workers involved with casualised and externalised work; and the zone where people are 'making a living' in the informal sector (2005:5) as opposed to earning a living. It is within these three zones that both capital and labour are restructuring. One of the key aims of the editors is to develop a new research agenda for industrial sociology in South Africa, by framing the study of work, workers and workplaces within the context of the 'triple transition'.

The first theme investigates through three case studies, issues of race, discrimination, and equity in the labour market. The three cases move from an analysis of a formerly racialised apartheid workplace (Von Holdt's) to post apartheid workplaces, which demonstrate that equity, discrimination and race remain central to labour studies. The second theme revisits a continuing theme of labour studies, that of workplace participation. This theme is comprised of four case studies making it the theme with the most number of case studies.

The second theme contains one of the most interesting cases of the volume, by Maree and Godfrey. The case entitled "'If you can't measure it, you can't manage it": reorganisation of work and performance at two fish processing firms' (2005:125) compares two cases of employee participation in Sea Harvest and in I&J respectively. This case is interesting due to its counter-intuitive findings. Both fish processing companies are similar in most respects in terms of their size, type of products manufactured and composition of their workforces. The key point of difference between these companies is the way in which their labour processes are organised. An extensive and expansive worker participation scheme was introduced post 1994 at Sea Harvest. I&J, on the other hand, introduced an intensively Tayloristic system to measure work on the production line. Both companies however, display vastly different consequences of their labour process strategies. From 1993 to 2001, I&J displayed an incredible upturn in before-income-tax profit (1,646 per cent increase!) as well as a marked increase in workers' earnings. This is directly attributable to the intensified surveillance and monitoring systems put in place during this time. Sea Harvest (despite the increased and extensive worker participation programme) showed a far smaller increase in profit (26 per cent) from 1995 to 1998. Further, Sea Harvest workers' average wages declined. However

Sea Harvest workers displayed a far more positive attitude to their jobs and employers than I&J workers. Maree and Godfrey attempt to work out this conundrum, and the remaining three cases further explore the complications and contradictions that worker participation raises.

Theme three investigates work in the services sector. Kenny's chapter on a large retail chain (Shoprite) demonstrates powerfully her argument that the workplace has shifted from an apartheid workplace order in the 1980s to what she terms a 'market hegemonic order' (2005:217). Miller's investigation takes Kenny's argument further by discussing how Shoprite operates a market hegemonic order beyond South Africa's borders. The theme ends with Omar's study of emotional labour and electronic surveillance in a Telkom call centre. This case provides useful insights into what is becoming a burgeoning new form of employment in the services sector and one that very little critical work is been conducted on.

In theme four Theron provides us with an overview of trends in work restructuring in South Africa. Two case studies on the footwear and clothing industries respectively round up the theme by demonstrating how workplace restructuring is impacting on the organising capacity of labour, as well as leading to great informalisation of these sectors. Theme six considers how changes have taken place in the public sector. Von Holdt's case study demonstrates the agency of labour to organise and challenge the state's privatisation plans for Spoornet. Von Holdt and Maserumules's chapter on institutional decline in a public hospital provides further evidence that labour can be an effective change agent in the face of institutional decline. As the authors state, 'in the case of Chris Hanu Baragwanath Hospital, the only sign of an innovative response to this crisis is the transformation project initiated by the trade unions' (2005:459).

A key claim of the book is that there needs to be a conceptual shift that allows us to differentiate workers that earn a living from workers that make a living. This claim is explored in two chapters as part of theme five, which Webster and Philips explore in some detail. Philips' chapter examines how workers make a living on the margins of society, and focuses on the self employed workers in the survivalist sector. Specifically it looks at the range of livelihood strategies employed by these workers. Webster examines the possibilities of organising workers in what the editors term the third zone of work or peripheral informal work.

Whilst both chapters in this theme lend themselves to addressing a key claim of the book, that of reconceptualising work and workers from making

to earning a living, more cases need to be included to lend sufficient weight to this claim. Redefining work, workers and the workplace has become a central part of the labours of the industrial sociologist. For South African labour studies Ari Sitas' work on livelihoods and new social movements has been an important part of this redefinition (Sitas 1998, 2001). A number of PhD scholars at the University of KwaZulu-Natal are working on projects that attempt to reconceptualise livelihoods in a globalising world. These projects are part of a coherent organised cluster that attempts to push the traditional boundaries of industrial sociology. These scholars have taken up Hart and Sitas' (2004) challenge not only to reconceptualise livelihoods, but also to link livelihoods to land, the protection of natural resources and dispossession. This work is important in that it turns traditional industrial sociology on its head. It allows for a new theorising of work that includes Webster's conceptualisations but goes beyond them. If industrial sociology is to make the leap to studying the 'third zone' of work, then it needs to take cognisance of the fact that the third zone is defined by its relationship to the first and second zones. For example, Hart argues that the rural cannot be understood by its relationship to the urban, and the way they construct each other simultaneously.

An emerging group of PhD scholars along with established scholars such as Sitas and Hart have taken up the challenge of demonstrating this. This theme would be much stronger if some of that work was included. Apart from Webster's revisit chapter on Durban and Mosoetsa's chapter on Pietermartizburg, KwaZulu-Natal is largely absent. Perhaps it is my own KZN centredness that finds this an issue! More substantially though what it means is that a range of KZN scholarship, which is particularly strong on reconceptualising livelihoods, is not included. If this is to be a seminal text on work then this is a notable absence.

This is an important book that makes a valuable contribution to the field. It should also signal to a new generation of scholars to go beyond traditional ways of theorising and researching the world of work.

A follow-up volume should focus on transitions in theorising on the workplace. There is an exciting array of new projects that go beyond the labour process approach that students are picking up on, such as economic and labour geography. Trade unions and the industrial workplace have long been the mainstay of industrial sociology, but it now has to recast its conceptual lens. Gone are the neatly bound industrial objects of study like the factory or the trade union or the urban industrial worker. It is no longer

useful to research these as entities or objects separated from a host of other social processes or relationships. As South Africans move further into an informalising economy, new challenges emerge for those of us trying to make sense of this changing social world. Linkages, networks and relationships between formal and informal sectors, urban and rural, trade unions and emerging social movement organisations will now provide us with a map to explore these new relationships. A number of recent trends are emerging, forcing social theorists and activists to 'rework' conventional pinnings of industrial sociology. One of the possibilities that will allow us to recast ourselves and industrial/economic sociology is to explore some of the emerging ideas around space, spatiality and labour geography. A new labour studies praxis will take this into account.

## References

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