




REVIEW ESSAY

On Power at Work

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Power at Work: A Global Perspective on Control and Resistance. Edited by Marcel van der Linden and Nicole Mayer-Ahuja. *Work in Global and Historical Perspective*, volume 16. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023, xi, 342 pp.

Power at Work: A Global Perspective on Control and Resistance, edited by Marcel van der Linden and Nicole Mayer-Ahuja, marks an important moment in the trajectory of labour history over the last half century. Writings on labour have seen a shift from a focus on institutional history to social history in the 1960s, to the cultural and linguistic turn of the 1980s, and, over the last decade or so, a move to reclaim the material in new ways.¹ In the 1970s, the labour process and shopfloor politics was an important theme in writings on labour – Marxist and non-Marxist – but these were often framed in reductive and teleological narratives derived from the experience of the Global North.² Recent writings demonstrate a renewed interest in workplace politics from fresh perspectives that look at the relationship between the production process and cultural transformation in complex ways.

The essays in this volume encapsulate some of the ways in which labour history is being reconceptualized today. They provide a dense and layered perspective on the politics in production on the shopfloor and its inter-relationship with the wider politics of state, capital, and labour. The vast geographical and temporal span of the studies allow for a long-term global view that moves away from the Eurocentric assumptions that underlined earlier writings on power relations at work. The rich regional perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the interconnections between the global and the local. Indeed, one is tempted to ask whether the global can exist except through concrete manifestations within specific locals? How did global trends towards deindustrialization and informalization unfold in specific

¹On the linguistic turn, see Lenard R. Berlanstein, *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana, IL [etc.], 1993); on new materialism and its influence on historiographical traditions, see Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce (eds), *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (London, 2010).

²See, for instance, Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974); Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work: An Introduction to Debates on the Labour Process* (London, 1985).

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local contexts? How are notions of “contract” and freedom that develop in the West articulated and reworked in different regional spaces? How useful are concepts like “hegemony” and “consent” – which acquired currency in the context of high industrialization in the Global North – to understanding relationships of power at work at other times and spaces?³ The contributions to this collection allow us to look at the ways in which the global and the local articulate each other, and how the binary opposition between the two blurs and dissolves.

A framing argument of the volume – outlined in the introduction – is that the boundaries of power are not fixed; the frontiers of control shift: they are continuously negotiated and redefined (Van der Linden, pp. 1–26). If capital seeks to control, regulate, discipline, and deprive workers of their agency, workers in varied ways reassert their capacity to manoeuvre, create spaces, and resist control. To explore the specificity of these mediations, the essays ask a set of questions: How do structures of control and subordination operate at various sites and spaces? What were the mechanisms of control? What defines the limits to power? How are these structures reworked? I focus below on some of the themes that are subjects of inquiry in the current volume.

Several contributions explore the relationship between law and power. They track how law enables different forms of control; legalizing acts that may otherwise appear illegal. Coercion is not beyond law, in opposition to law: it becomes within law. How was power over labour constituted through law? How was coercion legitimated? Rana Behal elaborates how tea plantation workers in Assam were subject to the punitive provisions of the Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859. Ravi Ahuja shows how Asian seafarers came under a separate category of contracts called “lascar contracts”, which restricted their mobility. Indian seafarers, like the Congolese seafarers, were denied shore leave at ports when ships laid anchor. Those who de-boarded the ship were subject to strict control and monitoring by employers after going ashore. Daniel Tödt refers to the “un-free” time of Congolese seafarers: their shore leave, he points out, was like the “day leave” of prisoners. In both tea plantations and ships, surveillance and control extended beyond the workspace and formal working day. Plantation workers were kept under surveillance in the “coolie lines” where they lived, to prevent any possibility of desertion. Thus, we see law working in three different ways to control labour: firstly, law legitimated control over mobility – it restricted mobility, fixed labour in particular locations on plantations or on ships; secondly, it extended the spatial and temporal limits of surveillance – to time after work; and thirdly, law was used to regulate terms of employment for workers – in *abattoirs* in New Zealand, for instance, the Employment Contracts Act of 1991 limited the bargaining power of workers. These legal mechanisms not only extended the power over labour in different ways, but they also expressed the need to legitimate power through law. To appear legitimate, power had to be legal.

A range of papers give a close view of the disciplinary mechanisms on the shopfloor, the modes of regulation of time, wages, and the labour process, and the power of intermediaries who monitored labour discipline. They show how modern techniques of regulating time and labour through a close control over a worker’s body – associated with Taylorism during a time of high industrialization in the

³Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago, IL [etc.], 1979).

Global North – operate in other contexts.⁴ Jacob Eyferth’s essay details how workers on collective farms in China during the Great Leap Forward period (the mid-1950s onwards) were given instructions on how to stand and move in the fields: they were told not to straighten their bodies but remain in a low crouch. Their hands had to be in constant motion (pp. 69–70). Work on collective farms almost resembled factory work, with rural workers subject to the discretionary authority of “team leaders” (maximizing worktime and minimizing temporal breaks). There was an intensification of the labour process through the regulation of body movements and gestures. Toby Boraman describes the processing of meat in abattoirs in New Zealand in what he characterizes as the Fordist “dis-assembly” line work or a “blood and guts” system. A butcher had to repeat the same operation seven and a half times a minute, 450 times an hour, 3600 times a day (p. 165).

Within the workplace, power was embodied in the figure of the intermediary: foremen; *serangs*; team leaders (in China), who wielded power over labour. Common to the authority of foremen/*serangs* and other intermediaries were the discretionary powers they exercised. In Turkey, for instance, Görkem Akgöz argues that formal rules were a mere façade. Foremen could change the mode of payment, from a piece rate system, which women often preferred (Akgöz, p. 129), to daily wages, in many cases. The power of foremen extended over women’s bodies. In textile factories in Turkey, foremen tried to regulate the physical appearance of women, disallowing them to wear fine silk stockings, make-up, and fancy hairstyles.

Power was not exercised through coercive mechanisms alone; it was established through the constitution of specific forms of work ethic, through the remaking of worker subjectivities. The creation of a work culture that valorized ideas of achievement orientation was important to the making of a disciplined workforce. Workers on collective farms in China, we are told, were encouraged to emulate the figure of the “model” socialist worker who was efficient and committed to meeting production targets. In shipyards in socialist Yugoslavia, in the post-war years after 1945, a Stalinist work ethic characterized by a rapid pace of work and high achievement goals acted as a motivating force (p. 196). Ju Li and Sabine Rutar’s essays show how power was exercised through the constitution of specific forms of work ethic, through the remaking of worker subjectivities. Workers on collective farms in China, we are told, were encouraged to emulate the figure of the “model” socialist worker who was efficient and committed to meeting production targets. The adoption of Taylorist methods of streamlining the production process on farms and in shipyards influenced the ways in which workers’ notions of self and identity were constituted (pp. 60, 198). Ju Li shows how the labour reforms of the 1980s, which increased the power of managers, produced a younger generation of workers who were compliant and cooperative, in contrast to an older generation that was defiant and rebellious.

The use of race and ethnic differences or the “management-by-race” (Ahuja) was a technique commonly employed by managements to exercise control over the workforce.⁵ The contributions by Ahuja, Jonathan Hyslop, Tödt, and Christian

⁴On Taylorism, see Thompson, *Nature of Work*, pp. 73–79.

⁵For an engaging discussion on race and labour, see Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern (eds), *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa* (London, 2000).

Strümpell show how power operated by breaking solidarities; by creating divisions along lines of race, caste, and ethnicity. Ahuja and Tödt describe the discriminatory treatment that Asian lascars and Congolese seafarers were subjected to. Congolese workers on Belgian ships and Asians on British steam ships were put on jobs – on the stokehold, for instance – that were stigmatized and considered “dirty” and dangerous. Contracts of employment for Asian and “black” seafarers were different from those applicable to Europeans: they were not allowed shore leave, and had to stay and work when ships docked at ports. Policies of strict segregation and status differences between white and black and Asian seafarers fostered a racialized and hierarchical culture of work on board ships. In steel plants in Rourkela, those from tribal and lower caste backgrounds were concentrated in hazardous work in hot shops, the coke ovens, and blast furnaces. Migrants from Punjab, Bengal, and Bihar worked in the more “skilled” operations in the plant.

Power as we know is exercised in gendered ways. Cultures of work that foster images of women as docile and pliable and men as strong, muscular, and skilled have been pervasive across the globe.⁶ Many of the essays give insights into the specific ways in which the gendered basis of power was constituted. In Turkey, women were employed on jobs that were repetitive, lower paid, and categorized as “unskilled”; in tea plantations in Assam, women were paid lower wages for doing the same work as men. In practice, women do not always conform to prevailing gender stereotypes. Akgöz’s essay on Turkey provides a fascinating view of women who challenged masculinist assumptions of skill and expertise on the factory floor. She cites a dramatic instance when women subverted normative patriarchal ideas about the feminine by demonstrating their ability to fix and repair machinery – a job that male factory workers considered as their prerogative. In the post-1950 decades, women working in factories in Turkey questioned wage inequities and challenged gender hierarchies in more militant ways. In male-dominated workspaces, in meat processing factories in New Zealand and on board steam ships, a masculinist culture that valorized tough guys and muscular bodies was characteristic.⁷ Male bonding, as Tödt elaborates, was forged not just in the workplace but outside, through playing sports and drinking together with men.

There were, however, conjunctures when management strategies of control were contested, and the boundaries of power re-negotiated. During strikes and protests workers challenged and subverted authority structures even if momentarily. Rutar’s essay unravels the micro-politics of self-management in shipyards in Yugoslavia in the 1970s and early 1980s. Experiments like this were short-lived but for a brief while they served as a model for discussions around democracy and self-management. Tödt shows how management efforts to restrict shore leave on a Belgian steamship were resisted by Congolese seafarers. Ironically, the racialized organization of the workspace, which created divisions between privileged white

⁶See, for instance, Sonya Rose, “Gender at Work: Sex, Class and Industrial Capitalism”, *History Workshop*, 21 (1986), pp. 113–131; Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, “Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics”, *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), pp. 79–88.

⁷On masculinity and working-class culture, see Steven Maynard, “Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (1989), pp. 159–169.

workers and blacks, also served as a basis of cooperation among the Congolese workers who organized protests against management policies. Strikes by Indian seamen on British steam ships just after the declaration of war in 1939, acted as a pressure on the British state and employers. Hyslop elaborates how the intervention of the British government forced shipping companies to grant major concessions in the form of wage increases and improvement in conditions of work.

There were also invisible ways in which workers resisted disciplinary authority in spaces of work. Pilferage, foot dragging, and unofficial work breaks were common practices among steel factory workers in China, abattoir workers in New Zealand, seafarers on British steam ships, and plantation workers in Assam. These were not all instances of major revolts by workers, but they were critical to the renegotiation of power in the workplace.

How are power relationships in the workplace refigured in contemporary times? A set of essays in the volume give a sense of how global trends towards deindustrialization and informalization in the post-1980 period are manifest in particular regional contexts.⁸ Managements tried to break up union power by employing short-term contract workers and by relocating industries in new areas. In New Zealand, large meat processing plants in urban areas were shut down and small automated plants were set up in rural areas. Workers who were in a position of strength in relation to previous managements were now in an increasingly vulnerable position. In China, similarly, the rapid downsizing of steel plants created feelings of disempowerment among workers. In the public sector steel plant in Rourkela, the forced casualization of the workforce by the 1990s weakened workers' power and allowed management to exercise control through divide-and-rule policies. Each of these situations show how power operates by playing on the vulnerability of workers.

The volume gives a textured view of the dynamics of power relations in the workplace, across time and place. Many of the concerns raised here also open up possibilities of posing new questions and thinking of old issues along different lines. I focus below on some of these questions.

Power at Work tells us about some of the ways a work ethic is normalized and instilled in workers. The importance of inculcating work discipline and work ethic has been recognized both under capitalism and socialism. How do we explore this idea further? We must recognize that a work ethic is not always internalized or partially internalized. It is sometimes strongly resisted and sometimes negotiated to create spaces of manoeuvre – as Van der Linden suggests in the introduction. Is it possible to specify when and under what conditions a work ethic/discipline is resisted strongly, when it is successfully renegotiated, and when is it fully absorbed and internalized? The specific tensions such negotiations create would shape the very form of the work ethic that is normalized.

It will be important to see how power is experienced at an everyday level to understand the invisible ways in which it operates. Workers may be unaware of the many hidden ways in which power operates. In other contexts, they may be aware

⁸On deindustrialization, see Christopher Johnson, "Introduction: Deindustrialization and Globalization", *International Review of Social History*, 47 (2002), pp. 3–33.

of and hostile to the operations of power; alternatively, they may internalize the logic of power, accept its operation, and be complicit in its reproduction (Eyferth, p. 62). What did compliance mean in terms of the subjectivity of workers? Must one necessarily write of the experience of workers in a tragic mode? Workers also have feelings of pride in their work; they have relationships of camaraderie and playful banter in the workplace despite the most oppressive conditions, as highlighted, for instance, by Alf Lüdtke in his study of machine tool workers in Germany.⁹

Authority in the workplace, as the essays show, was subject to opposition during times of dramatic protests and through silent, invisible forms of resistance at an everyday level. Non-compliance with rules and foot dragging, however, do not always constitute resistance. We need to understand when they are intended as acts of resistance, i.e. when they are deliberate efforts to non-conform, to do what is not permissible. When acts of non-conformity are repeated despite punitive action they can be seen as acts of opposition to authority. And this confrontation transforms such actions into a more self-conscious resistance to authority. But there are other situations where a different logic operates. Often, non-compliance only reflects the persistence of an alternate culture of work, an alternative normal. We need to caution, however, against seeing resistance everywhere, or writing what can be termed as resistance history – one that valorizes resistance.

What did acts of resistance mean for workers in terms of their notions of identity and dignity? Small ways of negotiating spaces within existing structures are, at times, important to protecting certain notions of dignity. For steel factory workers in China, Ju Li shows, silent resistance posed a moral dilemma. Idling and shirking work were contrary to the ethical principles that workers had lived by all their working lives. It resulted in “shattering their sense of honour and pride, and in turn, strengthening their feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness” (Ju Li, p. 94). Resistance through foot dragging in this case was disempowering. We need to possibly differentiate specific cultural contexts of power, to explore what everyday acts of non-compliance mean in each of those contexts. It is also important to probe how gendered subjectivities inflect the experience of power in a variety of ways.

The power of intermediaries – foremen, *serangs*, jobbers – we know, is ubiquitous and persistent in different labour regimes.¹⁰ We must understand, however, how the position of intermediaries is refigured in changing contexts. In the age of informalization and the decentralization of the labour process, the role of the intermediary is obviously transformed.¹¹ Is it possible to re-imagine the figure of the intermediary in an electronic age when supervision is undergoing a dramatic

⁹Alf Lüdtke, “Cash, Coffee-Breaks, Horseplay: *Eigensinn* and Politics among Factory Workers in Germany Circa 1900”, in Michael Hanagan and Charles Stephenson (eds), *Confrontation, Class Consciousness and the Labor Process: Studies in Proletarian Class Formation* (New York, 1986), pp. 65–95. See also Alessandro Portelli, *Biography of an Industrial Town: Terni, Italy, 1831–2014* (Cham, 2014).

¹⁰For a discussion on the role of intermediaries in other contexts, see Ulbe Bosma, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Aditya Sarkar, “Mediating Labour: Worldwide Labour Intermediation in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”, *International Review of Social History*, 57:S20 (2012).

¹¹See, for instance, Andrew Stewart and Jim Stanford, “Regulating Work in the Gig Economy: What are the Options?”, *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 28 (2017), pp. 1–18.

change? In an age of total control, within digital surveillance regimes, do we see the end of human intermediaries in the workplace?¹²

Processes of informalization and the erosion of standard employment relations across the globe in the last decades of the twentieth century have deepened feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and powerlessness among different sections of the workforce. Precarity itself is not a completely new phenomenon.¹³ It is now commonly acknowledged that a large number of workers were part of a floating, informal economy, even in a period of high industrialism in the post-World War II period. What we see today, however, is new forms of precarity in a global context in which ideological frameworks that legitimated notions of security for labour are in crisis. Is it possible to argue that, previously, precarity was a hidden form, not seen as a desirable ideal? Workers had won their right to formal work contracts and to regulate hours of work and pay. This established a certain notion of legitimacy and acceptability. Even when formal contracts were denied, and casual labour was employed, the hegemonic ideal of formal contract was not questioned. That was seen as the desirable form, the legally appropriate form. Can one argue, then, that, today, these criteria of desirability and acceptability are no longer seen as necessary by employers? Precarity has now come to be conceptually seen as permissible, as inevitable. We have the establishment of a new normal, a new hegemonic legal order of power relations. The hidden is no longer hidden.

Finally, about the relationship between precarity, informalization, and resistance. All too often, precarity is seen as an explanation of workers' incapacity to resist, to question power, to protest. Precarity and vulnerability, I would argue, do not necessarily do away with resistance to power. Recent studies show how workers in precarious and informal jobs negotiate with employers at an everyday level and sometimes go on strikes. Steel workers in the industrial hub of Wazirpur in North West Delhi, for instance, staged three major strikes between 2012 and 2014, forcing managements to negotiate.¹⁴

A powerful argument that has developed in some recent studies is that informal workers today are waging new kinds of struggles. Their struggles for wages or better conditions are taking place outside the site of production: instead of making demands on owners of capital for wages and better conditions, workers confront the state, using the rhetoric of citizenship.¹⁵ More recently, in a time of crisis for

¹²For penetrating insights on digital capitalism and new forms of control, see Moritz Altenried's, *The Digital Factory: The Human Labor of Automation* (Chicago, IL, 2022).

¹³For a discussion on the concept of precarity, see Marcel van der Linden, "San Precario: A New Inspiration for Labor Historians", *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 11 (2014), pp. 9–21; Ronaldo Munck, "The Precariat: A View from the South", *Third World Quarterly*, 34 (2013), pp. 747–762; Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, "Precarity as a Political Concept, or Fordism as Exception", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 25 (2008), pp. 51–72.

¹⁴Workers went on strike in the summer months, a time when labour demand was high and capitalists were in a more vulnerable position, as elaborated in Naveen Chander, Chitra Joshi, Prabhu Mohapatra, and Aditya Sarkar, "Workers Struggle against Informality: A Chronicle of Two Strikes", unpublished paper presented at the Conference "Between the State and the Site of Production: The Making of Informal Labour Relations" organised by the Max Weber Stiftung and ICAS:MP at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) Mumbai, 26–27 September 2016.

¹⁵Rina Agarwala, "Reshaping the Social Contract: Emerging Relations between the State and Informal Labor in India", *Theory and Society*, 37 (2008), pp. 375–408.

industrial production during the pandemic, workers in industrial establishments in different regions in India staged mass walkouts in protest against the nationwide lockdown that immobilized labour.

The essays in this volume show how the frontiers of control over labour shift at certain moments, but power remains all-encompassing and pervasive, and the balance in favour of workers is fleeting. All too often they feel disempowered and diminished. In the words of Ju Li's informant, "workers everywhere are indeed the same: small". In this sense, the note of optimism in Mayer-Ahuja's conclusion, which draws on Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* – "It is possible to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence" – does not entirely flow out of the general tenor of the essays in this volume. One could say, however, that this is a hope that makes a project of studying labour meaningful: an endless search for the cracks to see how the light gets in.