



Putting the inalienable to work: labour and life in contemporary capitalism

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review of

Adkins, L. and M. Dever (eds.) (2016) *The post-Fordist sexual contract: Working and living in contingency*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan (HB, pp. 217, \$79.00, 978-1-137-49553-2)

A reviewer's job is made much easier when one of the editors identifies precisely what is valuable about the collection in her introduction. Describing one of the contributions to *The post-Fordist sexual contract*, Lisa Adkins writes that the author 'resists turning to an unnuanced account of the movement of capital into all areas of life' [14]. Instead, the chapter author uses the collapse of boundaries between work and life to generate a study of 'both old and new labour, home and work, production and consumption' [14]. I would suggest that all contributions to this volume, both individually and collectively, perform the same layered analytic. Through a variety of rich empirical studies into arenas of work as diverse as home-based craft industries, paid care work, 'mommy blogging' and academia this collection maps the specificity of gendered and sexed forms of work. Most importantly, the studies here don't take the absorption of the whole of life into capital as the conclusion of their findings. Rather, this is the basic assumption from which their analyses emerge. Taking the intertwining of identity politics and political economy as a given is what distinguishes this collection and is also that which places it firmly in a feminist tradition.

Of course, this link to feminism is obvious from the title of the collection that riffs from Carole Pateman's 1988 study of the gendering and exclusions of the

social contract. This volume is not updating Pateman's work per se, but relies on its insight that underlying all formal contracts, including those of labour, are a range of tacit social and cultural contracts that differentially enact regimes of freedom and subordination, particularly in relation to gender and sex. In this collection, the analysis of these contracts is placed within the dynamics of post-Fordist, neoliberal, advanced capitalism typified by regimes of precarious, unstable and poorly remunerated work. Contingency in the subtitle is here associated with feminised industries, the 'feminisation' of work (Mies et al., 1988; Adkins, 2001; Morini, 2007) and the experience of 'othered' workers in contemporary capitalism. However, the addition of 'living and working' and the refusal to privilege one or the other makes this a powerful critique with lineage drawing from feminist history. While the implications of them are broad, it is no wonder that almost all of the studies focus on gender, sex and/or feminised professions.

The collection is organised into 3 sections exploring different aspects of contemporary work. The first focuses on the role of the inalienable within capitalism. Adkins' introduction is followed by Dan Irving's study of how the processes of transitioning impact on the experience of work for trans women. Underpinning this analysis is the role played by gender performance, particularly normative performances of femininity and masculinity, in the workplace. What Irving does, though, is not only identify the social issues like shaming and social isolation associated with transitioning in the workplace, but to examine these as economic events. Citing the high levels of unemployment in trans* identified populations, Irving's study thus highlights how gender and sex – experienced so intensely as inalienable aspects of self – are implicated in the contemporary economy.

Another form of transitioning is examined by Kori Allen's study of the experiences of work-related bridging programmes for Canadian immigrants. Allen notes that these projects encourage migrants to engage in speculative investment in their own human capital, to develop their potential as workers through volunteering and self-development, rather than identifying labour market gaps and equipping them for labour in those sectors. What is learned in these work transition programmes is not skills, but a particular entrepreneurial subjectivity. She also notes that the extension of micro-credit loans to migrants, particularly migrant women, to start businesses relates the culture of entrepreneurship and the logic of self-investment directly to financial debt. In Allen's study, self-making becomes financialised.

Mona Mannevo also explores the regulation of work through self-actualisation discourses, this time focussing on women in academia. She analyses

contributions to a Finnish collection, *Tutkimusmatkoja äitiyteen* (Research Journeys to Motherhood), documenting 33 stories of women's experience combining work in academe with parenting. She explores the various affects that circulate in these accounts, using Berlant's idea of 'cruel optimism' (also picked up elsewhere in the collection) to explain the continued attachment to a troublesome form of labour. Mannevuola argues that ambivalence and contradiction abound in women's narratives about their work, including that in the self-assessments made about the quality of their affective and immaterial labour for both family and institution.

The second section picks up on the intersection of love and money identified by Mannevuola and Allen as it focuses more closely on the financialisation of the inalienable in work undertaken in domestic contexts. Beginning with Susan Luckman's exploration of home-based craft micro-enterprises, this section incrementally builds a picture of the complex entanglement of economics and subjectivity. Examining the self-descriptions offered on seller's blogs on the craft website Etsy, Luckman identifies a recurring narrative form that locates a happy resolution to the tensions between work and life, in particular those of parenting, in home-based work. She suggests that micro-enterprises are offered as a 'magical solution' or symbolic reconciliation to the problems of post-Fordism, particularly those faced by women whose assumed role as primary carer remains little challenged in hetero-patriarchal family contexts. That this fantasy does not, in fact, resolve the inequalities and problems of precarity and contingency that abound in contemporary labour contexts is the final, cautionary point.

Jessica Taylor also explores home-based micro-enterprises, this time the phenomenon of mommy blogging. Using the idea of the palimpsest in order to avoid casting such work as new, she explores texts positing blogging as a new opportunity for middle-class women (such as the 2012 'Canadian Digital Mom' report by Mom Central Consulting) with historical texts exploring women's work (such as Marjory MacMurchy's *The Canadian girl at work: A book of vocational guidance* published in 1919). In particular, she notes the importance of home economics and its overlaying of scientific management principles onto domestic work as a precursor of the commercialisation practices of mommy blog authors and communities. She thus suggests that the overlapping of home and work contexts is less novel than is often assumed. She concludes that the monetisation of mommy blogging, 'while clothed in the form of exciting new media, is clearly shaped by long-standing gendered structures of work' [124].

Lisa Adkins and Maryanne Dever's chapter also picks up on the topic of gendered domestic work, highlighting the crisis in social reproduction associated with the post-Fordist condition. They offer a complex documentation of the ways in which

the dynamics of households and the nature and quality of domestic work are entangled with processes of financialisation. From the penetration of financial devices into the household to the privatisation of various reproductive activities previously offered by the state or unpaid housewives, calculative work has become a new form of everyday, domestic labour. Their point, though, is that domestic labour may indeed be 'hardwired' to commerce through models that measure its contribution to the performance of assets such as water and electricity companies on financial markets. It is not merely that domestic work is being monetised but that the reproductive sphere is increasingly entangled in the creation of promissory financial value.

The final section focuses on governance structures of contemporary work. This theme has been a persistent feature of the previous studies but, in the three papers here, both formal and informal regulatory frameworks that shape work are brought to the fore. Orly Benjamin reports on an institutional ethnography of subcontracted Israeli care providers, focusing in particular on the contractual logics understood by high and low-level administrators in private and State bodies as well as individual care workers. Her goal is to understand how the logics of the contracts that are sourced in post-Fordism result in diminished quality of work for carers. Benjamin documents how refusal to recognise the need for training and education or compromising on occupational standards in order to meet budgets, generates the precarity, under-resourcing and low remuneration of contract employees, as well as difficult labour conditions. In doing so, Benjamin offers a useful and complex empirical case study of how post-Fordist economics shape labour.

Lydia Hayes also looks at mostly female care workers in the UK, focussing her attention on the covert surveillance of home-based carers by the families for whom they work. Like Benjamin, Hayes places such work in the context of deregulated and privatised social services, but also in the context of a news media keen to exploit the spectacle of perceived cruelty associated with poor caring labour. These discourses that identify care workers as always potentially self-serving and ruthless are the backdrop for the experiences of the workers interviewed in this study. Hayes describes the disciplining exerted by the threat of hidden CCTV cameras as well as the ways in which they individualise responsibility for mishaps, in effect diverting attention from problems caused by deregulation of the industry.

The final study of the collection by Ayse Akalin also explores discipline in home-based care work, this time engaged with the high turnover in migrant domestic labour in Turkey. In particular, Akalin highlights the use of 'lying' as a tactic of resistance by vulnerable women workers, until recently unprotected by

regulations and set contracts. She explores the deployment of the pejorative figure of the Migrant Domestic Worker (MDW) in the management of relations between employer and employee. Nevertheless, she also notes how the migrant worker must always be more than this stereotype, moving beyond their abjection in order to provide the living labour required of the role. In the absence of clear contractual obligations, ‘lying’ about, for instance, being called back urgently to the mythic, poverty-stricken family in the home country is used as a safe method for quitting an employer and manifesting autonomy. It also serves, as Akalin notes, as a means of resisting the ‘becoming’ imposed by the figure of the MDW. It is the agency of living labour.

The evidence of the quality of this collection lies in the thematic coherence around the intersection of the inalienable with capital, in particular the ways in which subjectivity is inextricably entwined into its logics as both cause and effect of exploitation. In the studies presented here, labour contracts, surveillance technology, fantasy, self-help literature, popularly circulated discourses of migrants and even romance novels and films all work as part of the ‘mechanisms of becoming’ [196] of the contemporary waged or unwaged workplace. This integration of the personal and the political; the formally productive and the reproductive; the social and the economic into studies of work is inherently valuable.

Despite this complexity, there is a tendency throughout the collection to tacitly or overtly describe this integration as something new. This is partly a problem of using the ‘post’ prefix in the book title. The term ‘post-Fordism’, as is the problem with all post- modifiers, suggests a break with the organisational logics of Fordism and indeed earlier forms of capitalist accumulation. There is the implication, then, that there is something new about the labour dynamics under investigation in this volume. Such attribution of novelty to the incorporation of subjectivity into capitalism has become a disturbing feature of much recent scholarship on labour, particularly those drawing on Mario Tronti’s (1973) idea of the social factory. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Jarrett, 2016), this position is marked by its blindness to the specificity of the experience it describes. When attention is paid to the gendered division of labour and the economics of women’s oppression under capitalism, attributions of novelty to the subsumption of immaterial aspects of self and body seem misplaced. Consequently, whenever a distinction between contemporary and precursor labour practices is implied in this volume, it registers as both absolute and internal dissonance. The studies in *The post-Fordist sexual contract*, not least because of their focus on feminised labour arenas, argue for continuity, modification and extension in the capture and regulatory systems of capital

rather than rupture. The post- prefix in the title thus becomes a niggly, but certainly not fatal, issue in the arguments of the collection.

This excellent volume is a valuable addition to the growing body of literature (re-) turning to the sphere of social reproduction and its theorisations in which the reproductive aspects of labour are considered integral to the value chains of capitalism. In doing so, it aligns itself with the current vogue for interrogating labour through the insights of Autonomist Marxism, which is particularly prevalent in my own field of internet research. But the complexity of the approach used in this volume takes it beyond the insights of the Autonomist paradigm, limited as that is by its blinkers in relation to issues of gender, sexuality, embodiment and race. By mapping the actualities of living labour in conditions of precarity, *The post-Fordist sexual contract* generates critical interventions that more adequately address the intersections of a variety of mechanisms of subjugation. It is a rich contribution to our understanding of work, identity and capitalism.

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