

On Making a Living and of the Reproduction of the Working Class

Work and Livelihoods: History, Ethnography and Models in Times of Crisis. SUSANA NAROTZKY and VICTORIA GODDARD (eds.). New York and London: Routledge, 2017; 223 pp. (list of figures, list of contributors, index). ISBN 978-1-138-81398-4

The chapters in *Work and Livelihood: History, Ethnography and Models in Times of Crisis* give anthropological (analytical) and ethnographic depth to understanding the effects of *flexibility* on individuals and communities affected by the restructurings of heavy industry in the post-socialist countries in Europe and South America. This “polysemic concept” (Narotzky cited in this volume, p. 212) is also central to Zygmunt Bauman’s understanding of what he calls a *liquid* modernity – a permanentization of “times of crisis.” Reading *Work and Livelihood* in conversation with Bauman’s analyses (e.g., Bauman 2007) not only provides us with an intriguing contrast of anthropological and sociological perspectives about the modernities people(s) navigate in, but also allows for different subjectivities to enter this often much too alienating discourse.

Structured into four sections, these are framed by an introduction (Victoria Goddard) and the concluding remarks (Susana Narotzky) of the editors, in which they emphasise the main themes and theoretical outcomes of the volume.

In Section I (*Past, Present and Future: Generations in Times of Crisis*) Pine (Lublin, Poland), Perelman and Vargas (San Nicolás, Argentina) and Díaz Crovetto (Volta Redonda, Brazil) discuss changes in generational dynamics connected to processes of privatization, globalization and adherence to capitalist norms. They describe and analyse the (im)possibilities of generational transmission in circumstances where dramatic changes in the structure and functioning of local heavy industries, and the accompanying changes in the role of these factories in the social and economic fabric of the local communities force workers to adopt new strategies in attempting to secure jobs for the younger generation. In places where steel and mining families were the norm defining continuity

for the place and the community, or where the fall of socialism disrupted lives and livelihoods, the different generations perceive and have to navigate very different realities. Generational transmission – in its traditional sense – becomes redundant, and in this friction of differing experiences, both parties feel a certain kind of loss.

In Section II (*Continuities and Discontinuities*), D’Aloisio (Melfi, Italy), Trappmann (West Germany and UK) and Spyridakis (Piraeus, Greece) analyse changing gender relations brought about by the employment of female workforce in heavy industry, and increasingly challenging ideals of masculinity due to long-term precarity and deindustrialization. Informal activities and a wide social and kinship network are employed to subsidize wage-work. Male workers (or former workers) experience redundancy and take ever higher risks with dangerous jobs, while female workers need to carry the double burden of domestic responsibility and inflexible factory shifts.

In Section III (*Lives of Worth*), Don Kalb (Eindhoven and Wrocław), and Wódz and Gnieciak (Będzin Ksawera, Poland) give voice to informants who express a sense of loss of worth. Devaluation of lives is experienced both on a personal level in failure to narrate life experiences in a way that is meaningful or relevant to the lived experiences of younger generations, and on the level of social status and identity in the gradual devaluation of production work in face of knowledge-based industries in the processes of capitalist transition throughout Eastern Europe. In a parallel process, places are (in a quite literal sense) stripped of their value in sites of mines. Whereas extractive and production sectors were heavily invested in before and during socialism, these sites are almost entirely neglected since other, more profitable sectors can function with fewer, more specialised workers.

In Section IV (*Politics and Resistance*) Buzalka and Ferencová (Podbrezová, Slovakia), Kasmir (Spring Hill, USA) and Sabaté Muriel (Galicia, Spain) describe the stratification of the working class, in the rise of *another kind* of worker (p. 209) alongside those working in the factory: the temporary, the outsourced, the ever more precarious. Capitalism, and socialism both “undermine the effectiveness of and status of workers’ organizations” (p. 16), which are often (like in the case of Cowley workers presented by Kasmir) overwhelmed by the task of protecting the exploitative, unhealthy jobs of workers.

The idea that accompanies the rising of the *other kind* of worker is *flexibility*. One of the tantalising ideas of modern consumerist culture is the potential to be reborn an infinite number of times: with each new job, each new product, each and every present that is void of the constraints of the past and the consequences of the future (Bauman 2007). *Flexibility* is desirable. But for whom? Whereas Bauman will stress the power dynamics inherent in this concept that is restructuring society (societies)

on every level and of the precarity and alienation attached to these dynamics, the chapters in this volume, and the surfacing themes of worth, place, power, continuity and discontinuity, and the ethnographic accounts and anthropological analyses give nuance and human reality to understanding what modern life means for the most vulnerable.

Also central to the volume is the tension between the abstract concept of space and the concreteness of place, the domain of actual living people. Whereas space is an abstraction of capital, of state power, an abstract assessment of political, economic and symbolic value, place is important for informants and anthropologists on multiple levels. On the one hand, place is multidimensional and multi-scalar. It is what is perceived, experienced, changed, located and referenced in people's experiences and narratives, in their accounts of navigating through a world. It is where they work, and which "in workers' vision are where they need to make a living in all the social complexity that this entails, i.e., sustaining life, being a social person, someone with dignity and respect" (p. 212). And in these endeavours they tend to their social relationships (Perelman and Vargas, D'Aloisio, Trappmann, Spyridakis, Sabaté Muriel, see also Ingold 2000), they engage with the landscape (Wódz and Gnieciak, Buzalka and Ferencová), they co-create, maintain and re-negotiate value (Pine, Díaz Crovetto, Trappmann, Spyridakis, Kalb, Wódz and Gnieciak, Sabaté Muriel) and experience time in the *longue durée*. "The attempt to hold back worthlessness is their main purpose and often results in moving from place to place and creating trans-local places" (p.212), as Narotzky sums up in her concluding remarks.

On the other hand, place is where people(s) are located. In their ventures to "hold back worthlessness," people strive to "make history," and in this process, *difference* emerges in the tension between place and space, which is experienced in spontaneous entanglements of people's lives, and emphasised in intentional production of differences as a means of control (p. 207). The tensions between place and space are analysed in anthropological work in their endeavour to comprehend the impacts of capital, corporations, and hegemonic power, whereas places are emphasised and described as distinct and different in ethnographic work to draw on (assumed) knowledge about the specifics of historical, cultural, economic and political background regarding their accounts.

Apart from the insightful analyses, one of the merits of the volume is the range of ethnographic methods it employs, and the resulting material, which comprises life stories and personal narratives (e.g., Kalb, Pines), ethnographic accounts of specific places (eg. Wódz and Gnieciak, Spyridakis) and comparative analyses of larger regions (e.g., Kasmir, Trappmann, Buzalka and Ferencová).

Should anyone be interested in recent ethnographies of the working class, political ecology, anthropology of space and place, extractive industries, post-socialism and understanding precarity and informal workers' networks, this volume is indispensable.

References:

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2007. *Consuming Life*. London: Polity.

Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.

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