

Book reviews

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Annie Delaney, Rosaria Burchielli, Shelley Marshall and Jane Tate (eds) *Homeworking Women: A Gender Justice Perspective*, Routledge: Abingdon, 2018; 186 pp. ISBN (pbk) 9781783535323, \$73.99. ISBN (hbk) 9781783533626, \$221.00. ISBN (ebook) 9780429430121, \$58.50.

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Introduction

We live in a time of emergency fatigue. We are continuously exposed to crises and atrocities that require urgent political, social and individual action. Rather than spurring us to action, such exposure can make solutions seem too difficult.

Such may be the case with the sprawling problem of exploitation of homeworkers; an exploitation in which we are all complicit, through the clothes we wear, the footballs we kick, the devices we use or even the food we eat. The demand on us to weigh each purchasing decision on its ethical merits is made more burdensome by the insidious way in which supply chains operate to distort the realities of production.

Homeworking Women: A Gender Justice Perspective (Delaney et al. 2018) is written by four authors who are leading experts in the field, with decades of experience between them. Their insights and knowledge demonstrate that the regulation and recognition of homework is indeed fraught with complexity and challenge.

While the authors acknowledge that '[m]any excellent books have already been written about homework' (Delaney et al. 2018: 2), this book can be distinguished from the previous literature in its analysis of homework through a gender justice lens. The authors explore the four justice dimensions of recognition, representation, rights and redistribution, and examine how these constructs are linked to power. Further, their framework is concerned with how current patriarchal and capitalist structures interact with these dimensions of justice and what impacts these might have on the lives of homeworkers.

Having each dedicated themselves to the improvement of the lives of women homeworkers, the authors note that '[t]he unchanged, persistent nature of homework, its invisibility and the many characteristic injustices for women employed within it are key factors motivating this book' (p. 5). They call on us to consider the often desperate circumstances of these women and demonstrate that even the best-intentioned reforms can run into difficulty. The systemic context of the injustice serves to reinforce the exploitation. There is no easy fix.

The book is organised into seven chapters, beginning with an overview of the problem. In establishing the gender-justice framework that provides the foundation for their

analysis, the authors first look at the nature of the injustices inherent in homework. They explore the precarious nature of the work, as well as its exploitation by the capitalist system, highlighting that across industries and regions, the majority of homeworkers are women.

In Chapter 2, the book considers the hidden nature of the work, or ‘invisibilisation’, which feeds into the vulnerability of homeworkers and leads to other difficulties around regulation. Chapter 3 picks up on this point and uses case studies to demonstrate attempts by various countries to extend the scope of labour laws to include homeworkers. The authors explore the barriers to implementation and enforcement of such laws. They suggest an approach that involves increasing responsibility and accountability along supply chains.

This leads to the next two chapters, which look, respectively, at ‘corporate social responsibility’ and ‘the logic of the supply chain’. Given the difficulties with respect to adequate regulation, as well as with the system of individual complaint that often underpins labour laws, it might make sense to aim for greater accountability from corporations. The authors acknowledge that there has been a rise in voluntary codes of conduct and other forms of corporate social responsibility but argue that such attempts are often compartmentalised within a corporation. The purpose of a supply chain is to maximise profits for the corporation, and there is likely to be an ideological disconnect between that purpose and worker rights. So, a corporation may respond to public pressure in relation to one area of their business, or may take some action to improve its reputation, while simultaneously ignoring other problems within their supply chain, or the core concerns of their workers.

The insights here are useful for anyone considering the ethical (or otherwise) behaviour of corporations, or the strengths and weaknesses of voluntary schemes as a means of addressing corporate conduct. In particular, the authors describe cases where the actions of corporations in responding to public pressure have resulted in worse outcomes for workers. They suggest that genuine engagement is the only viable alternative. Yet, in order for homeworkers to be in a position to meaningfully engage, they must have access to support networks.

In Chapter 6, the authors look at the importance of organising workers who, in many instances, have been considered ‘unorganisable’. Key to this is establishing and maintaining networks. There are powerful examples of transnational networks, and other instances of solidarity and organising. Again, however, the authors highlight some major obstacles. ‘A constant tension exists between the day-to-day demands of everyday life and work and the longer-term struggle to improve rights’ (Delaney et al. 2018: 147). The authors put forward ideas and suggestions for strengthening homeworker organisations.

This leads to a chapter entitled ‘Making change’, and it is in this final chapter that the extensive field experience of the authors proves most valuable. To begin to address the issues, one must first have a deep understanding of the complexities and challenges involved. With eyes firmly open, the authors posit ‘approaches in activism to achieve outcomes for homeworkers’ (p 169). These approaches include methodologies and movements that could well serve to inform practitioners and researchers in other areas who find themselves up against similar barriers.

Conclusion

The snapshot of the pervasive exploitation provided in this book might well be confronting for the reader who finds it likely that they are indeed a purchaser and consumer of goods produced by homeworkers. The candid assessment of the many failed attempts to regulate this work may be cause for alarm, or even depression. How can we be anything but complicit when the system has been designed this way, and the problems are so deeply entrenched? Yet the book inspires a feeling of momentum for resistance and change that offers hope and a way forward.

Conclusions drawn from years of research and activism have been distilled in a clear and accessible text. Aside from the important call to action that the book sounds in relation to such a substantial group of vulnerable workers, the insights and lessons drawn here may also be useful when considering approaches to other seemingly insurmountable ethical, legal and social challenges. Without shying away from the significant barriers that stand in the way of improvements, the authors suggest innovative solutions based on their observations and practical experience. This is a book for scholars and activists both.

Elizabeth Humphrys, *How Labour Built Neoliberalism: Australia's Accord, the Labour Movement and the Neoliberal Project*, Brill: Leiden, 2018. ISBN (hbk) 978-9-004349-00-1. ISBN (ebook) 978-9-004383-46-3, EUR€135.00/USD\$163.00.

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Elizabeth Humphrys' (2018) *How Labour Built Neoliberalism* has come at an opportune moment. After Labor suffered a surprise federal election loss, many in both the party and the movement are reassessing strategy and direction. Given the turmoil of the last set of Labor Governments, many will be looking back to what is now seen as a golden age of labour governance in the 1980s and 1990s.

Humphrys wants to challenge that instinct, reigniting a long-standing critique of the left's Third Way embrace of markets, and more specifically of the union movement's efforts at corporatism, leveraging its industrial strength for political gains. Internationally, the book contributes to an emerging debate over the role of progressive actors in facilitating neoliberal restructuring, a debate that challenges dominant accounts where neoliberalism advances as social democrats 'lose'.

At the book's centre is an exploration of the state. The book's cover provocatively challenges dominant understandings of neoliberalism. Both the title and the picture of a smiling Bob Hawke (Labor Prime Minister) meeting Margaret Thatcher, point to the key claim; neoliberalism is not only a product of the market-right, nor do the left uniformly play the role of resistance. Instead, efforts by unions and left parties to work through the state often end with the state transforming these actors, rather than these actors transforming the state.

Humphrys' critique is located within a Marxist tradition, sceptical of the state's role in managing capitalist economies, ultimately, on behalf of capital. However, she steers clear of some more reductionist Marxist readings by deploying Antonio Gramsci's