



William Monteith, Dora-Olivia Vicol and Philippa Williams (eds), *Beyond the Wage: Ordinary Work in Diverse Economies*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781529208931 (cloth); ISBN: 9781529208955 (ebook)

Beyond the Wage is an insightful edited volume that makes a crucial contribution towards a rethinking of work and ongoing debates on the future of work. The editors' introduction provides a succinct summary of key conversations in the field that is helpful for readers interested in these ongoing debates and lays out a framework of "ordinary work", which ties together the individual chapters. The editors identify and describe four themes – ruptures, resignations, struggles, and possibilities – as sections of the volume into which the individual chapters fit quite neatly. The individual chapters are full of ethnographic detail that provides deep insight into and analysis of people's lives and livelihoods "beyond the wage". The contributions encompass a range of livelihood sectors – brick kiln workers, rickshaw and motorcycle drivers, street vendors, and a host of other service providers – in the global South as well as the North, which addresses the "urgent need to provincialize the wage", as the editors suggest in their introduction (p.2). What is also remarkable about the book is its readability; none of the chapters are heavily theory laden, and each provides a rich mix of empirical evidence in support of theories of work and labor. This makes this volume an excellent resource for even a novice audience including undergraduate students and others who are looking to gain a deeper understanding of the field. The individual contributions in this volume are not only interesting, insightful, and thought provoking on their own, they also work well together. In terms of structure of the book, what might have made this collection even more coherent, however, is a concluding chapter. While the introduction does a great job of framing the contributions, a concluding chapter could open up questions, highlight avenues for future research, and perhaps even complicate the editors' initial framings.

As one reads the volume, a few tensions become palpable, particularly one between the individual and the collective, and another between agency and structure. In either case, most of

the contributions in this volume analytically privilege agency over structure and the individual over the collective. As I will suggest later, these analytical choices have political ramifications.

The chapters in this volume provide us deep ethnographic insight into the lives and livelihoods of the researchers' interlocutors, telling us about individuals, their agentive struggles and potentials. However, in many cases the reader is left wondering about workers' collective efforts to mobilize and organize. For example, while Mara Nogueira, in her account of street vendors in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, tells us that some vendors were "politically active", we get little if any sense of the kinds of political struggles being waged even though the chapter's central argument is that the decline of the Brazilian Workers Party must be understood in relation to the "the historical exclusion of non-waged workers [such as street vendors] and their interests from the trade union movement" (p.226). Similarly, in Annemiek Prins' account of rickshaw drivers in Dhaka, we are left wondering if there was any collective mobilization on the part of rickshaw drivers, or perhaps even owners, in response to Dhaka's new urban policies that immediately impinged on their livelihoods. Some chapters do attend to workers' efforts towards organization. For instance, Vinzenz Bäumer Escobar's chapter, for instance, focuses on the experiences of members of a Catalonian cooperative, providing us a rich and nuanced understanding of the challenges that collectivization projects face even when many of its members are committed to the cause. Similarly, Mechthild von Vacano's chapter on the platformization of Jakarta's motorbike taxi industry beautifully recounts the collective grassroots struggles waged by traditional motorbike drivers (ojek) against the "uberization" of their sector, and subsequently by the "uberized" motorbike drivers (gojek) against their platform firms. Interestingly, von Vacano tells us that gojek drivers were organized by a "subset of new drivers with a history of employment in the industrial sector, who brought their experiences of formal labor organization to the ojek industry" (p. 226). The experience of wage employment and collective organization in the industrial sector provided gojek drivers the tools to organize and mobilize their coworkers in a "beyond the wage" context. Similarly, in Dora-Olivia Vicol's

account of London's migrant workers during the pandemic, we hear briefly of the success, however limited, of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain in extending direct assistance, originally directed only towards wage workers, to self-employed workers.

Related to this is the tension between agency and structure. In focusing on individual workers' agentic capacities, and the creative ways they craft a livable life for themselves, the authors heavily lean on select literature that eschews the role of structure. The editors and contributors to this volume draw inspiration from feminist scholarship in geography, particularly J.K. Gibson-Graham's "diverse economies" framework that urges a move away from structuralist analyses on the grounds that structural "representations of capitalism as an obdurate structure or system" affirm an "ultimately essentialist, usually structural, vision of what is" and thus reinforce "what is perceived as dominant" (Gibson-Graham 2008: 615, 618). In line with this framework, contributions to this volume thus intend to "broaden the socio-economic imaginary of work" and envision the "future of work" as "plural and open-ended; rather than the invention of particular groups of people in advanced capitalist economies, it is the product of the 'inventiveness of people ... everywhere'" (p.11). With the exception of Nithya Natarajan, Katherine Brickell and Laurie Parsons' chapter, the editors and some other contributors largely treat Gibson-Graham's propositions axiomatically. In engaging with the diverse economies framework, Natarajan, Brickell and Parsons argue that "generative capacities at the individual level are embedded in, and constrained by, broader structures of exploitation and appropriation, which devalue and disempower people's aspirations", showing us how such devaluation and disempowerment then is a "part of a wider strategy on the part of capital to discipline workers" (p.177).

Yet if, as the editors suggest, a diverse economies framework treats all economies as being "composed of market, alternative market and non-market transactions; of waged, alternative paid, and unpaid labor" (p.7), then might more attention to structure allow for teasing out the *relations* between them? Many chapters recount the ongoing dependence of workers on

wage employment. Because wages are insufficient, some workers pursue a range of economic activities to craft a livable life. Yet, the authors do not really theorize this dependence – these *relations* between waged work and work “beyond the wage”. In part, this is related to a conceptual ambiguity in the authors’ understanding of the relation of work “beyond the wage” to the capitalist structure/system, a relation that was of much interest to scholars engaged in the articulation of modes of production debate more than three decades ago (see, for instance, Wolpe 1980). While that literature might easily be dismissed as being reductive or narrowly economic, it does provide useful insights into these *relations*, which deserve to be engaged with even if for correction. For instance, some contributors to this volume urge us to see self-employment as work “beyond the wage” despite legitimate contestations of such a conclusion. Drawing on the work of Chevalier (1983) and Banaji (2003), Dinler (2016) for instance has urged that we see waste picking labor in Ankara, Turkey as a new form of wage labor rather than as self-employment. This calls into question the fundamental *epistemological* premise of this edited volume related to the extent that contemporary forms of work are indeed “beyond the wage”. The wage relation, and the forms of exploitation inherent in it, extend not only to the standard employment relationship but arguably to forms of work that the contributors to this volume understand as being “beyond the wage”.

Gibson-Graham’s (2008: 616) inspirational “diverse economies research program” urges scholars to see it as a “performative ontological project – part of bringing new economies into being – rather than a realist epistemological project of capturing and assessing existing objects”. Yet, even though the editors espouse this framework, the contributions in this volume remain largely epistemological. Indeed, in my own work, I also remain as guilty of this as any of the contributors here. While the contributions here go a long way towards pluralizing our understandings of work, almost all the authors agree that we must be careful not to romanticize the lives of workers for a host of reasons. For instance, Prins acknowledges that rickshaw labor is not only “physically demanding, and at times hazardous”, but also does not offer “a secure or

safe mode of employment” (p.188, 190). Similarly, Samuel Strong suggests that for those on welfare, “living without a wage necessitates *greater work* in order to survive” (p.54). Escobar shows how the pursuit of alternative economic projects leave “many feeling physically, emotionally and financially drained” (p.156). Unsurprisingly, life “beyond the wage” is difficult. But if, as Tatiana Thieme suggests, we should all “aspire to a life beyond mere survival” (p.40), the question of imagining futures and the politics necessary for those futures then becomes an urgent ontological one. But it is precisely this question that needs better answers and is where the contributions to the volume fall short. The editors’ introduction suggests that the ongoing discursive construction of wage work as the ideal, obscures diverse histories and lived experiences of work “beyond the wage”. They promise that the lens of “ordinary work” will allow for “alternative possibilities [to] come into view, along with the tactics and strategies necessary to transfer them into the future” (p.11). Yet, we hardly hear about what these alternatives are or the tactics and strategies that might lead us towards them.

Thieme, for instance, urges that hustling might “constitute a generative form of work in its own right” and thus is “suggestive of openings for new ways to reimagine and remake work and livelihood” (p.29, 28). But we do not quite get a sense of what it would take to reimagine and what political work such a reimagination might do. Asiya Islam tells us that “[a]ccounting for non-income-generating reproductive labor as part of ‘ordinary work’ would facilitate the development of long-term and sustainable policy measures aimed at augmenting people’s capacities rather than merely increasing rates of employment” (p.109). Here again, we are left wondering who and how should do such an accounting and what such policy measures might be. Nogueira suggests that paying attention to street vendor subjectivities is how we “might arrive at a more inclusive politics that is able to overcome the global crisis of labor” (p.248). But we don’t get a sense of what such an inclusive politics looks like. Natarajan, Brickell and Parsons suggest that instead of assuming “generative capacities” of work, analysis must begin by “asking how such capacities can be empowered through structural reform, thus focusing on systemic rather

than individual conceptualizations of poverty and vulnerability” (p.178). Although the call for structural reform is laudable, the reader is left to wonder what it might entail. In the worst case, some contributions might be read even as a defense of precarity. For instance, while Claudia Strauss acknowledges that contract workers “did not like the low pay and uncertain tenure of temp work”, she nonetheless concludes that “social and psychological characteristics of a job can be as important as its contractual form” (p.88).

There are exceptions to these shortcomings in this volume, however. Escobar’s research is focused on one example of the kinds of experimentation with alternative economies that Gibson-Graham and other scholars have urged for. Other contributors have targeted the state more explicitly in their concluding comments and recommendations. For instance, Vicol proposes that her research points to the need for a “new politics of universal redistribution” (p.273). Similarly, Strong suggests that there is a need to “socially and politically mobilize alternative forms of work so that they may be recognized by the state and supported through unconditional interventions” (p.63). E. Fouksman, whose entire chapter is devoted to examining a universal basic income program in Namibia, argues for a need to reframe basic income in terms of distribution of shared collective wealth in order to expand the support for such programs.

Many of the contributions demonstrate workers’ own “moral, social and psychological attachments” to wage labor (p.289). Fouksman for instance finds a “deeply held resistance to receiving income from (or through) the state without labor”; the interviewees expressed a preference for a hypothetical government work program over a basic income grant. Here, the key is that Fouksman’s interlocutors expressed their preference for a particular kind of wage labor – work in a government program. Similarly, both Hannah Dawson’s and Prins’ research participants expressed their desires to work in government jobs because this was considered to be the means to social advancement. Work outside the wage was insufficient to ever guarantee what Dawson’s interlocutors deemed to be a “successful” life (p.133). Government jobs with “lifelong employment, pensions and other benefits” were the tickets to success, the gateway to class

mobility (p.194). Other contributors such as Strong emphasize that people's economic activities "beyond the wage" are "driven by a lack of choice" (p.61).

In this context then, it might be useful to imagine what this extraordinary range of workers whose stories are narrated in this edited volume might want. Could they desire what the ILO (2021) terms "decent work", which it defines as "work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men"? Yet, the editors dismiss the ILO's "decent work agenda" because it "reproduces a singular idea of work based on the historical experiences of industrial workers in Western Europe" and "draws unfortunate parallels with the historical attempts of European colonial powers to use wage work as a tool to discipline indigenous populations based on a moral discourse that associated work with 'decency'" (p.8, 9). Instead, the editors urge that the "refusal of the wage in much of the postcolonial world forms part of a longer history of anti-colonial resistance" (p.3). But the evidence that the contributors have laid out might be read in a completely different way: that people indeed want "decent work" that provides them the capabilities – to use Amartya Sen's (1999: 18) term – to "lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value".

Indeed, as the editors suggest, people are motivated to work in "non-standard jobs" due to a range of factors which often include a "desire to avoid the degrading and isolating aspects of wage labor" (p.9). But is not this precisely the reason to fight for "decent work", however poor and historically insensitive the name choice for the ILO's agenda is? So then, perhaps the real question is one of the tactics and strategies necessary to get us towards futures where we can "aspire to a life beyond mere survival" (p.40). Redistribution programs such as universal basic income are certainly a way forward. But so is the need for empowering and mobilizing workers. As Nogueira shows, the "historical exclusion of non-waged workers and their interests from the

trade union” (p.235) helps explain why street vendors in Belo Horizonte voted for Bolsonaro. Indeed, the “social void left by the breakdown of the traditional labor organizations” has been filled by right-wing populists worldwide (Breman and van der Linden 2014: 936). Against this, Breman and van der Linden have argued, “only a drastically reformed and reorganized international trade union movement can offer a way out” (2014: 937). Yet, the contributors to this volume have been largely silent on the question of the need for worker mobilization (p.109, 248). A contract worker that Strauss interviewed saw benefits that went “beyond the contractual minimum”, such as “[f]ringe benefits and expense reimbursements”, as “signs of caring” (p.84). What if, instead, they were seen as basic rights that workers are entitled to and are able to fight for?

This book opens up these questions and more. And this is precisely what good research and writing should do – motivate our search for a politics that is adequate to the persistently recurring crises that have been and are arguably increasingly becoming more of a part of the lived realities of workers everywhere. For this, an ontological politics needs to go beyond an epistemological politics dedicated to opening up “debates on the future of work” (p.5). In the end, without a clear ontological politics, the contributions remain epistemologically bound, restricted by their own theoretical frames.

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August 2021