

Book Review Forum

Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, *Garments without Guilt? Global Labour Justice and Ethical Codes in Sri Lankan Apparels*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781108832014 (cloth); ISBN: 9781009032315 (ebook)

Authors Response

Inspired by Yugoslavia's market socialism, Trotskyists in the Sri Lankan government instituted workers' councils during the 1970s. A decade later, the experiment collapsed. What explains its rise and fall?

— Uditha Devapriya (2023)

Antipode, its editors and Andy Kent, have been gracious, as have Jayanthi Lingham, Sabina Lawreniuk, and Alex Hughes, in creating this forum space for my book *Garments without Guilt? Global Labour Justice and Ethical Codes in Sri Lankan Apparels* to follow on from the RGS-IBG conference held at Newcastle University in August/September 2022. I want to start by recording my appreciation for their time and hard work, despite our increasingly chaotic working lives, strike actions in the United Kingdom, and busy schedules to make this conversation and publication outing possible. Next, I want to thank the reviewers, Jayanthi, Sabina, and Alex, for their generous, creative, and insightful reflections and commentaries on the monograph. For these, I am immensely grateful.

I start with a quotation of a young journalist in Sri Lanka speaking on his reflections on worker councils and the central role they attempted to play in the country's working-class history. These are registers that we need to continuously unearth because to do so offers an alternative way of approaching working-class collectives rather than limiting ourselves to locating labour and capital relations over the *longue durée*.

Workplace realities are far from constant conflict; this is especially so in factory settings, where camaraderie, cajoling, coaxing, and concessions sit alongside conflict and tension. In other words, the shop floor does not always or necessarily sit as either an

exclusively synergistic or antagonistic space. So, Lawreniuk is right that I call for a “cooperative labour–management ethos”, and yet I do so with an abiding desire for promoting working-class rights (p.xvii).

My call arises from both empirical observations as well as close readings of working-class histories. To take the former, rather than binaries of synergistic v. antagonistic, shop floor realities necessitate contestation and compromise to sit alongside each other in production sites with regards to labour–management relations. Given this daily reality, very similar to the Nordic countries and Germany, for instance, there needs to be further research on a cooperative labour–management ethos that may have existed, and which needs to be institutionalised. In other words, in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere in the global South), structural facets that inhibit the presence of worker councils needs to be tackled head on. And, it may be the very absence of worker councils that results in the lack of what Alain Supiot calls “economic democracy” within workspaces, where the upshot is the lack of economic citizenship for workers (Le Texier and Supiot 2018). Hence, when we have The Messenger Band in Cambodia say, “Employers oppress us and give us no rights and freedom”, the oppression also comes from the lack of economic rights. The struggle, however, can be both within and outside the shop floor, with legal framings also needed to strengthen and offer an institutional context that workers can draw on. It is these legal framings protecting labour rights and worker council presence within workplaces that facilitated many Scandinavian countries to work towards equality—and although, as Thomas Piketty (2022) notes, this is not without struggle and had opportune political context, the aspiration towards equality needs frequent invocation. In the global South, the tussles and outcomes that Lawreniuk and The Messenger Band identify should also consist of options that keep workers in meaningful, secure, and protected jobs—and for this, workplace democracy, both political and economic, is a necessity.

Worker councils, like in Scandinavia or Germany, are a goal to promote, advocate, and struggle towards so that we go beyond the analysis of the underbelly of capitalism and also champion institutional entities that embed worker rights within workplaces. Hence, it is a recognition of labour agency that makes me claim that “we should champion the role of apparel sector industrialists in the upgrading process” (p.10). To continue the rest of the sentence, my purpose was to underline the “space for the rightful place of labour and their

claims for labour justice”, and draw out how labour geographies too shaped the evolution of Sri Lankan apparels.

A similar concern in Lingham’s thought-provoking commentary (especially as an outsider/insider, like myself) seemingly has more resonance, given that she speaks of the North and East of Sri Lanka—former war-torn regions of the country. She is totally correct to note that apparel producers’ intentions of job creation in a post-war setting without attentiveness to war-torn context means that multiple forms of violence were created or exacerbated—and these are critical factors. It is for these reasons, the book—and Chapter 7 especially—alerts to possibilities of code infringements around forced labour and discrimination, dynamics less evident or pronounced in the rest of the country.

In my reading of factories entering former war zone areas and in writing about the militarised nature of capitalism—both in the book and prior, for *Antipode* (Ruwanpura 2018)—firms were subject to a level of scrutiny which was hitherto absent in Sri Lankan scholarship, or indeed in GVC and GPN writings more generally. With this backdrop of militarised capitalism as the analytical handle, there is little space for judging apparel sector firms favourably, other than to draw attention to the consequent uneven application of ethical codes in a post-war setting. In the book, however, I did feature the intentions of apparel sector firms and management and their motivations to shift to post-war parts of Sri Lanka. Such blinded moves were politically insensitive, but more importantly when I draw out the cosyng up with the military and the state (militarised capitalism), the apparel sector was subject to a critical analysis that does anything but judge the firms favourably.

This is an evaluation that comes to haunt the Sri Lankan corporate sector (although not just the apparel sector) as it undergoes a severe debt crisis and has defaulted for the first time in its post-independence history. Although corruption has been outlined in the country, often the attribution of these unethical practices was to the government or state agents (Lindberg and Orjuela 2017). The crisis, however, has started to unravel and expose the role of corporates and private individuals—and the need for further analysis of union statements on illicit financial flows, corporate fraud, and corruption (Daily FT 2022). The unbounded nature of my research, which Hughes finds to be strength in my fieldwork approach, may require a journey to untraversed ground that human geographers working on supply chains may need to pay far more attention towards. Simply put, our gaze should not limit us to value

capture from labour to capital alone, but also cover value flows from labour to capital to offshore accounts or Western countries. This, however, is work for all of us.

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