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Nandini Deo

Lehigh University, USA

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Women, work, violence and the neo-liberal moment

Nandini Deo*

Lehigh University, USA


One of the surprising effects of neo-liberalism has been to shift progressive politics away from labour organizing towards NGO-led campaigns against social harms. Reading labour histories and feminist histories together, it is argued that the new politics of resistance needs a new language which combines broad feminist analysis with grassroots labour organizing strategies.

Keywords: feminist politics; labour; neo-liberalism; violence; coalitions; NGOs; unions

Neoliberal globalization is the thread that binds these three books together. Issues of labour organizing, employment conditions, and feminist organizing in India, Asia, and beyond are all contextualized by a particular form of globalization. This neoliberal globalization affects the relations and conditions of production of course, but it also shapes the possibilities for a progressive politics. There are certain types of employment regimes, certain types of union and feminist organizing, certain agendas, certain transnational networks, and certain relationships between civil society and the state that are favoured by the establishment of neoliberal economic and political ideals into a global orthodoxy. So, what is neoliberalism and how did it become so powerful?

Neoliberalism evolved from the set of 10 economic policies articulated as the ‘Washington consensus’ by the World Bank and given this title by John Williamson (2002) in the late 1980s, which focus on the need for governments to exercise ‘macroeconomic discipline, a market economy, and openness to the world (at least in
respect of trade and FDI’ (1). The assumptions that undergirded this consensus held by the World Bank and IMF and foisted on various governments as part of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) were that free trade globally and a limited state domestically create the ideal conditions for economic growth and development. From the very beginning, there were criticisms of these prescriptions and by the early 1990s most left-leaning critics saw the Washington Consensus and neoliberalism as coterminous ideologies ‘designed by the United States to globalize American capitalism and its associated cultural system’ (Steger and Roy 2010, x). Today neoliberalism is understood more broadly than the initial macroeconomic prescriptions of the Washington consensus to include a political ideal of a depoliticized state, a transformation of citizens into consumers, and a fragmented civil society. Even as criticisms of neoliberalism were voiced by the academy and given force by public protest over the past 20 years, the neoliberal consensus has been adopted as an economic ideal by all manner of states, even those such as China and India which profess a commitment to socialist or Marxist ideals. Some have argued that this contagion is a result of very active promotion by followers of economist Milton Friedman and those in the corporate class who benefit from these policies (Harvey 2007; Klein 2007). It is important to note that neoliberalism is not simply a set of economic policies, nor just an ideology of market fundamentalism, but can also be understood as a discourse of governmentality (Larner 2000). Such a threefold understanding draws attention to the ways in which neoliberalism simultaneously re-structures the economy, the state, and social life.

Neoliberal globalization leads to many transformations; those highlighted in the books reviewed here are the drive to create labour market flexibility, privatization and deregulation of economic activity, scaling back the provision of social services, and the increasing importance of the global public sphere over the local. The effect of most of these policies is relatively clear – workers are increasingly forced to bear the brunt of fluctuations in markets. That is, the risk previously borne by corporations or communities is now borne by the individual worker. This is most apparent when the world of work is seen through a gendered lens, a theme developed in the volume Labour, Globalisation and the State edited by Debdas Banerjee and Michael Goldfield. The contribution by Rakhi Sehgal, ‘State, market, and the household’, shows the increasing reliance on subcontracting and the assumption that social reproduction will take place in the home. This means that women are responsible for managing the risks of ill-health, providing sustenance and shelter, managing fluctuations in consumer demand, and responding to technological changes all within the home. In ‘Unorganized manufacturing, flexible labour and the “low road”’, Satyaki Roy shows that competition on the basis of low wages occurs in both rural and urban areas and concludes that ‘there is an increasing casualization and informalization of the female workforce’ (239). Moreover, this cannot be seen as an unintended consequence of greater economic policy goals. Indeed, ‘(t)he state’s policies of liberalization, export promotion and employment generation are supporting informal work as development’ (245). To this must be added the important intervention by S.M. Naseem, ‘Overseas migration, outsourcing and economic growth in South Asia’, and Jayati Ghosh’s ‘Informalization, migration and women: recent trends in Asia’ in the same volume. Both argue that Asian states are counting on remittances sent by an increasingly female and casualized migrant work force to fuel development and shore up foreign exchange reserves in a deliberate policy of encouraging international migration while providing no services.
or protections for these workers. The contributors to the volume *Women and Labour Organizing in Asia*, edited by Kaye Broadbent and Michele Ford, confirm and extend these findings in individual countries.

What is less well-known but equally consequential are the political effects of neoliberal globalization, particularly its impact on the agendas and trajectories of progressive social movements and labour unions. A key question which needs to be asked is: what forms of social justice claims are being heard? A recent debate from America offers one way to think about how neoliberalism shapes the issues of a progressive politics. In a protest against the inequalities and injustices of American capitalism which is legitimised and served by institutions of higher education, some argue against university attempts to simply diversify the faculty. ‘A university that no longer excludes people of colour but that increasingly excludes people without money is not a more just university. It is, instead, a university that has refused the injustices produced by racism while accepting the injustices produced by the unrestrained capitalism that is neoliberalism’ (Benn-Michaels 2008, 33). The argument is that in the effort to diversify the campus in a visible way, the underlying fight for equality in American society is silenced. By recruiting a few people of colour to the best universities, administrators are able to claim they are fighting for justice while quietly turning more and more of the professoriate into part-time, casual labour by hiring adjuncts. Talking about race is a way of not talking about capitalism. Benn-Michaels quotes a scholar of black political thought, ‘The “triumph of neoliberalism,” as Reed puts it, is the idea that “only inequalities resultant from unfavourable treatment based on negatively sanctioned ascriptive designations like race qualify as injustice”’ (Reed 2009 quoted in Benn-Michaels 2011, 3). Perhaps some activists are allowed to speak precisely in order to fill up the airwaves with claims other than those relating to the fundamental shifts brought about by the economic aspects of neoliberal globalization.

Reading these three books together suggests that a similar story might be told about the way violence against women has become an acceptable cause to rally around as means to draw attention away from the complicity of the state and capital in eviscerating the rights of workers – male and female. Violence against women, like racism, is a real problem. It must be addressed. But, I believe it is worth asking why at a certain moment in time it is the problem that the state and global institutions agree to examine? Kalpana Kannabiran and Ritu Menon, the authors of the volume *From Mathura to Manorama*, provide explanations.¹ One reason comes from within the disparate voices within the Indian women’s movement, as Kannabiran and Menon explain:

‘Within the movement itself, there is no single, common thread that binds it together, nor an agreed theoretical analysis or political position. . ..Notwithstanding this, however, a minimum consensus has evolved over the past three decades in the autonomous women’s movement, that rejects any rationalisation of violence against women and recognises the complexity of fields of violence...as cumulative and intersectional tools of patriarchal power’. (5–6)

Violence against women is something that activists from across the spectrum of feminist positions can agree upon- liberal and leftist both. The actions taken to ameliorate the problem shed further light, as Kannabiran writes:

‘Providing resources, shelter or legal service; researching their lack; sensitising judicial officers, the police and communities to the criticality of their work around and against violence; campaigning for justice in a particular case, often unsuccessfully; campaigning
for reform in legislation and finding that, often, the reformed law is made to stand on its head; are the constants of our resistance. . ..The critique, even within the movement, that these interventions are palliative and cannot in any fundamental way bring about a shift in women’s lived experiences of structural violence and inequality, is not unjustified’. (127–8)

What is true for the Indian women’s movement is true globally. Where in the 1970s the global women’s movement was focused on raising questions about economic development and the role of women within it, by the 1990s the issue of the decade was violence against women. This past decade has seen the ascendancy of sexual violence as the issue of the global movement (Joachim 2007). Kannabiran and Menon note that in the Indian case and elsewhere too, ‘(i)n the early 1980s, women’s groups theorised the patriarchal bases of the criminal justice system and sought legal reform as a way of providing effective remedy and redress for women’ (34). They further note that this was initially a means of making the private public by bringing domestic violence into the judicial realm but soon revealed itself to be ‘regrettably inadequate, indeed largely ineffective’ strategy (9). This global convergence on violence against women occurred precisely at the moment in the early 1990s when neoliberalism was at the height of its power and civil society seemed powerless to resist.

Reflecting on successes in sensitivity to the issue of violence against women, Kannabiran states ‘(s)hifts in public and official discourses at a particular historical moment represent a convergence of several forces, not the least of which is critical feminist dialogue with states, governments and communities’ (155). But, in addition to the genuine work of women’s activists, violence against women is a useful social justice issue which distracts feminists from the underlying inequalities that are intensifying in the neoliberal moment. The rise of violence against women as the issue around which feminists organized was facilitated by the emergence of an international legal discourse which was adopted by the newly proliferating NGOs around the world. ‘Over the past fifteen years especially, women’s groups in India have found it useful to build anti-violence campaigns around international conventions, as a way of prising open the private sphere to public scrutiny and public law in more effective ways’, according to Kannabiran in her sole authored chapter ‘Judicial and Legislative Action’ (44). The explosion of the NGO as the forum for progressive advocacy and service provision, replacing unions in many cases, has been identified as deeply depoliticizing (Chandhoke 2003). If neoliberalism is an ideology which seeks to individualize and atomize society, the resistance to it must coalesce around a redefinition of the community. Given the historical tensions between Marxist thought and feminism, is this possible?

Catherine MacKinnon (1982) states that ‘Marxism and feminism are theories of power and its distribution’, but proponents of the two theories accuse the other of misrepresenting what is most basic – work or sexuality (517). She goes on to argue that feminism is Marxism’s ‘final conclusion and ultimate critique’ as it makes the work of consciousness raising central to praxis (MacKinnon 1982, 544). In Women and Labour Organizing in Asia: Diversity, autonomy and activism edited by Kaye Broadbent and Michele Ford some case studies suggest what this might mean in practice today. As they say in their Introduction,

‘...employers, the state and patriarchal cultures divide the working class according to employment status, gender, ethnicity and religion. What we understand from the following chapters is that women are resisting these impulses in a number of innovative
ways which have the potential to have a transformative impact on the trajectories of working-class movements throughout Asia’. (12)

In Korea, India, Thailand, and Japan the creation of women-only unions or union branches created the space to rethink the boundaries between the private and public, the status of a ‘worker’, and the strategies for labour organising. For instance, in Korea the brunt of the Asian financial crisis was borne by women workers who were laid off en masse to protect the jobs of ‘male breadwinners’ as described by Kyoung-Hee Moon and Kaye Broadbent in their chapter ‘Korea: women, labour activism and autonomous organizing’. Both Japan and Korea have seen the replacement of full time work for women with temporary and limited contract jobs instead which make these workers ineligible for membership in many unions. In response, women’s unions have begun to organize full-time, part-time, and unemployed workers – a theme discussed in Broadbent’s chapter ‘Japan: women workers and autonomous organizing’. By expanding the constituency served by unions, they are refusing the divisions and exclusions employers try to create by targeting women as disposable labour.

In India, in particular, women’s unions have especially targeted the informal sector or women who work in non-traditional work spaces. This has led to a wholesale re-evaluation of the boundary between private and public, according to Elizabeth Hill in ‘India: The self employed women’s association and autonomous organizing’. She says, ‘Union women understand that what happens in the private sphere of the home affects their capacity to engage in the public sphere, that the prevailing conditions of reproduction shape productive capacity...’ (124–5).

Andrew Brown and Saowalak Chaytaweep in their chapter ‘Thailand: women and spaces for labour organizing’ report ‘(t)he WWUG [Women Workers Unity Group] operated at the forefront of a number of campaigns that had the effect of blurring the boundaries between economic and broader social and political issues that the Thai state had sought to maintain through the 1975 LRA [Labour Relations Act]’ (106). The division between production and reproduction is artificial. The neoliberal push to deformalize work and encourage subcontractors to work with individual women who engage in production and reproduction within the same space of the home is paradoxically making this division crumble. The deconstruction of this division between home and work, or production and reproduction, suggests the way forward in reconciling the agendas of the union movement and the feminist movement. For instance, in ‘Alternative Forms of Protest’, Ritu Menon describes the railway campaign in which women’s groups worked with railway trade unions and human rights bodies, eventually moving both towards seeing violence against women as a labour issue and a public issue. Violence against women was reframed as a threat to economic production as much as it is a human rights or women’s issue.

Neoliberal globalization opposes the impersonal global forces of competition against the local, face-to-face interactions of the factory or neighbourhood. Yet, resisting it will require transnational and global linkages that are as strong as international capital itself. Here again, there is good news. International support was critical to a number of campaigns to support women’s participation in union activity as well as to amplify the voices of these women workers to the national and global stage. Transnational unions have pushed Asian affiliates to be more open to women’s concerns. They have done so by funding gender initiatives and by using networks of NGOs, IGOs and INGOs. This was the case in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and
Bangladesh. Particularly in the case of Indonesia as described by Michele Ford in ‘Indonesia: separate organizing within unions’ and Malaysia as described by Vicki Crinis in ‘Malaysia: women, labour activism and unions’ it appears that if it were not for the strong pressure of the transnational union federations, domestic unions would be inhospitable to women. Ford is more optimistic about the long-term effects of this type of ‘aid-conditionality’ than is Crinis who finds that few male union officials have internalised their gender training.

Each of these books tells a story about activists who work to improve the immediate conditions of workers and of women in their societies. They also tell a story about the seemingly irresistible forces of neoliberal globalisation remaking economics and politics around the world. Seen in this light, the efforts of unions to narrowly bargain over factory conditions, or feminist legal campaigns to protect victims of domestic violence seem inadequate to the challenge at hand. However, bringing the two together to launch a movement that refuses the artificial boundaries between worker and non-worker, producer and reproducer, global and local is possible. Not only is it possible, it is happening. By documenting the challenges, the strategies of resistance and the variety of local experiences of this neoliberal moment, these books add considerably to our understanding of feminism, labour activism, global flows of capital and labour, neoliberalism as idea and policy, and to the progressive politics that are yet to come.

Note
1. The book has chapters that are co-authored by Kannabiran and Menon, as well as chapters written by only one of the two authors.

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