

Book Reviews
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At Work in the Informal Economy of India: A Perspective from the Bottom Up, by Jan Breman.
Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2013. Pp. xv+459. £32.50. ISBN: 978-0-19-809034-2

Locale' of the labouring poor, while chapter 6 highlights forms of 'Resistance to Exclusion and Coping with Insecurity'. Chapter 7 concludes the analysis by raising questions on the possibility of reshaping the social contract in India, and engages in reflections on the systemic nature of informalization under the current 'globalised regime of capitalism' (p. 142). At the end of the main manuscript, ten selected readings map the evolution of Breman's thought since the 1970s.

It is virtually impossible to give justice to a book of this sort by focusing on the content of single chapters. Hence, I will focus on four themes that I think make this book an exceptional endeavour. For each, one can identify continuities with Breman's earlier work, also through the help of the ten selected readings. This said, the book also presents important new elements. Moreover, and crucially, it engages in a systematic effort to scrupulously pull together the multiple strings of Breman's life work on informality.

The first theme, quite unsurprisingly, is Breman's rejection of dualist theories in the study of informality. Stressed across all chapters with a different emphasis, this rejection does not only look 'backward', to past work on informality, but also refers to more recent work, which may dress old argument in new clothes. Particularly compelling, in this respect, is Breman's clear disagreement with Sanyal's (2007) characterization of postcolonial capitalism. Although mainly elaborated in the first chapter, this disagreement is manifested throughout the book, as if in an open dialogue with Sanyal's work. For Sanyal, the political economy of postcolonial capitalism is defined by two distinct socioeconomic circuits; one driven by accumulation and a second defined by what he labels the needbased economy. Both are commodified and monetized, hence capitalist; however, the first rests on primitive accumulation, leading to large dispossession and displacement, while the second is inhabited by the victims of these processes, who retreat to a sub-economy characterized by subsistence activities (p. 20). This sub-economy, which testifies to the resilience and ability of self-help of the labouring poor, is also (re)produced by a welfarist national and international governmentality aimed at providing castaways with minimal resources to subsist. Despite acknowledging a higher degree of sophistication in Sanyal's analysis vis-à-vis 'classic' dualist theories, for Breman, Sanyal's work still essentially recognizes duality as the core organizing principle of postcolonial capitalism, and relegates informality to the realm of 'classlessness' (p. 100). Breman considers this characterization as ill-equipped to capture the relevance of informality in India, particularly in the context of the neo-liberal turn.

This leads me to the second important theme emerging from this analysis, which concerns the definition of informality inspiring the narrative. In the very first lines of this book, Breman writes: 'The informal economy is described and analysed in this publication as a regime to cheapen the cost of labour in order to raise the profit of capital.' Rather than anchoring understandings of informality to regulation, as the majority of accounts do, Breman embraces a definition embedded in capital-labour relations. This is a crucial point. First, this definition offers avenues to reject dualist accounts picturing informality as a domain primarily characterized by self-employment. As Breman argues, and most of all demonstrates through field accounts, this category often hides multiple forms of disguised wage labour. Second, it enables Breman to engage in a useful discussion over the limitations of residual accounts of informal labour, which tend to define it simply in relation to its alter; namely the 'labour aristocracy' supposedly found in formal wage work. It is a far vaster world, where one should distinguish at least three different 'tiers'; the petty bourgeoisie, the sub-proletariat and the Lumpen (pp. 90-1). The last category, borne out of Franz Fanon's analysis of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism (2001 [1961]), is utilized by few in relation to informality (an interesting recent attempt is found in Denning 2010). It is used here by Breman to define the non-labouring poor, a category through which he returns the relevance of unemployment to studies of informality. While, as Breman admits, this distinction is still unable to fully capture all possible nuances of work and life in the informal economy, it is a useful step to stress differentiation (see also Portes and Hoffman 2003, on Latin America). Third, a definition of informality embedded in capital-labour dynamics enables Breman to discuss the role of informality in the context of Indian capitalism and assess the role of

the state, particularly in relation to India's neo-liberal shift. Questioning the commitment of the Indian government towards labour formalization since independence (by looking at the failure of these attempts in Gujarat), Breman maps the rise of the new wisdom of the 1990s; namely, that poverty could be redeemed by formalizing capital rather than labour. With reference to both Ahmedabad and Surat, Breman shows how allowing capital 'to be more firmly embedded in the milieu of the poor' (p. 5) only succeeded into further mainstreaming informalization into formal domains, arguably increasing the blurring of the divide between formal and informal jobs. While vividly illustrating these arguments with reference to the cases studied, as he previously did in *Footloose Labour* (1996), here Breman also further supports his findings by testing them against those of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), which paints the current status of India's national employment along very compatible lines. In doing so, he draws particularly, albeit not only, from the 2009 work of Kannan (in this book pp. 94–7). For Breman, in order to understand labour informalization, one should understand the informalization of capital, operated through 'the informalised state' (see also Harriss-White 2003).

The third crucial theme running throughout the book is the attempt to develop the tenets of what I would define as a 'labour-theory of poverty'. Effectively, this attempt runs throughout Breman's work (in *Footloose Labour*, 1996, but also in the *Labouring Poor*, 2003), where informality is often defined as a 'regime of exploitation and marginalization' (e.g. selected reading 8). It is developed via anchoring the theoretical underpinnings of the category 'labouring poor' to Marx's 'reserve army of labour'; a point Breman may partially share with other analyses (notably Bernstein 2007). This present account makes a more systematic effort than Breman's earlier work to theorize a view of poverty as it is structured through labour, while also vividly sketching the working and living rhythms of Marx's reserve army. This vivid sketch shows the intimate match between exploitation and what seems to suggest a full commodification of reproduction. The overlap between work and life characterizing the very existence of India's labouring poor is for Breman 'conditioned by the need to surrender completely to the unreserved claim on their availability at all hours of the day or night, in all seasons of the year' (p. 53). In relation to the links between informal labour and poverty, a special place is occupied by migration, and even more so by circulation, which for Breman better captures the labouring poor's work and life cycle. Hugely underestimated (he mentions a recent estimate of 30 million circular migrants, but one can sense his dissatisfaction), the 'labour nomadism' (p. 64) triggered by circulation is hardly represented as a free choice. It engages the reserve army in a perpetual cycle of fluctuation between town and countryside, which has to be repeated again and again, as the only possible survival strategy, until old age, when workers are sent back home for good, as 'sucked oranges' (p. 57).

Poverty is anchored to the labour process, and also shown as a process in itself, with the village as its point of departure, and often its point of final return. Notably, the lack of freedom of the circular migrant is twofold for Breman. On the one hand, it relates to the very practices of circulation, embedded in relations of 'neobondage', mediated now by intermediaries ('jobbers') rather than employers. Once again, these are structured around the village, through the payment of advances by the intermediary to the worker, in a context whereby labour is often immobilized before it actually circulates. Circulation and immobilization, in Breman's account, are inextricably linked, and structure this type of migration in 'corridors running from their homes to the workplace and back again' (p. 358), where 'influx and exodus are intricately related to each other in a perpetual pattern' (p. 66). Freedom from the means of production is always addressed in the background; in fact, dispossession is the starting point of Breman's analysis of circulation. On the other hand, lack of freedom manifests itself in the living experience of the poor; it is, for Breman, a freedom from a dignified existence. Breman stresses the social costs of this lack of freedom, which condemns India's labouring poor to 'undercitizenship' (p. 101); from the breaking up of the family to the 'masculine appearance' (p. 71) of cities (as circulation is primarily a male experience); from communal violence (as it erupted in the case of Gujarat) to the sorry existence of the poor in slum enclaves, spent in toil, harassment, and often entailing alcohol and drug abuse. To picture the last point, recalling Davis' (2006) characterization of his *Planet of Slums*, Breman uses his own accounts but also borrows from Boo's (2012) powerful chronicle of slum life in Annawadi in Mumbai, whose conclusion, however, he does not share, as it fails to be informed by broader structural issues (see also Breman 2012).

The last theme I want to highlight relates to Breman's reflection over collective action. Obviously, this is hugely constrained in informal settings; particularly by the interplay and 'mutual interdependence' of three elements: heterogeneity of the reserve army of workers, the unregulated rhythms of employment and the strongly fragmented nature of the market for unskilled labour (chapter 6, see also selected reading 7, p. 370). With the notable exceptions of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and National Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), unions are not spared in Breman's

analysis, due to their failure to engage with informal workers, and their overemphasis on formal wage-workers, who are easier to organize. In relation to the closure of Ahmedabad's mills, Breman also underlines the problems behind 'Gandhian' approaches to unionization, possibly focusing more on the 'civilising mission' of raising the industrial proletariat to a 'higher morale plane' than on effective organizing. For Breman, overall, any union strategy only focusing on a few 'formal enclaves' is destined to fail, a crucial political point. Despite this, Breman's portrait of India's labouring poor is not a passive one. Labour unrest does manifest, albeit with the constraints of the case, generally defined by spontaneity, local containment and brevity. Unlike in Fanon's analysis, or again in Sanyal's account, his own research suggests to him that the localities where rural and urban poor live 'are neither revolutionary cradles, nor quarters accommodating a vast mass of lumpen elements which can be willessly manipulated from outsiders' (selected reading 7, p. 385). Most of all, the very lives and daily struggles of the labouring poor severely question the sustainability of Indian capitalism. Re-proposing his own words in the *Labouring Poor* (selected reading 10 and p. 142 in the main monograph), Breman stresses that although capitalism is not in crisis yet, 'a point of no return is reached when a huge reserve army waiting to be incorporated in the labour process becomes stigmatised as a redundant mass, an excessive burden that cannot be included, now or in the future, in economy and society'. That, to him, will signal the opening of such crisis. He does not see a resolution of India's social crisis in weak attempts at generating a social floor (a point also made by Lerche 2012), while one senses his contempt over propositions by international institutions (p. 84; see also selected reading 9, p. 428) that during economic crises the informal economy could work as a cushion, absorbing India's labouring masses. Undoubtedly, reading this book, the very idea that the village that once ejected them will now reabsorb them appears untenable.

If Breman's analysis and characterization primarily refer to India, Breman rightly contends that these findings are hardly atypical. There is by now overwhelming evidence to suggest that, unlike what heralded by modernist, stagist development visions, the 'West' is now following the 'Rest' in the race towards informalization. In fact, as Breman suggests, 'in view of the disembeddedness of capitalism at a transnational level, informality tends to become the overarching structure of the global labour market' (p. 10). However, partially developed in both the introduction and the conclusions to this book, the theoretical implications of this reflection remain to be fully explored in relation to the current mode of reproduction of global capitalism, leaving this reader with a thirst for Breman's next book. In the meantime, *At Work in the Informal Economy of India* should be widely read by scholars and students of development and labour studies; certainly by those focusing on India, but also by all those concerned with political economy more broadly.

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