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Retail worker politics, race and consumption in South Africa: Shelved in the service economy, by Bridget Kenny. Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. xv + 282 pp. £22.99 (paperback). ISBN 978 3 030 09895 7. £101.00 (hardback). ISBN 978 3 319 69550 1. £17.99 (e-book). 978 3 319 69551 8.

In this book Kenny describes how the category of “workers” (*abasebenzi*), understood as a collective political subject, has been constantly re-configured through the dialectical interaction of race, class and gender in South Africa’s retail sector. The broad chronological perspective adopted by the author produces an analysis that encompasses both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa’s history, thus producing a book that has the merit of explaining today’s struggles as results of historical processes. Contrary to those who dismiss workers’ politics as obsolete, the book shows how starting from the actions of precarious workers can provide valuable insights about their political imaginaries, forms of collective organization, processes of subjectification, and assertions of political subjectivity.

The volume consists of a preface and eight chapters. The first chapter works as an introduction and explicitly states the aim of the book: exploring why a primarily black, female, low wage, and low skill service workforce has “returned over and over to the workplace as a crucial site of politics” (2). The author is very clear in underlying that the focus of the book will be on conjunctural analysis and reproduction of concrete “subjects-in-struggle” rather than on providing an account of economic interests and trade union strength. From the second chapter the book follows a linear chronological development where it is made clear how race, gender and class dynamics shaped white women shop assistants’ identity in 1960s Johannesburg and how these same dynamics still have an important role in shaping black women retail workers identity today. The way continuities and disconnections are described and explained is one of the main virtues of the book. The quotes from several interviews are of great use, especially in helping the author explaining *abasebenzi* as a militant collective political subject, what in her words is “a potent signifier [...] responding both to an already constituted labour process and to a realm of consumption defined through femininity of white women” (63). The unresponsiveness of official trade unions and the consequently wildcat strike strategies adopted by workers put retail workers politics into the same processes that characterize other economic sectors in South Africa, making the book a useful reading for every scholar interested in a broader understanding of South Africa’s labour relations.

Another salient feature of the book is the description of the changes to which the category “employee” has been subjected over time. The racially controlled labour market of the apartheid era guaranteed to the white working class the monopoly on this category. This was simultaneously at the base of full-citizenship claims, charged with racial meanings and represented as the civilised capitalist labour relations in opposition to the backwardness of African forms of economic activities. The anti-apartheid struggle successfully fought to fully include black workers into the category of employee without, however, challenging the supposed superiority of the capitalist labour relations. This latter became so embedded into workers’ views that when the concomitant introduction of subcontracting and temporal contracts made the situation of part of the workforce far away from what was conventionally associated with being a (white) employee, workers simply kept fighting for it. Through the extensive use of workers’ words, the author is able to show how the set of affective associations “with a norm of full-time, standard hours and occupational integrity” (226) that black retails workers attach to the category “employee” remain in place notwithstanding “the ever-diminishing horizon of realizing it” (226). This became one of the reasons why workers’ struggle is a constant theme in the book and why “To sit at home and do nothing”, as one of the workers interviewed said, means to be outside the realm of action, suggesting “that work

represented not simply economic interest, but a historically embedded set of relations imbricated into forms of sociality and political community” (203-4).

In looking at the conflict between capital and labour from workers’ perspective and narrating it through workers’ voices, this book is definitely into the tradition of South African labour studies that has, since long ago, provided precious insights on alternative form of workers militances and interesting methodological solutions to look at them. To conclude, this book provides a comprehensive description of how and why retail workers’ subjective experience is translated into political action in the workplace and, in doing so, it also underlines the historical trajectory that has seen the struggle to establish a stable, cheap and reliable black workforce shifting towards the need to make it easily dismissible.

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