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Katherine Joynt
University of the Witwatersrand, kath.joynt@gmail.com

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Review of Ben Selwyn's 'Workers, State and Development in Brazil: Powers of Labour, Chains of Value'

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Book Review

Ben Selwyn (2012) *Workers, State and Development in Brazil: Powers of Labour, Chains of Value.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press. ISBN: 978 0 7190 8 5314

REVIEWED BY *Katherine Joynt, University of the Witwatersrand*

The ability of firms to relocate their production processes to the Global South in the quest for cheaper labour is the focus of much globalisation and development literature, and characteristic of the conventional Global Commodity Chain (GCC) approach to development. Indeed, commodity chains were introduced by World Systems Theory as a tool for analysing the organization of production which reproduces uneven North-South development where buyers in the North control networks of producers in the South (12).

In this equation labour is often construed as a victim, while capital is seen as the key decision maker on the issue of resource allocation and is given 'analytical (and thus political) primacy' (11). In a stimulating book that both critiques and builds on Global Commodity Chain analysis, Ben Selwyn brings labour to the fore, arguing that the nature of class relations and class formation impacts on the local developmental process. Drawing on the Schumpeterian concept of innovation and upgrading, Selwyn illustrates how the successful economic upgrading of the grape export industry in Brazil was accompanied, and to an extent driven, by social upgrading in the form of improved working conditions.

Set on the grape farms of São Francisco Valley in North East Brazil, Selwyn's book gives a historical account of the progress in the region which moved from being impoverished and underdeveloped in the early 1960s to being a high-value agro-export zone from the late 1990s to the present. The foundation for the success of the grape sector was a combination of initial Brazilian state investment in irrigation, and land, water and electricity subsidies and the global retail revolution of the 1990s. Concentration and centralisation of northern retail power and the subsequent rise in the global standards for export agriculture meant greater demands on grape producers in Brazil, and therefore more controlled workplace management. However, it also meant an increase in workers' structural power; their ability to increase their bargaining power by disrupting the production process.

Through a series of in-depth interviews with key actors and a carefully researched political economy of the industry, Selwyn shows how this structural power was accompanied by the strengthening of workers' associational power driven by the Brazilian rural trade union movement, Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais (STR). STR began successfully organising in the 1970s, staging strikes and blocking roads and farm entrances at the most crucial stage of the grape farming process, such as grape maturation.

In comparison to other countries in the Global South, where farm workers remain mostly unorganised, underpaid and often live and work under adverse conditions, I found it remarkable the extent to which the STR has succeeded in organising these grape workers and the concessions which the STR has negotiated for its members. These include a period where workers were paid ten percent above the minimum wage, a ban on unregistered labour, closed contracts with

specified overtime remuneration and improved health and safety measures. Further gender sensitive concessions include crèche facilities on some farms, paid doctor's visits for women workers and two months of paid maternity leave. One of the strengths of Selwyn's book is the chapter focusing on women workers who comprise a large portion of the workforce on the grape farms and are very active in the leadership and membership of the STR.

During the period between 2002/03 and 2008 in which Selwyn conducted fieldwork, he observed that the STR, which began as a militant and confrontational trade union, shifted toward cooperation and class compromise. Compliant employers recognise that they benefit from STR's organisation because it helps prevent new entrants who do not comply with the negotiated levels of social protection from undercutting them, while the union which continues to fight for concessions on workplace conditions also recognises the need for the industry to remain competitive and has softened its demands on wage increases. The complexity of such a class compromise is well developed by Patrick Heller (1999) in his book, *The Labour of Development*, in which the role of industrial and agricultural labour and class struggle is tied to the social and redistributive development of Kerala, India.

Selwyn concludes this innovative study by suggesting that 'new modes of representation, organisation and mobilisation' are needed so that the gains of the grape workers in the region can be broadened to include other less profitable sectors in the valley where there is less structural and associational power, such as the casualised labour often employed on small-scale family farms (178). But instead of developing this important point, this suggestion comes across as an afterthought. The growing casualisation of the workforce globally is undermining the traditional forms of bargaining power that Selwyn argues the grape farm workers are drawing upon. Jennifer Chun (2009) has used the notion of 'symbolic power' to show how casual home workers in the US and golf caddies in Korea were able to successfully organise by taking their demands into the public realm.

In a world where labour is constantly perceived to be on the retreat, *Workers, State and Development in Brazil* is a powerful contribution to the emerging field of global labour studies. By demonstrating how farm workers can successfully organise and proactively impact on local developmental processes in the age of globalisation, Selwyn has provided readers with both an inspirational case study and a sophisticated analytical framework. This book is valuable for readers interested in GCC, labour studies, development and political economy.

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Katherine Joynt is with the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. [e-mail: kath.joynt@gmail.com]