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*Women and Labour Organizing in Asia: Diversity, Autonomy and Activism*, Edited by Kaye Broadbent and Michele Ford, London; New York: Routledge, 2008, 174 pp., ISBN 0-415-41315-x (hbk), and ISBN 0-203-93822-4 (ebk).

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Le second processus, celui de l'individuation, fait référence à l'avènement de la société d'individus. Faisant écho aux travaux durkheimiens portant sur la transformation de la solidarité sociale, Lallement s'interroge dans cette deuxième partie sur « la place du travail comme vecteur d'individuation » (p. 29) en analysant, par exemple, le taylorisme, la tension « individu-organisation », le travail et le soi ainsi que le « drame » lié à la relation de service. Dans cette deuxième partie, l'auteur parvient en bout de piste à démontrer que le travail rend possible l'individuation des acteurs sociaux bien que cette individuation n'édulcore en aucun point le caractère institutionnel du travail.

Le troisième processus, l'intégration, met en lumière que malgré la portée du mouvement d'individuation précédemment décrit, le travail assure aux acteurs sociaux un statut et une raison d'être sur le plan social, notamment en vertu de leur incorporation dans les systèmes de production. S'interrogeant alors sur l'intégration de l'individu social par le travail, l'auteur en arrive à démontrer le lien étroit entre le travail et l'intégration. Par une analyse de la société salariale contemporaine, de la notion d'encastrement et de la fonction intégrative des organisations, Lallement affirme que « l'emploi reste un point d'ancrage majeur à la société » (p. 341), le travail contribuant à cet égard à transformer le travailleur en tant qu'être social.

Le quatrième processus, la régulation, fait référence aux règles considérées à la fois comme contraintes et comme productrices de sens aux pratiques, aux interactions et aux représentations liées à la notion de travail. Par un examen des relations professionnelles, des formes d'action collective, de la dynamique des professions et des marchés du travail, l'auteur démontre dans cette dernière partie que la règle joue un rôle primordial dans la configuration du travail et des statuts sociaux qui y sont liés, ce qui assure au travail un rôle prépondérant dans le façonnement de la société contemporaine.

Il demeure évident que l'ouvrage de Lallement parvient à affirmer, avec énormément de minutie sur le plan analytique, que le travail fait toujours société. Nul doute qu'au fil du temps, le travail et les travailleurs se sont transformés. Toutefois, ces modifications n'ont point édulcoré le caractère institutionnel du travail. C'est

ce qui permet à l'auteur de soutenir que « les institutions ne disparaissent pas à mesure que l'individuation gagne du terrain » (p. 547), même si « une institution n'est jamais totale » (p. 548). En ce sens, malgré le processus d'individuation, le travail en tant que producteur de lien social permet de transformer l'homme en travailleur faisant société. À cet égard, les notions de travail et de société sont étroitement liées l'une à l'autre, se nourrissent l'une de l'autre, et en viennent à façonner le monde contemporain en vertu, notamment, de la dynamique intermédiaire associée au rôle du travailleur en tant qu'être social.

En terminant, nous ne pouvons que suggérer sans aucune hésitation la lecture de cet ouvrage, malgré son caractère volumineux qui pourrait malheureusement effrayer certains lecteurs potentiels. À notre avis, il s'agit d'un ouvrage de synthèse remarquable où chacun des chapitres traite d'une question primordiale liée au travail et où la démonstration est solidement construite à partir d'analyses sociologiques antérieures effectuées tant par certains pères fondateurs de la sociologie, tels que Durkheim, Simmel et Weber que par des sociologues plus contemporains, tels que Crozier, Hughes et Reynaud. Pour toutes ces considérations, *Le travail, une sociologie contemporaine*, constitue une lecture incontournable pour les étudiants, les enseignants et les chercheurs s'intéressant à la sociologie du travail puisqu'elle parvient à éclairer notre compréhension de la société contemporaine à partir d'une analyse détaillée du rôle que joue le travail dans le développement de celle-ci, en misant sur les apports réflexifs d'analyses reconstruites par la communauté scientifique en sociologie.

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### **Women and Labour Organizing in Asia: Diversity, Autonomy and Activism**

Edited by Kaye Broadbent and Michele Ford,  
London; New York: Routledge, 2008,  
174 pp., ISBN 0-415-41315-x (hbk), and  
ISBN 0-203-93822-4 (ebk).

*Women and Labour Organizing in Asia* is a compendium of ten contributions by scholars, who work within, and/or comment upon, Asian labour organizations, and who discuss

the history and challenges from different perspectives. The editors (themselves contributors) argue in the opening chapter that “women have become the new face of industrial labour – and of labour activism . . . in all the most and least developed countries of Asia.” They seek to “shine a spotlight on male-dominated union organizations in the region and their failure to protect women’s interests,” by exploring “women’s responses to unions’ shortcomings.” The book is sponsored by the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA), which aims through its Women in Asia Series (WIAS) to “promote knowledge about (the issues) to both academic and general audiences.”

Both the title and some opening remarks raised this reviewer’s hypothetical quizzical eyebrow – creating early scepticism on the veracity and scale of the issues as so bluntly and boldly stated, whilst nonetheless being anxious to share their voyage of discovery. The surprise came not from ignorance that Asian working women face myriad and potential gargantuan problems, but that there are indeed such structured organizations and responses to these issues – and in countries which are traditionally viewed by many Western democracies as ones which may discourage or proscribe such activities. I was pleased to be disabused and enlightened.

Each chapter deals with an area of Asia, after the opening overview by the editors. Given the mostly specific material and detailed examination in each instance, or occasional broader studies, it is impossible in this short review to give a concise précis of each author’s contribution, and to do each learned dissertation justice. But each section contains an introduction and conclusion, which invariably have excellent though all too brief summaries on the social, political, work and union activities of the area: most conclude that, even if there is (rare) formal recognition of women’s role within unions (China), equality is illusory or non-existent, power is still the domain of men, and the challenges facing these women have a common thread – balancing work and family commitments, cultural and political pressures, patriarchal attitudes and control, gender discrimination and harassment, equal rights and pay, and willingness to participate in formalized movements.

In chapter 1, Broadbent and Ford comment on diversity, autonomy and activism. Their book seeks to contribute to the debate on union activities for women in Asia, and argue that segregated or exclusively women-only organizations provide an alternative to the male-dominated unions. They are often essential outlets for sharing concerns which may otherwise be viewed as possibly forbidden or certainly discouraged in patriarchal societies. Their concluding comments leading into the body of the book are concise and insightful – they give us the motivation for their work, and deserve quoting here: “What mixed mainstream union leaders and union members must remember is that 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.”

In chapter 2, on Indonesia, Ford looks at “separate organizing within unions.” After Suharto’s repressive regime ended in 1998, the largely feminized export industries organized as unions, with women eventually forming separate departments within male-dominated structures – although they have had a high profile and been actively involved over decades.

Chapter 3, by Fang Lee Cooke, is entitled “China: labour organizations representing women.” She points out that “dual and contradictory roles of workers’ representation and the implementation of state policy are manifested in the pragmatic and gradualist approach adopted by . . . officials.”

In chapter 4, Vicki Crinis considers Malaysian “women, labour activism and unions.” She points to economic trade liberalization overshadowing unions’ activism, and the influx of foreign workers as a barrier to organizing. Crinis tells us that unionists have joined with feminist NGOs to raise awareness of their rights, domestic violence, and sexual harassment at home and work.

A Sri Lankan perspective by Janaka Biyanwila, on “contradictions for women in labour

organizing,” is presented in chapter 5. He looks specifically at the health care sectors. He states that, within the authoritarian and militarized state, unions allow for some form of democratic debate and participation, although highlighting the complex issues facing women workers’-only collectives within male dominated unions.

Next chapter “Bangladeshi women and labour activism” by Shahidur Rahman, once again examines the garment industry. He notes that unions must inspire workers to become actively involved, as relevant vehicles for achieving workplace and social change for both genders.

In chapter 7, “Thailand and spaces for labour organizing,” Andrew Brown and Saowalak Chaytaweeep give an excellent overview of the situation in this country. Women workers are neither “passive nor docile victims,” and over some decades have often been active protestors. Women’s activism was central in unions’ struggles for recognition and rights, and there are new generations of activists who continue to shape the future of trade unionism.

Chapter 8, “India and the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) and autonomous organizing,” by Elizabeth Hill, also points out that women have a “vibrant history of leadership and participation” in their country’s development, though not traditionally in the union movement or the largely “informal economy” or “unorganized sector.” But the success of SEWA in work-life reform shows that mainstream unions could learn much from the organizational capabilities of women, and their singular though inclusive perspectives.

In chapter 9, Kyoung-Hee Moon and Broadbent present “Korea’s women, labour activism and autonomous organizing.” Women-only unions not only advance the cause of women, they focus on pay and conditions for all, at work and in the community, and have been particularly successful with part-time or unemployed workers, thus highlighting the benefits of collective representation.

Finally, in chapter 10, Broadbent on “Japan’s women workers and autonomous organizing” says that although women-only collectives are numerous, they represent small numbers of members. The recruitment

of non-full-time, unemployed and even full-time workers into such collectives would provide a different focus from the enterprise-based unions – and raise awareness of women workers’ issues including training and education.

As a member of the “general audience” the editors seek to attract and involve, it was a daunting task to look beyond some of the broad and yet occasionally restricting statements in the opening chapter. Nonetheless, the book is a thought-provoking compilation of learned study and experience, diverse in its geographical and social coverage, and providing solid background and statistics on the challenges facing these women in the globalized work environment.

Those organized or unionized structures give working Asian women the chance to broaden their opportunities, provide feminine, communal and employment support, and help them better cope with the demands of home and work. These sometimes competing yet complementary roles are made more difficult and complex by religious and cultural considerations, patriarchal and gender discriminatory attitudes and structures, and often intimidating government and societal positions.

This reviewer longed for the more personal and individual perspective to fulfil that “broader” appeal aspiration; but the reality is that neither the title nor the structure will encourage “the public” to delve into this area. Our knowledge would benefit from such reading, in an accessible form, thus contributing to enhanced understanding, debate and tolerance.

*Women and Labour Organizing in Asia* is, however, an outstanding academic collection, and a valuable insight for student and aficionados who may know of, or chance upon its existence, if only to serve as an introduction to this interesting debate.

My closing comment is to suggest that ASAA consider a less academic approach, and present these important issues, which affect vast areas and enormous populations, to the other (much broader) “general audience”.

**Jan Stoneham**

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