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Threads of Labour, Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective (review)

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The Canadian Journal of Sociology, Volume 32, Number 3, Summer 2007, pp. 418-420 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: 10.1353/cjs.2008.0015



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Patrik Aspers: Book Review: Hale, Angela; Willis, Jane (eds.): Threads of Labour, Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). In: Canadian Journal of Sociology 32(3), 418-420 (2007). University of Toronto Press

The original publication is available at the publisher's web site: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cjs/summary/v032/32.3aspers.html>

the individual as the unit of analysis and on our continuing theoretical efforts to focus on causal mechanisms underlying “individual behaviour” rather than “social behaviour.”

King's University College
The University of Western Ontario

Joseph H. Michalski

Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch, *Dr. Golem: How to Think About Medicine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 246 pp.

This is the third volume of the *Golem* series where the authors turn their attention to medicine. A golem is described as a creature of Jewish mythology, an animated being created from clay and water by man, knowing neither the extent of his strength or his ignorance. The golem is considered well-meaning but sometimes causes harm through innate clumsiness. That is, there is no intent to cause harm although it happens. In this book, medicine is treated as a golem.

The authors view medicine as a body of expertise, rather than a combination of logic and fact. Medical doctors have expertise in their area just like lawyers, car mechanics, and plumbers have in theirs. Sometimes they get it right and other times they make mistakes. Even skilled practitioners may fail on occasion. Of course, there is a big difference between repairing a body and fixing a car as the consequences for the former are much more serious. The topics covered in the various chapters are the placebo effect (leave the body alone and it may heal itself), bogus doctors (how they get caught), tonsils (diagnosing and dealing with uncertainty), alternative medicine (vitamin C and cancer), contested diseases (yuppie flu), defying death (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), AIDS activists, and vaccination (parents rights). The theme of the book is both interesting and promising, but the topics selected provide only a snapshot of the issues addressed, thus leaving the reader with more questions than answers about the efficacy of medical care in relation to mainstream areas like heart disease, diabetes, surgery, obstetrics, women's health, and the like. To prove its case, the golem needs to take a bigger bite out of the elephant.

University of Alabama at Birmingham

William C. Cockerham

Angela Hale and Jane Willis, eds., *Threads of Labour, Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 266 pp.

The garment industry is one of the largest industries of the world, both in terms of output and the number of people it employs. This industry spearheaded the

industrial revolution and it was the first to become global when the increasing cost of labour in the developed countries made it attractive to move manufacturing to developing countries. The prices of clothes, in relative terms, have decreased over time, and the trade flows have contributed to the huge American trade deficit with China, the largest garment exporter of the world.

Branded retailers or marketers design the garments and handle marketing and brand management, whereas the production of the clothes is outsourced. Buyers have manufacturers compete for orders, and the one with the lowest price, given the required quality and delivery day, will get the order. In this competition firms, and obviously workers, from different countries struggle to get orders.

Scholars who studied the emergence of capitalism, like Marx, used the garment and textile industry to analyze the change, and the often difficult working conditions that predominately young workers of both sexes faced. The public debate on the garment industry has for some years focused on the working conditions faced by manual labour, which, in some cases, resemble those that Marx described.

In the volume edited by Angela Hale and Jane Wills, *Threads of Labour*, an attempt is made to analyze the socioeconomic web of the global garment industry from an action perspective. They take the harsh conditions of blue-collar workers, especially women, in garment factories in China, Mexico, India, Bangladesh and other production countries as the starting point. Action research is driven by the problems that the actors in the field face, which means that the ambition of this project is to improve the conditions of the workers in this industry.

We are told that garments are put together in a process that has many steps. Moreover, the garment manufacturers supplying the global chains also have their own sub-contracted suppliers. This means that the production chain is extended, and the further away from the global buyer a worker comes, the worse the physical, mental, and financial working conditions. This subcontracting even reaches into the homes of women and the work sometimes also includes their children. This work is usually undertaken under unpredictable economic conditions and with no legal rights.

The book is written in an easy-to-read style, and without much technical jargon. It is informative and adds to our knowledge of the working conditions in this industry. The authors explain how the research is a collaborative effort in which the leading theoretical ideas were conceptualized at the centre and the research was conducted at the periphery. The research project was set up with the workers themselves as the scientific fieldworkers. Meetings were held so that workers from different countries could come together and learn from each other. Some of the special problems they had in coordinating people from dif-

ferent countries — for example the role of language barriers, legal hindrances, and so on — are also discussed.

I find the analysis of gender to be a great value of this book. This issue is often neglected, and not at all discussed by Gereffi and other political economy oriented researchers who have studied this field for many years. Many workers, probably the majority, in this industry are women. But the entire field of consumption of garments, which is also dominated by women, is never analyzed in this book. There are some other substantial problems. Though it is clear that the working conditions are hard, the largest problems many women face have to do with the risk of being raped and murdered while they go between home and work. It is also suggested by the authors that this is the responsibility of the garment chains. I think that it is not reasonable to blame the global buyers for virtually all problems workers have. Religion and culture in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan may, in many ways, be more serious problems for the women than the workplace related problems. The research reported has not put the problems women face in a broader social context.

Moreover, the fact that women are able to get outside of their homes and make money can, of course, also affect the gender pattern in these countries. This sociologically important issue is not even mentioned in the book. It appears as if it was clear from the conception of this project what the problem is and how it should be addressed: the garment buyers must be changed, the industry more politically governed, and the workers must be paid more. These are easy points to score, but it is not clear that what they suggest is the best way to actually improve the standard of living of the workers in this industry.

In the end, I think this book raises many interesting questions, but it provides fewer answers. Though action research is based on trust between researcher and the members of the field, there is a danger that the ambition to improve conditions becomes the dominating idea, instead of the scientific demands of increasing our knowledge and, above all, developing the theoretical knowledge that, in the end, provides explanations. Still, and though I have made some critical remarks, I found the book worthwhile reading for anyone who is interested in the global garment industry.

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Patrik Aspers

Nancy Foner, *In a New Land: A Comparative View of Immigration*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005, 327 pp.

Nancy Foner began the comparative study of international migration in the 1970s, focusing on Jamaican immigrants in New York and London. This was pioneering work, using the contrasts between different host societies to provide