Too often research on global cities places inordinate emphasis on the role of capital and political and economic elites in making the city. Inversely, some of the literature uncritically celebrates the activities of social movements and overstates their impacts. In contradistinction, *Global Cities at Work: New Migrant Divisions of Labour* generally succeeds in managing to balance in dialectical tension the processes of labour market restructuring, contemporary immigration and the remaking of London as a global city.

Little attention in the global cities literature has been dedicated to exploring how migrants and workers of colour, overwhelmingly in employment at the bottom end of the labour market, have been central as active spatial agents in the production of cities (for one exception, see Meléndez et al. 2010). This is odd considering that in places like London or New York, paradigmatic cases of the global city, it is impossible to understand their political, economic and cultural formations without acknowledging their deep reliance upon foreign-born workers. For example, a little over a third (35 percent) of London’s working-age population was foreign-born as of 2006. Official statistics suggest that nearly half of those employed in London’s elementary occupations (e.g. cleaners and security guards) were born overseas. In *Global Cities at Work*, Jane Wills, Kavita Datta, Yara Evans, Joanna Herbert, Jon May and Cathy McIlwaine insightfully explore the new realities of the contentious political and geographical landscape of London.

Seeking to rectify the under-examined role and lives of foreign-born workers in the global city, this team of radical geographers from Queen Mary University of London, led by Jane Wills, undertook an ambitious and empirically rich project, ‘Global Cities at Work’ (of which the book is a product). The authors develop a rigorous and theoretically sophisticated analysis of key political and economic developments in the formation of London as a global city. From an
examination of broad trends in London’s labour market to an in-depth exploration of individual workplaces and the everyday lives of a diverse sample of migrant workers, the scope of *Global Cities at Work* is impressive.

According to Wills *et al.* what holds together the different perspectives on the question of what constitutes a global city is the figure of the migrant worker. Although previous scholars (for example, Beaverstock *et al.* 2000) have demonstrated that the financial and business services sectors are dependent on a continual flow of highly skilled labour from overseas, Wills *et al.* go further in calling for attentiveness to how low-wage migrant workers have become pivotal to the economic dynamism of London. Thus, they write that while “subcontracting is now the world’s paradigmatic form of employment across the world, the migrant is the world’s paradigmatic worker” (p. 6). In developing this analysis, the authors critically examine the roles immigration status, race, and gender have had in the undervaluing of particular jobs (especially in the cleaning and care sector) and in affecting competition in London’s labour market. As the authors note (p. 6), “[e]ven those who cross borders legally find themselves politically disenfranchised”, rendering them more easily exploitable because of their restricted access to employment, welfare and the political process. In a perverse sense, functioning as an exploitable labour supply provides these workers with a ‘political advantage’. The authors also grapple with the wider implications of migration for the rest of the world by exploring what possibilities exist for a form of ‘bottom up’ development through remittances sent back home by migrant workers in London.

*Global Cities at Work* is divided into eight chapters. The first two examine the changing landscape of immigration policy, labour market restructuring, and the emergence of London as a global city. These opening chapters provide an excellent overview of research on migration and an examination of the political and economic restructuring that has constituted neoliberalism. In the consideration of the latter, the decline of the Keynesian welfare state in the UK—marked by the reduction of state expenditures on social welfare provision, changes to workplace employment regulations and stealth privatization through the contracting out of work throughout the public sector—looms large. Chapters 3 through 6 bring the lives of migrant workers and the role they play in London to the forefront of analysis. The authors illuminate the lives of the ‘people behind the headlines’, providing readers with a deeper understanding of why many of these migrants ventured to London in the first place, how they engage in the labour market, and what their experiences of low-paid employment are like today. In the final two chapters of the
book, Wills et al. seek to unpack the political implications of their research, with a focus on what they deem to be the most hopeful and creative organizing experiments and strategies of migrant organizations, trade unions, and broader multi-issue organizations like London Citizens with which the authors are affiliated. These organizing efforts are aimed at making change on a number of fronts including housing, a living wage for workers, and regularization for undocumented workers. This section of the book—in my judgment the weakest—fails to critically engage the question of what possibilities may exist within these struggles for an anti-capitalist or more radically transformative politics than the limited reform agenda adopted by the authors. I will return to this limitation below.

First, it should be remembered that the earliest research on world cities, by John Friedmann and Saskia Sassen, depicted massively polarized urban conglomerations in which high powered cadres of financial and related business professionals bustle about during the day while low-wage workers clean and guard the domain at night. Sassen’s work on London, New York and Tokyo (as well as other global cities like Miami and Toronto) indicated that place-specific yet broadly analogous patterns of socio-economic polarization—the most vivid of these being in the structure of the labour and housing markets—had arisen in what are otherwise rather different urban centers.

Wills et al. take seriously the agency of low-wage migrant workers in their theoretical accounts of global city formation and the rescaling of statehood. However, in their exploration of some recent organizing efforts and campaigns of migrant workers and their allies in London, the authors of Global Cities at Work fail to elucidate what anti-capitalist possibilities or prospects for radical, systemic transformation might be present in the struggles they examine.

It seems reasonable to ask that radical geographers and engaged scholars working in solidarity with marginalized workers investigate how specific forms of strategic learning and political consciousness develop over the course of campaigns and struggles. Through this focus, scholars can illuminate the complexities—warts and all—of how movements and their participants evolve. This can advance our understanding of particular struggles and point to more effective ways to organize future movements.

This focus does not require us to presume that workers engaging in struggles are motivated by anti-capitalist politics. What it does obligate us to do is to ask certain questions of these workers and their movements. For instance, how has organizing in London around the
demands to turn ‘strangers into citizens’ and for a living wage transformed the class and political consciousness of those involved? Are these kinds of campaigns and the organizations waging them up to the task of transforming the highly inequitable and exploitative global city so brilliantly examined by the authors? What have been the challenges and lessons learned from such organizing and how has it reconfigured the landscape of possibility for social movements in London?

Sheila Cohen, in her analysis of the decline of workers’ power and possibilities for getting it back, illuminates a useful approach to understanding the political potential of struggles that seem, at first blush, ‘insufficiently radical’ by exploring some of the questions raised above. Cohen argues the “immersion in the raw politics of class conflict”, although “rarely sought by those involved”, is often a life changing experience for many and the “shortest road to political awareness, for workers without the luxury of a formal political education…” (2006: 2). How existing campaigns, be they a militant strike or a city-wide campaign for a living wage, may go beyond a struggle for particular reforms or ‘economistic’ demands depends largely on the transformations that occur in the course of the struggle and this is what, in my estimation, Wills el. al. could have interrogated more insistently.

Similarly, whilst the research in Global Cities at Work clearly illuminates how important religion and religious spaces are in the communities of newer immigrant communities in London, the authors are too quick and uncritical in their advocacy of what they call a ‘post-secular politics’. They fail to address the many impediments such religious spaces can throw up in developing durable political solidarity amongst migrant workers, much less between diverse communities of migrants and native born workers.

All that said, Global Cities at Work is an illuminating exploration of the role of contemporary immigration in the UK’s labour markets and in the making of London as a global city. The analytical and empirical thoroughness of this book provides an invaluable perspective into the ongoing transformations of London’s political and economic geography. The book should be instructional to everyone who is fighting for more just futures for migrants and cities.

References


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