



# Introduction

## *Precarity, Class, and the Neoliberal Subject*

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*Industrial Labor on the Margins of Capitalism*: the title of our volume requires explanation. It is not our intention to imply that the multinational mega-corporations that employ some of the workforces it describes are peripheral. By “margins,” we aim to conjure settings geographically removed from the *historical* epicenter of industrial capitalism. Rather than Western Europe and North America, our case studies come from Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Five are from the postsocialist world; that is, they deal with contexts where the whole basis of the social order has profoundly changed within the last generation.

Many of the chapters deal with workforces that are divided between a core of regular company workers and a penumbra of insecure casual and temporary labor. With globalization and economic liberalization, the relative size of these two kinds of workforce has in most cases changed significantly, as have the relationships between them. The first section of this Introduction discusses this division in general terms. The second asks if the two types of workers should be seen as belonging to separate social classes. The final section addresses the issue of personhood. The neoliberal order, we are often told, instills a new kind of subjectivity, an idea of the entrepreneurial individual engaged in a constant process of self-fashioning. What does our ethnography tell us about the success of that project?

## The Decline of the Regular Worker?

In *The Great Transformation*, his most powerful and passionate work, Karl Polanyi (1957 [1944]) told the story of an institutional revolution that occurred in England in the first half of the nineteenth century and eventually transformed the world economy. Its most profound consequence was that the “factors of production”—land (which is to say, nature), labor (the human person), and money—became commodities (“fictitious” commodities, Polanyi insisted) that could be freely transacted on the market and were regulated by it. Formerly restricted in its scope, the market principle now dominated both the natural environment and human society for the first time in history. Otherwise stated, this institutional revolution was a precondition for the emergence of an integrated, full-fledged market system based on *laissez-faire* doctrines that presupposed as complete a separation as possible between the economic and political spheres. The invisible hand of the market can result in the greatest good of the greatest number only if the market is liberated from the meddling interference of the state and allowed to develop as an autonomous domain, supposedly governed by its own distinctive rules and principles, and free from the requirements of ordinary morality (Dumont 1977). As Adam Smith famously taught: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest” (quoted in *ibid.*: 63). As Polanyi saw clearly, however, the state had never in reality renounced its role in the direction of the economy. It was midwife and nursemaid to the “free market.” “*Laissez-faire* was planned. Planning was not.” There was “nothing natural about *laissez-faire* ... [it] was enforced by the state” (Polanyi 1957: 144). What was in fact largely spontaneous was the collectivist reaction against it—the inevitable result of the suffering caused by commodification. To mitigate its human costs, society was forced to bring the economy back under social control by ‘re-embedding’ it in its social matrix.

This counter-movement involved (albeit limited) steps to de-commodify labor and provide it with some protection against the vagaries of the market. Under pressure from organized labor and its political allies, the state established a social safety net and legislated on the terms of the employment contract. By the mid-twentieth century, what became known as the “standard employment relationship/contract” was the norm in the wealthier capitalist countries of the West. It was premised on stable, full-time jobs. Maximum working hours were regulated; workers were paid not only for days worked but also for periods of recuperation, and were somewhat shielded from arbitrary dismissal. That enabled them to organize in support of their demands.

What Polanyi did not foresee was that the market would not remain caged, that there would be a reaction against the reaction to it that would include concerted attempts to remove what were now billed as “rigidities in the labor market” and dismantle the social safety net. He did not predict that the more frictionless flow of capital across national boundaries, buttressed by neoliberal policies and dogma, would move things back toward the re-commodification of labor. Even where once it was dominant, the standard employment relationship is, according to some (e.g., Castells 1996), a form that is now superseded.

That may be an exaggeration. According to European Commission statistics, in 2003, permanent full-time jobs were still “the predominant employment relationship” (Bosch 2006: 47), though the issue is complicated by problems of comparability. What that relationship means in different parts of the European Union is variable. In terms of working hours and pay, the gap between full and part-time workers is wider in the United Kingdom than elsewhere, though in terms of statutory protection against dismissal it is narrower. Those in full-time employment may be no more secure because Britain, like the United States, has done more to deregulate labor conditions and gone further in weakening the influence of unions (ibid.: 48–50). Throughout most of Europe over the past three decades, however, a growing proportion of the workforce has been hired on a casual or part-time basis. This is correlated with growth in female employment and of the service economy, and the trend has been toward an erosion of the standard employment relationship in terms of both the proportion of workers it covers and the protections it affords. Moreover, greater precarity affects a broader range of positions on the hierarchy of labor. While vulnerability to unemployment was once seen as the hallmark of the proletarian condition (e.g., Lockwood 1958: 55), today managers and white-collar workers are often equally exposed.

Setting aside the “second world” of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialism, the “standard employment contract” was only ever of major significance in the most affluent Western countries and possibly Japan, and only at a specific historical juncture. As Breman (2013) has emphasized, it was never standard for most workers in most parts of the world. In India, for example, it is almost exclusively organized/formal-sector workers (never more than about 8 percent of the total workforce, the majority of them employees of the state) who have been the (at least theoretical) beneficiaries of most of the labor legislation that guarantees enforceable minimum wages, regulates hours and conditions of work, requires employers to heed health and safety rules, gives workers the right to join unions, and provides them with a considerable measure of job security. Unorganized/informal-sector labor, the overwhelming majority of the manual workforce, is (in practice)

unprotected. Further, Fernandes (2000) has shown how a large segment of the “new middle class” who work in Mumbai offices now experiences employment conditions that differ little from those of contract workers in industry: jobs are insecure and allow them little autonomy, they are subject to strict surveillance and subject to periodic layoffs, and wages are well below those of regular employees and lack the fringe benefits that the latter receive.

Several of the chapters in this volume document cases in which the regular workforce has historically enjoyed significant job security. What most of them stress is workers’ growing precarity and the deteriorating conditions of their employment. Hoffmann’s chapter is an outlier here. The power of the recently installed Maoist union has made workers in the Nepali food-processing factory he studied—or at least, those of the “right” ethnicity—*more*, rather than less, secure. In instances in which there was formerly a large regular workforce, its strength has been radically reduced and its labor replaced by that of much cheaper and more flexible contract workers.

But there is again an exception. In the coal mines and coal-washing plant that Kesküla studied in Kazakhstan, there is no subcontracting. Instead the entire workforce is made up of regulars who overwhelmingly come from Russian-speaking backgrounds and are of non-Kazakh ethnicity. Mining communities, concentrated in separated townships scattered across the steppe, have a strong sense of solidarity and of their distinctive identity. There is no contract labor, Kesküla suggests, because the owner—the steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal—acquired these mines almost by default when he took over the nearby Temirtau steel plant (see Trevisani’s chapter). Lacking previous mining experience, Mittal delegated their operation to local managers, who considered it impossible to run them with low-skilled casual labor—a judgment colored by two recent major accidents that resulted in serious labor unrest and adverse publicity. Also significant is the preferential recruitment of the children of existing workers, a long established policy that led to the formation of much valorized “labor dynasties.” Of these management often positively approves. They are seen as an instrument of control (recalcitrant workers jeopardize not only their own jobs but those of their kin), and as a way of economizing on training (recruits learn the ropes from family members). In this case, moreover, many managers themselves come from mining backgrounds. Thus both sides of industry have a stake in ensuring that only regular workers are employed, and that those recruited are qualified by kinship. It is a form of “opportunity hoarding” that keeps outsiders out—perhaps especially those of Kazakh ethnicity (who now monopolize government jobs).

Even in this case, however, a shrinking of the permanent workforce has given rise to a problem that several other contributors stress—that of

reproduction. Earlier, the child of a regular worker could expect to succeed to a parent's job as a matter of customary right, but that is no longer so. Members of the younger generation are now generally condemned to work on casual or temporary contracts, eke out a living in the informal economy, emigrate, or face unemployment.

Whereas the strength of the permanent workforce has everywhere declined, the degree to which those who still hold regular posts in these large industries are now more precarious, and have experienced any marked deterioration in their terms of employment, is variable. The comparison between our five steel plant examples is suggestive. In the cases of Bulgaria (Kofti) and Kazakhstan (Trevisani), many workers with notionally permanent positions have been made redundant, wages have been cut and benefits curtailed, and those who manage to cling to their jobs are now required to work with greater intensity in worse conditions. Casualization has hit women harder than men, with knock-on effects on gender relations and domestic power. Though formerly public-sector units, both of these plants (which notably are the ones located in postsocialist settings) have been privatized, and only since privatization have these changes occurred. The other three plants (in Indonesia described by Rudnycky, in Egypt described by Makram-Ebeid, and in India described by Strümpell) remain in the public sector. Though in these the subjective sense of precarity may have grown—partly because of the threat of privatization and partly because everybody is aware that alternative jobs in the local economy are much less secure—the objective conditions of the regular workforce do not appear to have deteriorated greatly. Its size has been radically cut, but that has been accomplished largely through voluntary retirement schemes, natural attrition, and a moratorium on recruitment, rather than through enforced redundancies. Wages and benefits have not been significantly reduced, and there is little evidence of any significant intensification of labor. Many of the most unpleasant, arduous, and dangerous tasks are now performed by insecure, poorly paid contract laborers, often under the supervision of regular workers.

In the Tata Motors plant that Sanchez studied in Jamshedpur (India), the situation is similar. The core workforce continues to be extremely well remunerated by all local standards, to enjoy considerable job security, and to work at a rather relaxed pace. Though Tata is a private-sector conglomerate, a significant stake in it is owned by the state (Sanchez 2016: 94), and historically pay and conditions in its companies come as close as the Indian private sector gets to those in public-sector units. In his present contribution, Sanchez is mainly concerned with the contrast in political outlook between these workers and workers in a small, unorganized sector scrapyard. What his ethnography sharply brings out is a

characteristic of the workforce we encounter elsewhere: regular and temporary workers are often close kin (compare the chapters by Makram-Ebeid, Kofti, and Trevisani).

The plant's management is predominantly Bengali; its workforce, predominantly Bihari and almost exclusively male. Managers and workers are distinguished by regional ethnicity and language. Tata has always prided itself on providing its workers with lifetime employment, decent wages, and generous welfare provision, and has long operated a policy that gives each worker the right to nominate a "ward" (usually a son), who on the worker's retirement will in principle be appointed to a regular post in the plant. Under the pressures of economic liberalization and globalization, however, this paternalistic regime has been undermined. The permanent workforce is dwindling, and their labor is being replaced by non-unionized, impermanent workers who are paid much less and have no claim on company welfare. Most of the latter are the often highly educated wards of regular workers. Many are notionally appointed as "apprentices" and "trainees" who do not even have to be paid the legal minimum wage, and though they do exactly the same jobs as the permanent workforce, most remain low-paid casual workers indefinitely. They consequently burn with resentment and a sense of betrayal—not least of betrayal by their union, which has been complicit in this informalization. Thus permanent and impermanent workers often belong to the same households or at least share the same regional origins, though by now most have been settled in Jamshedpur so long that they no longer have meaningful ties with their ancestral villages and no rural base to fall back on.

What 'manufactures consent' in this context? Why does this younger generation of workers work? A large part of the answer is their dream that a secure Tata job might eventually materialize. As Sanchez shows in his recent monograph (2016: chapter 6), in the performance of their duties regular employees can get away with a good deal of truculence and foot-dragging that would never be tolerated from temporary workers (who are now more than three-quarters of the total labor force [ibid.: 8]). So why does Tata retain a regular workforce at all? The obvious explanations are that the company is constrained by labor laws, by the legal difficulty of laying them off, and by the legacy of its carefully nurtured tradition of paternalism. But Sanchez himself comes to the more intriguing conclusion that the existence of permanent workers is what allows management to count on the compliance of the rest. Temporary workers put up with their lot only because they believe in the possibility of being eventually regularized. A core workforce, however small, is needed less for its own contribution to production than for the effort that others can be induced to make in the increasingly forlorn hope of one day joining its ranks.<sup>1</sup>

It has, of course, always been the case that even when companies run their core operations with a regularly employed full-time workforce, it makes business sense for them to hire temporary labor to cope with spikes in demand and do unskilled ancillary jobs that are only intermittently required. Indeed, it would often seem that a high degree of job security for the regular workforce is contingent on a pool of flexible labor that can be taken on when needed and dumped when not. Through much of the second half of the twentieth century, the Japanese “salaryman” working for a big corporation could expect lifetime employment with pay and conditions markedly superior to those of the much larger number of workers in small-scale factories (Dore 1973; Roberson 1998). Both were again sharply differentiated from casual labor hired through the *yoseba* (day labor market). These “men of uncertainty”—mostly rootless and (by the time of Gill’s field-work) aging single men cut off from their kin and employed on short-term contracts—represent the antithesis of the salaryman in that they live apart from the two main institutions of Japanese society, the company and the family (Gill 1999, 2001). When recession hits the big corporations, the *yoseba* degenerates into a species of skid row. The two poles of the hierarchy are inseparably linked: the lifetime employment of the salaryman could only be sustained while there were flexible workers to meet employers’ fluctuating demand for labor. As Parry (2009, 2013a) has also suggested for the central Indian steel town of Bhilai, the security of some is dependent on the precarity of others.

It seems obvious that the ratio of casual to regular workers will vary from one to another industry, and depend among other things on the sophistication of its technology and the need for specialist skills to operate it, and on the volatility of the market for its products. Construction is clearly an industry that needs flexible labor, as sites turn over rapidly, there is no fixed place of employment, and labor requirements fluctuate day by day—and indeed, a high proportion of its workers are temporary the world over. In the service sector, the tourist industry stands out. At the other end of the spectrum, large-scale integrated steel plants would be hard to operate without a reliable nucleus of regular workers. If production is disrupted at a critical point in the cycle, the whole plant grinds to a halt and crucial items representing enormous capital investments, such as blast furnaces and coke oven batteries, are at serious risk of long-term damage. It is different in their ancillary mines: while a blast furnace that is subject to an unscheduled stoppage of even short duration might take months to repair and re-fire, coal and ore can be stockpiled and what is left in the ground today can be dug up tomorrow. That makes steel plants peculiarly vulnerable to lightning wildcat strikes, which gives labor considerable bargaining power and management every incentive to create at least a core of “loyal” workers

who can be counted on to keep the plant running in return for high wages, good benefits, and the promise of secure jobs.

Though now privatized in Pernik (Bulgaria) and Temirtau (Kazakhstan), all five of the steel plants discussed here began by providing housing for workers, and three of them built company townships. That says something about the political aspirations of the state at the time of their construction— aspirations that included the creation of a modern industrial working class that would carry the torch of history for a resurgent nation, fashioning a new kind of worker in a new kind of society. More prosaically, this investment in housing also tells us that those who planned these mega-industrial projects envisaged a settled labor force with considerable security and commitment to their jobs.

These plants are now technologically quite antiquated and the replacement of many machines is long overdue. As Trevisani describes in his chapter and as Makram-Ebeid (2013) shows elsewhere, it is experienced workers, not managers, who know how to keep this increasingly unreliable machinery running. Such workers are not easy to replace.

It may also be significant that steel is a capital-intensive industry with high energy and raw material costs. As a proportion of total production costs, the cost of labor is characteristically quite low. Relatively high rates of remuneration for the core workforce do not greatly add to the price of saleable steel, and it is plausible that public-sector management has been historically predisposed to regard them as a price worth paying for industrial peace. In the current era of globalized competition, however, that concession tends to look less appealing. In India, labor costs per tonne have recently been up to seven times higher in state-run plants than in some large private-sector units.<sup>2</sup> And self-evidently, management complacency about the cost of regular labor does not square with the fact that all the plants discussed in this volume have taken steps to reduce their wage bills by substantially cutting their core workforce and replacing it with contract labor.

It is, however, doubtful that this has been solely driven by the desire to cheapen labor. Often it would seem that its casualization is as much about discipline and control as it is about cost. Being easier to fire, temporary workers are generally easier to sweat—even if, for reasons we come to later, in Trevisani's case it is regular workers who feel most compelled to intensify their labor. But certainly, private industrialists in India—although seldom slow to take advantage of the lower price of contract labor—commonly claim that their main reason for favoring it is that while temporary workers work, regular workers malingers. And more generally, the subjugation of labor is as important a consideration as its price—even if that subjugation is ultimately also directed at the extraction of greater surplus value.



The two chapters in this volume that deal with the clothing industry suggest it is significantly less reliant on a stable regular workforce. Garment production, especially when heavily exposed to a fickle export market, is plainly vulnerable to volatility. Fashions change rapidly, and much demand is seasonal. Flexible labor is what employers want. The chapter by Carswell and De Neve deals with the booming urban and peri-urban agglomeration surrounding the south Indian garment-producing town of Tirupur, which now manufactures for export on a very large scale. Workers work long hours at high intensity to fill orders with tight turnaround times for a market that brooks no delay. Labor turnover is high, and few workers remain with the same employer for more than two or three years. Almost all are hired through a contractor, whom they often follow from factory to factory, though others strike out on their own in search of more skilled employment and better pay and conditions. All of these jobs are flexible—which is to say that in this industry, there is no division between regular company and irregular contract labor.

In the Trinidadian case discussed by Prentice, garment production began as a home-based cottage industry organized on a “putting-out” basis, though it was subsequently centralized in factories. Her story is of a widespread return to a putting-out system, and of the implications for labor of this reversal of the old teleological narrative in which cottage industry is permanently superseded by factory production. Globalization and economic liberalization inexorably fostered competition between garment-producing countries. Caribbean manufacturers found it hard to survive, resulting in factory closures and widespread layoffs amongst the predominantly female labor force. Those quickest on their feet responded by shifting production from the formal to the informal sector. Workers were sent home with industrial-grade sewing machines to become self-employed “micro-entrepreneurs,” who are, for the most part indistinguishable from disguised wage laborers. They produce on piece-rates and have no guaranteed hours, and their employers are no longer obliged to pay them the minimum wage and can cut their costs on electricity and the provision of work space. The risks of production and of market fluctuations are devolved onto the workers themselves, and unionization has declined as formal wage employment is replaced by insecure home-based work. The state has actively promoted this trend by deciding—as neoliberal orthodoxy teaches—that the salvation of the national economy depends on removing the fetters that once stifled the entrepreneurial capacities of the individual. In the state rhetoric of empowerment, Prentice writes, “insecurity becomes recast as freedom, self-exploitation reframed as ‘being your own boss.’” The reality is that most of these workers are now more precarious and materially worse off.

However, it would be too simple to put this kind of “regression” down to recent neoliberal trends alone. They have certainly given new impetus to putting-out, but periodic reversion to the practice has probably been a recurrent, long-standing feature of capitalist production. Based on research conducted in 1980, Harriss (1984) has documented for a very different industry a similar trend: owners of medium-sized engineering companies were laying off regular workers, and encouraging some to set up small workshops, to which they supplied secondhand machinery and gave orders. For them the advantages were manifold, but the most prominent was that of alleviating their problem of labor control.

Though in a less pronounced form, the textile industry (which produces cloth rather than clothing) often has similar characteristics to garment production. Chandavarkar’s (1994) study of the Bombay mills during the first four decades of the twentieth century privileges the constraints that confronted the owners, preeminently the difficulty of mobilizing capital, which required them to pay attractive dividends to investors; and market volatility. In response, they tailored production to short-term demand. That required flexible labor. About one-third of the workforce was taken on casually at the factory gates, and even “permanent” workers were subject to layoffs and redundancy. By comparison with the Japanese textile industry over that period, however, both the productivity and the turnover of labor were low (Wolcott 1994). Japanese mill workers were mainly girls aged fifteen to eighteen who typically remained in the industry for no more than a couple of years, and who consequently saw little benefit in striking. Indian mill hands, by contrast, were predominantly male, aspired to permanent employment, and were prepared to strike for long-term goals and to make it both costly and risky for their employers to force through productivity deals that would result in job losses. The moral seems simple: the social profile of the workforce, and its willingness to assert itself, may explain a great deal about the degree of precarity to which it is subject.

Where workers are highly skilled and companies invest heavily in training, it is a priori probable that they will try to retain them in regular jobs. But though Tirupur’s tailors and cutters are extremely skilled, their skills are generally acquired on the job and are not in short supply; and labor turnover is high. As Carswell and De Neve emphasize, skill is a necessary condition for getting and retaining employment but is by no means sufficient. Its deployment is structurally constrained—by gender and caste in particular. Many married women cannot get jobs commensurate with their skills because they are hamstrung by their domestic responsibilities; many Dalits (ex-“Untouchables”) from outlying settlements cannot move into better ones in town, or upgrade their skills, because they are bonded to dominant-caste power loom owners in their villages. To keep their families

afloat, they have taken advances they cannot repay. That they would otherwise prefer work in town is due less to the difference in pay than to a wish to escape rural caste oppression through urban employment. Partly for that reason, the wage gap between the skilled and the unskilled is surprisingly low. Caste oppression deflates the price of skill because many low-caste people are prepared to accept low wages in order to free themselves from it. The general message, however, is that by itself skill is no guarantee of regular or even of more rewarding employment because structural inequalities determine who can acquire and deploy it. In Prentice's chapter, what enables Victoria to succeed as a micro-entrepreneur while Lana cannot is not differential skill, but social capital. In the very different setting of the Stomana steel plant (Kofti), it is not competence that gets you a job or protects you from redundancy, but real or fictive kin relations with people higher in the factory hierarchy.

If skill alone is not much protection against precarity, the want of it certainly makes workers vulnerable, because they are readily substitutable (Beynon 1984). Taylorist management methods break production down into the simplest, most mindless steps (Braverman 1974). A labor regime of this sort underlies the alienation, the high turnover, and the easy disposability of workers in the German-owned car factory in Russia described in the chapter by Morris and Hinz. But as the history of Ford shows, even where labor is unskilled and easy to replace, excessive workforce churning can be prohibitively costly to the company, which is why Henry Ford took the dramatic step of simultaneously cutting working hours and more than doubling the wage by introducing the five-dollar day (Miller 1992: 65f). High labor force turnover has elsewhere been seen as a problem for reasons that are not simply economic. The regularization of labor in the Mombasa docks in colonial Kenya was driven by political and ideological considerations. Casual labor was associated with indiscipline and political subversion, and challenged the colonialists' conception of what a modern industrial labor force should be. Decasualization was above all about producing predictable, tractable workers (Cooper 1992).

Plainly, globalization has shifted the balance of power between capital and labor. Confronted by labor conditions not to their liking, companies can realistically threaten to shift production to other national jurisdictions where regulation is laxer, and labor is cheaper and more compliant. Schober's chapter deals with a large South Korean shipbuilding concern that has relocated a substantial part of its operations to the Subic Bay Freeport Zone in the Philippines. One major objective of this move was to neutralize the power of the assertive unions at its yards in Korea. In Subic, nearly all labor is hired through subcontractors. As this case and others in this volume remind us, these globalized capital flows are not simply another

instance of the economic imperialism of the usual suspect Western powers. One of the three mining companies on the Zambian Copperbelt on which Lee focuses is Chinese-owned, while a second is owned by a UK-registered Indian company. The Temirtau steel plant (Trevisani) and the Karaganda mines (Kesküla) in Kazakhstan were acquired by a London-based Indian steel magnate. The Nepali food-processing units of which Hoffmann writes were set up by a Marwari<sup>3</sup> industrialist of Indian origin. One of the factories in mainland China on which Fang reports is Taiwanese-owned, and the Bulgarian steel plant that Kofti studied belongs to a Greek multinational.

Capital flight is constrained by the costs of relocation and by the ownership structure of the company. Of the five steel plants examined in this book, two have been privatized. At these there is a real possibility that the company will run down its operations, sell, or even close the plant. Should bottom-line calculations dictate, it will switch its investments elsewhere, and the company may have a clear interest in ensuring that this bottom line is illegible to outsiders (see Trevisani's chapter). Keeping workers guessing about the company's intentions and in suspense about the security of their jobs predisposes them to acquiesce to the deterioration of their employment conditions. Meanwhile, the three public-sector plants are differently placed. The Steel Authority of India, for example, would stir up a political storm if it closed its plant in Odisha in order to release funds for investment in another Indian state, and there is no question of relocating to Kazakhstan. Capital flight is a much smaller threat. That is of a piece with our earlier observation that in none of these public-sector instances have the labor conditions of the regular workforce degenerated to the extent that they have in the privatized cases.

The threat of capital *flight* to labor in countries from which it might exit is well understood. Equally important is the impact that the obverse process of capital *incursion* has on labor conditions in the places to which it flees. It is often accompanied by a dilution or even a wholesale suspension of workers' rights as governments vie with each other to attract inward investment, thereby creating the "race to the bottom" that Cross (2014: 35) identifies in his discussion of Special Economic Zones in India. Investors are offered significant tax breaks, as well as exemptions from many government controls and labor laws, including the obligation to recognize unions. Following the liberalization of the Indian economy, state governments were given more autonomy to set their own economic strategies and drum up inward investment. Initially these zones remained under tight state control, but liberalization created inexorable pressure to deregulate further. It was not only state governments that competed with each other to attract outside capital, but also different national economies (*ibid.*: chapter 2). The cheaper and more submissive the workforce they could offer, the

greater their chances of success. Assuring the “right” labor conditions may involve stamping on nascent labor movements.

A case in point, drawn from central India, is the brutal suppression to which a group of unions united under the banner of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) were subjected in the early 1990s. The movement specifically championed the rights of contract workers in the iron ore mines attached to the Bhilai Steel Plant and in Bhilai’s private-sector industry—an unusual phenomenon in that most such labor is in India non-unionized. Other notable features of the CMM included its militancy, its attempts to make common cause between workers and peasants, and the comparative modesty of its immediate demand that existing government legislation on contract labor should be actually implemented (Parry 2009 and forthcoming). This last notwithstanding (it aimed to uphold the law, after all), the state hounded it with ruthless determination, acting in collusion with local industrial interests (which had a notorious record of flouting its laws). Though we cannot elaborate here on what is an extremely complex story, one headline conclusion is that a major part of the explanation for its nakedly partisan role was the timing. In Bhilai itself, CMM militancy was reaching a crescendo on the private-sector industrial estate just as the central government was embarking on serious measures to liberalize the economy. That offered unprecedented opportunities for attracting inward investment—provided that the region could offer a cheap, flexible, docile labor force. As the state government and local industrialists saw it, it was imperative that the new labor movement should be speedily crushed. It was.

In this volume, Schober reports allegations that unions were unofficially banned from Subic as a sop to potential investors; and the Philippine state certainly adopted a relaxed interpretation of its own laws to make subcontracting easier. The resulting fragmentation of the labor force makes it even harder to organize strong unions. Of the three Copperbelt mining companies Lee studied, the Chinese-owned one has had the most effective union because it hires labor through a single contractor. The others recruit through a number.

We cannot, of course, assume that capital incursions are unwelcome to the local populations they most directly affect. There are generally both winners and losers. Though the jobs created may pay only a fraction of the wage they attract in the country from which the capital has fled, they are frequently far better rewarded than any other work that is locally available. Often, however, it is not the locals who get them. Outsiders are easier to discipline (e.g., Cross 2014: 85–86). Though employment in start-ups on green field sites may offer an escape from local structures of domination, the dominant are commonly less sanguine, though some will be consoled

by the boom in real estate prices that new factories may bring. Jobs in them provide new opportunities for self-fashioning. “It is important,” Wolf (1992: 135) writes in her study of “factory daughters” in Java, “to understand that workers find factory employment preferable to arduous agricultural labor, to highly controlled and poorly paid positions in domestic service, and to being under the eyes and constant control of parents and other relatives in the village. ... Although it is undeniable that factory work is exploitative, it is equally undeniable that young village women prefer it to other meager choices.” It gives them a new sense of self-worth.

The impact of capital incursion on the local labor regime may critically depend on the objectives of the investors. What fundamentally distinguishes the Chinese-owned company from the other two multinational mining corporations in Lee’s chapter is that its strategy was geared to obtaining the ore the Chinese economy requires, whereas the other two companies set their sights on short-term shareholder profits. From that the rest follows. In the interests of fulfilling its target output, the Chinese company ran its operations through a single contractor; its workforce was consequently less fragmented and its union was able to leverage significant gains in terms of job security (if not wages). In the interests of maximizing shareholder returns, both other companies ran their operations through multiple contractors, between whom they fostered competition and from whom they squeezed the cheapest possible deals. The workforce was parceled between them, the unions were weaker, and the workers, though paid somewhat better, were more likely to be laid off at short notice.

To draw together the main strands in our discussion so far, we can say that in most industrial settings at most times and places, the standard employment relationship was never the predominant form. Even where it formerly existed, the protections it once afforded have now been significantly dismantled. The global trend has been toward increasing precarity, and a weakening of the power of organized labor brought about by the threat of capital flight and incursions, the casualization of jobs, and increased subcontracting. The more casualized the workforce, the harder it is to organize strikes. Those who lead and actively participate in them are more easily fired; workers who are anyway unlikely to remain in the job for long have little incentive to make immediate sacrifices for future gains, and casualization and high labor turnover are conducive to the atomization of the workforce and inimical to the development of strong workplace solidarities. Job insecurity inhibits not only collective action but also rational planning (Bourdieu 1998), and in the absence of adequate state welfare provision it encourages reliance on familial networks of support, and on patrons and brokers. That in turn promotes dependency and an unwillingness to challenge the status quo (Wood 2003). Skill by itself is scant

protection against precarity, but to be unskilled is to be highly vulnerable to it. The uncertainty bred by job insecurity affects those who currently have jobs as well as the unemployed, and rapidly becomes a widely diffused state of mind that gnaws at the collective consciousness. Though the precariat has been called “the new dangerous class” (Standing 2011), it is neither new nor dangerous. It is too difficult to organize, too fragmented, and often too demoralized to be that.

This pessimistic conclusion admittedly runs counter to a recent literature that stresses the success of informal labor organizations in various parts of the world. Take Agarwala’s (2013) argument that in India the “informal” cannot be equated with the “unorganized,” that informal labor organizations have managed to extract significant gains for their members, and that neoliberal policy agendas have in fact strengthened their hand in launching a “Polanyian” countermovement against the commodification of labor. These gains have been won by making welfare claims on the *state* as *citizens* rather than by wringing concessions from their *employers* as *workers*. According to Agarwala, the differential success of this strategy in different Indian states is explained by two key variables: the intensity of competition between political parties (irrespective of their ideological orientation) for the electoral support of the poor;<sup>4</sup> and the extent to which they have espoused a neoliberal policy agenda. Electoral competition persuades parties to champion worker demands because informal labor organizations offer them vote banks. Neoliberal development strategies push the latter into a Faustian bargain: in exchange for welfare benefits, they promise the compliant and flexible workforce on which those strategies are premised. The case is cogently made but not quite conclusive. Even in Agarwala’s privileged examples, only a small fraction of informal labor appears to be effectually organized, and she offers no hard evidence on whether they vote as a block on the basis of class interests or on how that vote is mobilized (supposedly through neighborhood organizations). The compulsion to “buy” workers’ consent to current labor conditions is surely diminished by the capacity of the state and the employers to coerce consent, and by the fact that workers have no alternative but to submit to them. Many of the most basic rights of citizenship often have no real meaning for the truly disadvantaged. Most relevant here, however, is that none of the chapters in this volume suggest that informal-sector labor is effectively organized.

Our discussion further suggests that there may be limits to casualization, and particular circumstances in which the existence of casual labor sustains the security of a regular workforce. These limits vary significantly between industries. Maintenance of a core labor force of regular workers may be the employers’ best strategy, encouraged by the high costs of training, the need for predictability, and their investment objectives. Casualization of

the workforce may be limited by its commitment to industrial jobs and its willingness to defend them, which in turn depends on its sociological makeup and historical experiences. In our steel plant examples, workers in public-sector units have proved less vulnerable than those in privately owned plants, largely because they are shielded by the political imperatives of the state.

Unquestionably, casualization is driven by capital's quest to cheapen labor, though its objectives are commonly equally aimed at making it more tractable and subservient. In the end this second objective may serve the first, but it is not safe to assume that the two are always in harmony. *De-casualization* may also be seen as an instrument of control—a means of producing a less unruly and unpredictable workforce—even if this strategy proves more costly in financial terms. Under neoliberal conditions, the role of the state has proved equally crucial in shaping the landscape of labor, almost always in the direction of making it more flexible. Political considerations may be as consequential as economic ones. As Mirowski (2014: 40) observes, “mature neo-liberalism is not at all enamored of the minimalist night watchman state of the classical liberal tradition.” The “neo” in neo-liberalism signals the role that the doctrine accords the state in molding subjectivities, social relations, and collective representations (ibid.: 54). The neoliberal order is a product of “political will,” “a mode of domination” (Bourdieu 1998: 84–85). In many of our case studies, it was the development policies and the legislation of the postcolonial state that created and entrenched a sharp divide within the manual workforce between a privileged enclave of regular company workers with secure jobs and the rest of the labor force; and it is the state—often under pressure from international financial institutions—that later led the assault on the “rigidities in the labor market” that it had itself created. In so doing, what it had also fostered was the development of a huge gap in the conditions of the two kinds of worker.

That raises the question of whether—and under what circumstances—this differentiation has given rise to a distinction of *class* between them, and it is to this issue that now we turn.

## A Distinction of Class?

In the past, regular jobs in many of the workplaces dealt with in this collection were, by the standards of the manual labor force as a whole, privileged. Some still are. Compared to informal-sector workers, permanent employees in India's formal sector are highly remunerated. Their jobs are often so secure that they constitute something like a property right (which is how



Makram-Ebeid's Egyptian steel plant workers describe them). They are often, in effect, heritable. As in Sanchez's case, the right of workers to nominate their own successors has been widely conceded. Quasi-hereditary succession to industrial jobs has been common elsewhere. The "labor dynasties" of Soviet industry were valorized and remain so in much of the postsocialist world (as Kofti, Kesküla, and Trevisani testify).<sup>5</sup> The literature on Indian industry reports many instances in which jobs have been seen as a legitimate source of what amounts to a rental income: a worker hives off all or part of his (or very rarely her) duties to a substitute who receives some fraction of the wage while he collects the rest. Sometimes he was able to surreptitiously sell the position (or his nomination of a successor to it).<sup>6</sup> The crux is that such jobs provide a degree of security that may constitute "a partial alternative to ownership" (Lockwood 1958: 204) in that they provide shelter from the uncertainties of the labor market.

In a country like India, the significance of such security can hardly be overstated. Sengupta, Kannan, and Ravendran (2008) estimated that in 2004/05 more than one-fifth of the total population had incomes below the official poverty line (i.e., insufficient for their minimum nutritional needs). More than another half teetered on the brink of that condition or were vulnerable to it, meaning that their households were "only one illness away from chronic poverty" (Krishna 2011: 157). A regular job in a state-run enterprise or one of the big private factories is an effective shield against that kind of vulnerability. The distinction between those whose employment has meaningful legal protection and those whose livelihoods depend on the immediate requirements of their current employer marks one of the deepest rifts in the Indian social order. Job security is at least as important a determinant of class positioning as ownership of the means of production. For many workers, a regular job is often far more significant than the possession of land.

Standing's (2011) discussion of "the precariat" highlights this divide. The precariat, he proposes, constitutes a "class-in-the-making" that is separate from both "the salariat" with stable full-time employment, and the shrinking proletariat. Breman (2013), however, calls it a "bogus concept" that sets up artificial distinctions between different fractions of labor that share the same fundamental predicaments. Several of our contributors are also skeptical—Strümpell because different forms of precarity may be cumulative, whereas Standing privileges work and employment and has little to say about the precarity of habitation; and Kofti because company and contract workers in Stomana are now both precarious, and because they often belong to the same households. That makes it unrealistic to see them as separate classes. Sanchez (on whose analysis we comment later) makes a similar case; and further argues that there is no divide between regular and

temporary Tata workers in terms of values and political attitudes, though between the latter and informal-sector workers there is a big gap. The precariat cannot therefore be understood as a unitary class. All that notwithstanding, Standing's class scheme underscores the stark division within the manual labor force that several of our case studies suggest. Several but not all—and the crucial question concerns the conditions under which that division gets crystallized.

As already suggested, the state has often played a critical role. In mixed economies with important state sectors—like Turkey, Mexico, India and Egypt—government-run enterprises developed generic similarities, including workforces that enjoyed high wages and considerable job security, and that were increasingly separated from unorganized sector labor (Waterbury 1993). From the Communists' coming to power until at least the early 1980s, the Chinese industrial workforce was differentiated between those employed in modern, large-scale state-owned factories and those working in cooperative and more small-scale local government units, in addition to which there were temporary workers in state enterprises and workers in rural industries (Walder 1986; Lee 2007: 36). In terms of pay, perks and security, a large gap separated these fractions of labor, and mobility between them was limited. For more recent times, Pun (2005) has emphasized the division between *gongren*, the old “proletariat” with secure jobs in state-run factories and rights of permanent urban residence, and the *dagongzai* and *dagongmei* (the “boys” and “younger sisters” who “work for a boss” in Special Economic Zones), who are overwhelmingly flexible rural labor with only temporary residence rights—rights that are a major determinant of life chances. In this volume Fang discusses the divide between the old working class (*gongren jieji*) and peasant workers (*nongmingong*), as well as the difference in one of the factories she studied between “staff workers” (*zigong*), who are nearly all locals with residence rights, and “basic workers” (*yuangong*) who are overwhelmingly rural migrants without such rights. In terms of pay and security they are sharply differentiated.

For sub-Saharan Africa, Arrighi and Saul (1973) once argued that security and high wages encourage the “labor aristocracy” to sever ties with their rural roots, and that politically they are aligned with the “elite” and “sub-elite” as “junior partners” in “the dominant power bloc.” This thesis was hotly contested, perhaps most compellingly by case studies of labor disputes in West Africa (Peace 1975; Jeffries 1975). These seemed to show that these workers were capable of radically challenging the political elite, and that in doing so they had the support of other sections of the working population, for whom they were spokesmen and from whom they did not see themselves as distinct. Cooper (1996: 462) subsequently dismissed the argument as “misplaced from the start” because it was based on the

false premise that such workers are indeed deracinated. Ferguson's (1999) account of Copperbelt miners, however, presented evidence that they frequently are cut off from their rural kin; indeed, Cooper's (1992) own study of the decasualization of labor on the Mombasa docks had showed that colonial policy had created a separate enclave of secure, highly paid workers. Later, Saul (1975) conceded that there may be instances in which the most privileged workers identify "downward" rather than "upward" and suggested that the analytical challenge is to specify the conditions that favor one or another of those outcomes. The discussion of "structuration" that follows is intended to bear on that agenda.

Though Standing sees the precariat as a distinct social class, he is not explicit about the concept of class that informs his analysis. The one adopted here owes more to Weber than Marx. Weber gives the state greater scope for autonomous action independent of class interests, and his concept of class allows for distinctions (based on their market capacities) between those separated from the means of production—between, for example, white- and blue-collar workers, or between manual workers of different kinds. The focus is on life chances, which members of the same class share and which differentiate them from others. The approach (like Marx's) is relational, and it encourages us to look at the way in which the privileges of some come at the cost of others and are reproduced through processes of exclusion and opportunity hoarding that restrict outsiders' access to positions of advantage. Class is at bottom an economic phenomenon, and a *social* class is made up of the totality of economic positions "between which mobility either within the lifetime of the individual or over successive generations is a readily possible and typically observable occurrence" (Weber 1978: 57). Unlike social stratification theory, which portrays the social order as a gradation with multiple rungs, the idea of "class society" is premised on its division into a small number of distinct groups defined by their unequal economic positions. For classes to have any social reality, there must be significant breaks between them, marked by differences in the lifestyles and life experiences typical of their members. Classes must have some sense of themselves as identifiable groups if they are to pursue their own interests.

Giddens's notion of "structuration" addresses how that sense of identity comes about—how economic classes become *social* classes that are no longer merely a matter of economic differentiation but are freighted with wider social meaning and salience (Giddens 1975; Kingston 2000). Economic inequalities do not of themselves produce that result, nor is it necessarily the case that the steeper the inequality, the more crystallized social classes will be. Economic inequality is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for class structuration. Among the variables that determine its

degree, mobility between classes—both within the lifetime of the individual and across generations—is critical. The more mobility there is, the less likely people are to identify with a stable class identity. A working environment that minimizes contact between members of different classes is important, as is residential segregation, which partly sets patterns of socialization outside the workplace. Structuration plainly depends on the degree to which social interactions are confined to people of the same class, on the frequency with which marriage ties and the bonds of kinship and friendship cross class boundaries, and on whether individuals of different classes join in associations that bring them together or set them apart. Common consumption patterns and lifestyles, along with shared tastes, attitudes, and beliefs, also have a self-evident bearing on whether people think of themselves as being of the same kind and as having a distinctive culture. Where classes are highly structured, they are likely to be characterized by common political orientations and sympathies. Classes may be more strongly structured on some of these parameters than others, and structuration is always matter of degree and is never complete. The tighter their structuration, however, the more sharply classes emerge as identifiable groups, though their boundaries can never “be drawn like lines on a map” (Giddens 1975: 273).

The manual workforce of the central Indian steel town of Bhilai, as Parry (2009, 2013a, 2013b, forthcoming) has argued, is bifurcated into two distinct classes that are strongly structured in the ways described. In the mid 1980s, the public-sector Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) had 65,000 workers on its direct payroll—a total since cut by more than half, despite expansion of output. This was achieved without forced redundancies, and those who have regular posts continue to enjoy high wages and secure jobs. It is the deployment of cheap, “flexible” contract labor that makes this possible. At the same time, private-sector industry in the area has boomed, though only a minority of the sector’s workers are company employees. To evade the labor laws, most are hired through contractors. Apart from the division between the workforces of public- and private-sector companies, and between regular and contract workers within each sector, there is also a vast army of largely unskilled temporary labor that works for daily wages in both the formal and informal economies. Materially and socially, however, the real rift is between those with regular jobs in the organized sector on the one hand, and on the other those who work in it as contract labor, or outside it in the unorganized/informal sector. The distinction is entrenched in local categories. The first kind of worker “has *naukri*” (a “service” position seen as a kind of “office” and spoken of as something one possesses).<sup>7</sup> The second “does *kam*” (insecure untenured “work,” paradigmatically for daily wages). Those who have *naukri* refer to those who do *kam* as the

“labor class,” which is certainly not how they think of themselves or are thought of by others—which is unhesitatingly as “middle class.” As everybody sees it, these are distinct kinds of people, unequal in dignity and resources, and different in outlook and values.

Only the baldest summary of the evidence that supports this analysis is possible here, but amongst the most salient findings is that over time the BSP workforce has become a largely self-reproducing stratum into which mobility from below is highly restricted. Given today’s minimal recruitment, BSP sons can now no longer count on following in their fathers’ footsteps, but they have a significantly better chance of landing some form of middle-class employment than the son of a contract or construction worker has of obtaining a regular BSP position. Rather, “labor-class” people move readily and frequently between typically labor-class jobs: contract work in the plant, construction work outside it, loading and unloading jobs, and various forms of self-employment. In earlier times it was not uncommon for one member of the household to hold a BSP post while his sibling(s) worked in the informal sector; but as households have partitioned and the generations have succeeded each other over the years, “the axiom of kinship amity” (Fortes 1969) has often buckled under the pressures of class differentiation as the BSP branch of the family distances itself from the embarrassing encumbrance of its poor relations. Residentially, the two strata are also increasingly segregated (for much the same reasons explored by Strümpell). In terms of the “size of the purse,” BSP workers comfortably qualify as middle-class, and on top of their wage they get valuable benefits and easy access to soft company credit that enables them to invest in urban property and/or agricultural land. Furthermore, their undemanding work schedules allow them to run lucrative moonlighting businesses. Meanwhile, the monthly incomes of many contract workers in the plant fall below the poverty line. BSP workers can sustain life styles and afford consumer durables of which contract workers can only dream.

Though company workers and contract labor often rub shoulders on the BSP shop floor, they do not fraternize. In the mid 1990s the plant was greatly overmanned; for regular workers time discipline was lax and the pace of work leisurely (Parry 1999). Ten years later time discipline was tighter, but BSP workers were doing less of the work themselves, having increasingly become a supervisory workforce overseeing the labor of the contract workers who were assigned the most arduous and unpleasant tasks, often toiling continuously throughout two back-to-back shifts. It seems reasonable to infer that BSP employees can only be paid so well and work so little because the contract labor that is progressively replacing them is paid so little and must work so hard—in short, that the relationship between them is one of exploitation. Certainly they do not always share the

same interests, and union politics both reflect and exacerbate the division. The regular BSP workforce is represented by a “recognized” union that has generally cooperated closely with management. Most contract labor is un-unionized, and whenever it has tried to organize, the official union, contractors, and management have colluded to suppress their *lèse-majesté*. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, there was a prolonged period of strife in BSP’s iron ore mines and a series of violent confrontations between a new union championing the cause of the contract workers in the manual mines<sup>8</sup> and the officially “recognized” union that represented regular workers in the mechanized mines. The main bone of contention was a mechanization program that threatened jobs in the manual mines. When the trouble subsequently spread to Bhilai’s private-sector industrial estate, contract labor went on strike while company workers either stayed out of the fray or took the company’s side. Meanwhile, the official union from the mines supplied the bosses with blackleg labor.

The two kinds of workers are also set apart in numerous ways outside the world of work: their children have very different kinds of upbringing; the conjugal bond and the stability of marriage are valued differently; and the two groups have markedly different propensities for suicide, ideas about the costs and benefits of industrial modernity, and orientations to time (Parry 2001, 2005, 2007, 2012). In short, we are dealing here with two distinct social classes that are highly structured on the axes Giddens identified: low rates of mobility across the divide, a high degree of residential segregation, attenuated kinship ties, contrasting lifestyles and consumption patterns, and a distance maintained between them on the BSP shop floor, where their interactions are hierarchically structured. Their interests are not always the same and sometimes conflict, and their relationship may involve a significant element of exploitation.

Given their institutional links (both are managed by the same public-sector holding company), their common history (both were part of Nehru’s modernizing vision and began production in 1959), and their geographical proximity, it is unsurprising that the pattern of differentiation that Strümpell reports for contemporary Rourkela is close to that outlined for Bhilai. What he shows, however, is that until recently the divide between organized and unorganized labor was masked by ethnicity, and that greater residential segregation has played a crucial role in restricting mobility and hardening the class boundaries between them. The Rourkela Steel Plant (RSP) was built in the highlands of western Odisha in an area dominated by Adivasis (supposedly autochthonous “Tribals”) who, as part of the compensation package for their requisitioned land, were promised one compensatory plant job per household. The many cases of failure to fulfill this commitment have been a running sore ever since.

Though many of the pioneer workers were migrants from distant parts of the country, a clamor soon arose for preference to be given to recruits from coastal Odisha. The plant belonged to “their” state, even if the local Adivasis regarded them as “foreigners.” Their demands were difficult to resist because the state government’s survival hinged on electoral support from the eastern coastal belt. In those early years, ethnic politics became explosive and Rourkela experienced horrific communal violence (Parry and Strümpell 2008). Its ethnic divisions were reflected in its spatial organization: the company town was the preserve of nonlocal RSP workers, both coastal Odias and those from outside Odisha. The displaced Adivasis were relocated in resettlement colonies on its periphery or lived in *bastis* (slum-like settlements) on encroached land, where they were joined by rural kin who came in search of employment. These settlements were thus a mix of RSP workers who had been given jobs in lieu of their fields, and informal-sector workers. Union politics in Rourkela broadly reflected its ethnic divisions, and RSP workers from the resettlement colonies supported the campaigns for compensatory RSP employment for the so far neglected locals. Ethnic loyalties overrode the incipient class division between them.

That has since changed. Nowadays out-of-state migrants are rarely recruited, the RSP workforce has been radically cut, and the RSP township can now accommodate its entire workforce. Fresh Adivasi recruits and RSP Adivasi workers from the resettlement colonies move to the township “for the sake of the children,” particularly the better employment prospects they will gain from its higher quality company schools and its more “civilized” atmosphere. One consequence is that Adivasi RSP workers have largely lost interest in their erstwhile neighbors’ struggles for jobs in the plant, and often are hostile to them. A second is that these settlements are now almost exclusively inhabited by unorganized labor. The situation is reminiscent of Wilson’s (1987) argument that the north American ghetto has become a “sink” for the “truly disadvantaged” as upwardly mobile blacks have moved out of what was once a mixed-class neighborhood, leaving behind a socially isolated underclass without mainstream role models or the capacity to sustain local institutions. Though Strümpell does not put it in these terms, it seems plausible to suppose that the increasingly precarious housing situation he describes is exacerbated by the social isolation of the informal sector workers that remain and the lack of a leadership that is able to effectively articulate their grievances. In any event, the trajectory is one in which a division in the workforce that once was strongly inflected by ethnicity has given way to one that is primarily based on class. It is the opposite of the development that Hoffmann reports from Nepal, where the Maoist agenda has shifted from the politics of class to the politics of ethnicity.

The *naukri/kam* distinction found in Bhilai has strong resonances, and sometimes almost precise analogues, in the local categories documented in several of our case studies. Hoffmann's Nepali informants distinguish between workers with *isthai* and *asthai kam*, fixed employment versus casual work. As mentioned above, Fang's ethnography brings out a sharp distinction between urban and migrant peasant workers. In China, Lee (2007: 130) reports, informal-sector jobs are not regarded as "real work," which is employment in the state sector. That's what they say in Bhilai, where *naukri* is a "proper job" and those without it are often described as *berozgar* (unemployed) even when they toil day and night in terrible conditions.

The way in which these categories may be ideologically freighted is vividly brought out in the vignette that opens Rudnycky's chapter. The ethnographer had blundered by referring to his interlocutor, who had a regular post at the Krakatau steel works, as a "worker" (*buruh*), and was indignantly set right: he was an "employee" (*karyawan*), not a worker. There is a world of difference. Employees receive a salary and a variety of benefits, and they have permanent positions from which they are hard to remove. Though the plant is highly overmanned and its workforce is being softened up for neoliberal restructuring by a management-sponsored Islamic reform program, there have yet to be significant redundancies. Workers get a wage (which in the case of Krakatau contract labor may reach up to half the amount an employee receives) and can easily be "let go." It appears more difficult for a contract worker to become a *karaywan* than for a *karyawan* to become a manager. Contract laborers are assigned the most taxing and dangerous tasks, often carried out under the supervision of regular workers. The two groups are distinguished by their uniforms and different demeanors; they have different break rooms, sit separately in the canteens, and belong to different unions. Whereas workers are mainly locals, employees are predominantly outsiders, do not understand the local dialect, and regard themselves as superior. They have middle-class lifestyles and consumption patterns, and do not live in the same neighborhoods that workers inhabit.

In Helwan, the steel town south of Cairo where Makram-Ebeid worked, the key distinction in the labor force is between a *muwazzafa* (one who owns a post [*wazifa*]) and an *'urzuqia* (one who does not know what tomorrow's job will be and does only "work" [*shughl*]). A *wazifa* is paradigmatically a secure and well-paid government job. Regular EISCO (steel plant) workers "own" it and have been able to pass it on to the next generation by custom and practice. It has now become a "right." Only the children of regular workers are eligible for recruitment. It is now hard to get a temporary contract or even a day labor job in the plant unless one comes from an EISCO family, but is possible to progress up the ladder from day laborer to regular worker (though it is unclear how common that



is). That distinguishes this situation from our Indian and Javanese cases, where such mobility is now highly restricted. Given that possibility, and the probability that they are kin, the distinction between EISCO workers who have “posts” and those who do not is less marked than that between plant workers in general and workers in the informal sector outside the plant. The latter are pre-eminently *al-tabābna*, displaced local villagers. The two groups characteristically differ in their lifestyles, household structures, and values and aspirations. EISCO workers consider themselves middle-class and superior to the rough, uncouth *al-tabābna*. Formerly, the two strata were more residentially segregated. That is to some extent breaking down, but closer proximity has not promoted sociability or trust. What has not broken down is the *al-tabābna*'s exclusion from plant jobs. That is largely the product of opportunity hoarding by current workers. Makram-Ebeid describes the relationship as one of exploitation.

While Sanchez wants to stress the growing precarity that affects all segments of labor, and to play down the divisions within it, another reading of his evidence shows a pattern that is very similar to the one just described: a gulf separates Tata workers (regardless of their employment status) from informal-sector workers (like those in the scrapyards he studied). The two kinds of Tata worker are probably kin and members of the same household. It is only to be expected that their ideas and interests should be the same. However, it would seem—at least if we can extrapolate from evidence about the neighboring Tata steel plant—that in the past, large numbers of local Adivasis were employed as contract labor. Permanent workers, predominantly immigrant Biharis, were totally unresponsive to their campaigns for permanent positions (Sanchez 2016: 95). It seems that Tata has since replaced them with Tata “wards” taken on as cut-rate apprentices, and that regular workers now show interest in their plight only because they are their sons.

One obscurity in Sanchez's account is how his stress on the deteriorating conditions of all workers squares with his argument that management has to retain a privileged core workforce if it is to keep its temporary laborers committed to their jobs. It is also unclear what evidence he has for claiming that regular workers are now more precarious. If that is true, how do they get away with the malingering and shirking he describes (*ibid.*: 138–139)? Admittedly, it might be claimed that the casualization of their sons leaves them exposed in old age, but the fact is that they receive a decent pension and a substantial Provident Fund payout on retirement. What Sanchez does, however, convincingly bring out is the contrast in political attitudes between Tata apprentices and scrapyards workers. While the former have a strong sense of entitlement, of betrayal and outrage at a birthright denied, life teaches the latter that the world owes them nothing and they must

submit to their lot with resignation. This is so, he emphasizes, despite there being little to distinguish them in terms of pay (though it must surely make a difference that one's father is a Tata worker and belongs to the same household). These different attitudes point to the essential conclusion that the two kinds of workers regard themselves as existentially different, as belonging to separate worlds. The Tata apprentice's outrage is at his own fate alone. He is indifferent to that of Rakesh and his scraggy co-workers; and Sanchez graphically evokes the contempt and derision to which Rakesh is subject on the streets. It seems unlikely that the latter's tormentors would feel licensed to treat a Tata scion so.

In each of these cases, it thus seems plausible to speak of distinct social classes. The cases differ, however, in where the boundaries between the classes are drawn: between workers with urban residence rights and migrant peasant workers, in China; between regular workers and contract and informal-sector labor in the Bhilai, Rourkela, and Krakatau steel plants; and between EISCO and Tata workers—regardless of their employment status—and non-company labor in Helwan and Jamshedpur. In other cases, however, class structuration within the manual labor force is fuzzier. Though the picture that emerges from these falls far short of portraying a unitary working class, nor is it possible to identify separate classes of labor.

Kesküla writes of mine workers in Kazakhstan who remain comparatively well paid (they can afford foreign holidays) and have a strong sense of solidarity, of their distinctive identity, and of being the old Soviet labor elite. Though they predominantly live in their own communities and are all company workers, their separateness is severely compromised because only a minority of their children will get mining jobs. As non-Kazakhs, they stand little chance of obtaining government employment. Even if they speak Kazakh, they have “the wrong eyes.” Most are forced into low-paid work or remain unemployed, and must either continue to depend on their parents or emigrate. Their sense of forming a distinct vanguard enclave of labor is being radically undermined.

In nearby Temirtau (Trevisani) and in the Bulgarian case (Kofti), the process of de-structuration has gone further. As we have seen, the pay, working conditions and security of the entire workforce have declined, resulting in a gap between company and contract labor that is narrower than it is in our earlier examples. Even regular employees are now precarious and often work alongside contract labor doing much the same jobs under the same harsh conditions. In the past, Temirtau workers could nominate their own successors, but that privilege has now been rescinded, just as it has been, for all practical purposes, in Pernik, where at the time of Kofti's fieldwork around 80 percent of workers and administrative staff were the children, nephews, or nieces of current or former employees. Today they

have little chance of having a regular job, and their parents have little desire for them to follow in their footsteps. In both cases, although managers and workers alike used to live in housing provided by the company (in Temirtau most managers had risen through the ranks), they are now more residentially dispersed, and regular workers are likely to live alongside contract labor. With profound consequences for domestic life, their households are also more likely to contain still dependent adult children, as well as women who have been made redundant. Though Stomana employees are still well-off compared to workers in Pernik's new garment factories, and though in Temirtau the "Mittals" (as regular workers are mockingly known) and contract workers have different political orientations and different attitudes to work, in the broad picture no one is secure, and downward mobility is "a readily possible and typically observable occurrence." The result is low structuration.

As observed earlier, what most obviously sets these two cases apart from our other steel plant examples is that both companies have been privatized and their managements' goals are geared to shareholder returns. (This recalls Lee's argument that management objectives aimed at acquiring "use values" cause workers to be differently placed.) Both cases have to do with a former labor elite whose position of pre-eminence in the hierarchy of labor is now seriously compromised. A priori we might suppose that such workers would be more inclined to identify "downward" with other fractions of labor whose conditions they now share, than "upward" with management and the middle classes. Likely as such a development might seem, however, neither case gives much indication that de-structuration is leading to a wider political mobilization of "the working class."

One reason for that concerns the way class intersects with ethnicity. Although ethnic divisions may inhibit the emergence of more generalized sentiments of "proletarian solidarity" (as the early history of Rourkela suggests), they may help to solidify the sense of common identity shared by workers in a particular niche of the labor market and to set them apart from others. Ethnic identity is often a "market capacity" or its opposite—a market disqualification. Class structuration may be boosted by the overlap between class and ethnicity (Giddens 1975: 111–112). What is certainly striking in our case histories is the way workforce divisions based on differentiation between formal- and informal-sector workers are often congruent with, and reinforced by, divisions based on ethnicity. In Pernik, Roma are over-represented in Stomana's contract labor force, though hardly any have regular positions; and much the same goes for the *Oralman* (people of Kazakh ethnicity who are return migrants from Mongolia and Uzbekistan) in Temirtau. Hoffmann's *paledars* (who have insecure portering jobs) are all ("Tribal") Tharus, whereas those who are sponsored for regular jobs by

the Maoist union come mainly from the local Madheshi peasantry. The Tata Motors shop floor is dominated by Biharis, who differ ethnically from both Tata management and the workforce in the Lohar Enterprises scarpard; while in our Egyptian, Indonesian and Chinese examples there is a high degree of overlap between regular and precarious employment and the distinction between outsiders and locals. At the same time as ethnic identities may subvert “working-class” unity, our case studies suggest that they frequently strengthen *class* structuration *within* it.

### Workers as Neoliberal Subjects?

In the ideology of neoliberalism, however, class disappears. Society is supposedly made up of autonomous individuals without collective identities. As Harvey (2005: 2) defines it, neoliberalism is “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and capacities within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” In that framework, individuals are resourceful and creative, take charge of their own fate, give free rein to their entrepreneurial instincts, and adapt to market conditions. If they fail, they have only themselves to blame. It is they who must accept the burden of risk. Welfare is debilitating because it creates a “culture of dependency.” Neoliberalism has achieved the status of a “hegemonic” discourse that is disseminated in innumerable ways by innumerable authorities who champion competition, self-reliance, and individual initiative. Its doctrines now pass as “common-sense,” its economic “discipline” as “inevitable” (Bourdieu 1998; Harvey 2005; Miller and Rose 2008; Mirowski 2014). Neoliberal subjects fashion themselves (Türken et al. 2016). They are protean beings with chameleon-like qualities. “Flexibility” is a sanctified value, and all commitments are provisional. Harvey (2005: 4) quotes Lyotard’s “famous description of the post-modern condition as one where ‘the temporary contract’ supplants ‘the permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family and international domains, as well as in political affairs.’” Even gender identities are now negotiable. Giddens’s (1992, 1999) “sociological” analysis of intimacy celebrates this transformation in the personal realm, where couples are now, at any stage, (supposedly) free to terminate their relationship when it is no longer fulfilling. Neoliberalism is a mindset and a way of life.

One striking feature of the literature on neoliberal *subjectivity* is how much of it is really about neoliberal *discourse*. Subjectivity surely conveys the idea of some internal reality, but of the thoughts and feelings of ordi-

nary actors we get little idea. What we learn is what the doctrine requires them to be. Of course, the discourse is much easier to access than the states of mind, but it is not a reliable proxy. The match may be very imperfect. As our ethnography shows, people cannot possibly believe all that neoliberalism tells them, and even if they did, their understandings might prove difficult to predict since the neoliberal agenda is self-contradictory. Although its doctrines and practices might have a significant impact on consciousness, that impact is indeterminate.

Ferguson's (1999) study of Zambian miners at the time of a dramatic downturn in the world market for copper makes it clear that neoliberalism may be chiefly productive of a paralyzing despair—a sense of abjection, of being expelled from the modern world and cast aside by history. These miners were far from being neoliberal subjects in the textbook sense. In a very different context, Gooptu's (2009, 2013) studies of retail workers and security guards in Kolkata shopping malls set out to show how their subjectivities are strongly shaped by the workplace, though the kinds of workers that populate such settings bear little resemblance to the go-getting entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects that figure in the dominant discourse. What the retail staff actually experience is the tyranny of targets, continual scrutiny of their performance, and a gnawing realization that they are in jobs with no future. The security guards continually encounter customers who regard them with contempt. Their training and experience teach them that the quality they most need is “the ability to accept,” and that they must fashion themselves for servility. The market, Gooptu concludes, produces the kind of workers it needs; and her picture is of a rather effective ideological project that does indeed succeed in colonizing hearts and minds. Of that, however, it is difficult to be certain. We get little idea of how these workers talk about their jobs outside interview contexts, and no idea of the values they take from the workplace into their lives outside it. To neoliberal ideology in its “pure” form, one might expect some resistance. It is not obvious how its valorization of protean persons is to be reconciled with an ideology that claims that each caste has its own immutable essence.

Neoliberal subjects are the autonomous, self-directed sovereigns of their own persons. They must be flexible, which means disposable. Neoliberalism has shifted the already unequal balance of power between capital and labor, making jobs less secure while work regimes become subject to speed-ups and enhanced surveillance, and demand intensified effort. From Prentice's chapter we learn that although some women in Trinidad's garment industry say factory work is preferable, many others see greater advantage in home-based production, where they can better juggle their income-generating activities with their domestic responsibilities and “cast an eye” on the children—even if it means they are materially worse off.

The kind of person neoliberalism tells workers they should be is in contradiction with the kind of person the neoliberal work regime allows them to be. This is evident in Trevisani's account of conditions on the Temirtau shop floor and in Schober's description of the military-style discipline, long hours, and compulsory overtime that are enforced in the Subic Bay shipyard. It emerges even more strikingly in Morris and Hinz's ethnography of workers in a multinational car plant in Russia. Their jobs are unskilled and unfulfilling; they have minimal scope for initiative; and compared to yesterday's workers in old-style Soviet factories, they have experienced a loss of autonomy and must work at higher intensity. Yet at the same time, they need the higher wages that the car plant offers if they are to be the kind of get-ahead worker they have always aspired to become. This tension undermines their sense of self-worth. Outside the factory they can hardly bring themselves to speak of their jobs. In it, they are thoroughly alienated—even from the union, on which they remain free riders though it has brought them tangible benefits.

Another disjunction is between the ideology of the entrepreneurial individual and the indubitable fact that nobody can make it alone. Success is contingent on the ability to mobilize networks of support. Workers in the Tirupur garment industry take considerable pride in their skills, and government-sponsored training programs foster the idea that their well-being depends on their individual capabilities. Men in particular are expected to strive and “get on” by graduating from apprentice to master tailor and hopefully becoming a contractor or even an owner. But the key to that kind of success is backing. As Carswell and De Neve observe in their chapter: “Against the widespread neoliberal rhetoric of individuality, self-reliance and independent enterprise, our informants reveal themselves as quintessentially non-neoliberal subjects whose lives continue to be shaped by family relations and domestic responsibilities, and whose entrepreneurial success is as likely to rely on the support of kin, caste and friendship networks as on individual skill, ability, or drive.” Or consider Fang, who argues that although the young women workers in one of the factories she studied have insecure jobs, they are not afflicted by their precarity because they see factory employment as a stepping-stone to becoming independent entrepreneurs. We do not know how often they succeed (rarely, one suspects), but Fang clearly shows that they imagine they can realize their aspirations by assiduously cultivating, in the traditional Chinese way, relationships based on *guanxi* with co-workers, bosses, and others—that is, relationships based on reciprocity, gift giving, mutual obligation and trust, and often on hierarchical deference. As they plainly see, the only way to become a successful neoliberal subject is to embrace dependence on old-style collective support.

Different groups of workers often have quite disparate reactions to the very similar conditions with which neoliberalism confronts them. Though the young female employees in Fang's THS factory (which is located in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone) may not be much concerned by job insecurity, it is a constant source of anxiety for the somewhat older cohort of workers in KSI (which is close to Shanghai). Sanchez's Tata apprentices and scrapyards labor respond to precarity in contrasting ways. Trevisani reports that for company workers in Temirtau the conscientious performance of their duties is almost an act of defiance—an assertion of their determination to keep the plant going despite the machinations of Finance and the London Office. They perform “work as resistance,” whereas contract workers “work for subsistence”—to put food on the table. It is the former who work hardest.

Not only are workers' reactions far from uniform, but the lessons they are intended to learn about neoliberal subjectivity may depart radically from the authorized script. In his study of the aftermath of the Gujarat earthquake of 2004, Simpson (2013) shows how the devastation of Kutch allowed powerful political and economic interests from the eastern part of the state to impose their own agenda on it. The earthquake provided both the opportunity and the catalyst for a massive piece of social engineering. It created the space for a radical reorientation of the region's economy along neoliberal lines. By offering tax concessions and cheap land for industry, and giving investors every confidence that it would be extremely unlikely to implement its own environmental and labor laws, the state government turned Kutch into “a large and cut-price industrial estate” (ibid.: 39). But hand in hand with this economic program went a political project that aimed to refashion local society along lines laid down by an assertive ideology of Hindu supremacy. The reconstruction of towns and villages meant that formerly mixed communities could be unscrambled, and new separations between Hindus and Muslims, and between castes and classes, were created. Those who pulled the strings had no interest in nurturing malleable neoliberal individuals with transient commitments. What they wanted were hard-core Hindus.

There are echoes of that in the situation that Rudnyckyj describes. According to the diagnosis of the Emotional and Spiritual Quotient (ESQ) training program that Krakatau steel employees were encouraged to attend, the problems of global competition that the plant has been facing are pre-eminently due to the inadequate Islamic piety of its workforce. For the plant to be restored to health, workers must become better Muslims. This message is conveyed in protracted, carefully orchestrated, intensely emotional mass sessions in which participants are encouraged to weep in atonement, and which combine conventional Islamic teachings with lessons culled from Western self-help manuals and business management-speak.

How far that message is heeded, however, seems variable. While many managers talk of a profound spiritual awakening, workers are generally more skeptical: “Oh no, now we have to cry again!” ESQ training is explicitly intended to inculcate a spirit of individual initiative and self-reliance, and—skepticism notwithstanding—many trainees report that it does. To that extent we can say that it helps to install a neoliberal subjectivity. But at the same time it congeals identities. Elsewhere, Rudnyckj (2010: 201f.) reports on a remarkable case of spirit possession that occurred during one of the ESQ sessions he attended. The possessed worker was an employee called Arfan, one of whose grandfathers was a Chinese Christian. The spirit that spoke through his mouth did so in “Chinese” (a language of which Arfan was ignorant) and displayed other distinctively Chinese characteristics. Through ESQ, it would seem, he was exorcising the Chinese part of his person to become a more complete Indonesian *Muslim*, a more “properly” anchored person with a more firmly fixed identity. That is not the individual of conventional neoliberal theory.

Neoliberal economies produce precarious workers, and precarity, as previously noted, is inimical to planning for the future and encourages clientelism and dependence on family support. How, under these circumstances, are such workers expected to be autonomous individuals capable of coolly evaluating their (often non-existent) options? Self-fashioning is a project for the relatively privileged, not for those who “do not know what tomorrow’s job will be” (as Makram-Ebeid’s informants express it). As the contributions by Kesküla, Kofti, and Sanchez poignantly illustrate, the casualization of labor has forced many in the younger generation into prolonged dependence, “infantilizing” them (Kesküla) and strengthening patriarchal authority within the household (Kofti). That might give pause to anybody tempted to suppose that, of Standing’s three precariat “factions,” it is the educated young robbed of a future who are going to prove the most “dangerous.” What it rather suggests is that neoliberal conditions expose the neoliberal subject as a chimera from an imaginary world.

Lee reports that on the Copperbelt it is, tellingly, the older workers with regular jobs who have been best able to set up viable side businesses. The same is true in Bhilai, where BSP wages and credit have capitalized much of the most dynamic entrepreneurial activity in the informal sector. Often it is not, as the theory supposes, those outside the formal economy who start the small businesses that thrive, but those whose moonlighting enterprises are underwritten by it. Whereas regular Stomana workers continue to cultivate land in the nearby villages they come from, and can earn a supplementary income from their membership in collective herding groups (*batchia*), Kofti shows how this is impossible for contract workers due to the unpredictability of their jobs. They are consequently more fully



proletarianized and less capable of entrepreneurial initiative. Neoliberal subjects are regularly smothered at birth by neoliberal economics.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that in the world created by the neoliberal economy, most people are positively prevented from becoming anything like a “proper” neoliberal subject. It may be true that in certain restricted circles the discourse has achieved a hegemonic status, but any claim that it is now firmly installed as part of the general “common sense” smacks of hyperbole. Such a proposition requires us to suppose that ordinary working people are willing to indefinitely suspend the common sense rooted in their everyday experience, which tells them that such a subject cannot possibly inhabit the same space as they do, and that the ideology and the practices that derive from it do not constitute a seamless and coherent whole. In that realization there is perhaps some glimmer of hope for the future.

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## Notes

1. The argument clearly assumes that mobility between the two employment statuses—permanent and temporary—is understood to be possible (and that company policy deliberately fosters belief in that possibility). In Indian public-sector steel plants, the chances of such promotion are now squarely recognized as being extremely remote (see Strümpell in this volume; Parry 2013a); considerations of that kind cannot therefore explain the consent of contract labor.
2. This estimate was reported for 2014/15 by *Business Line* (16 June 2015). It is consistent with comparative data compiled by the Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd for 2015/16, which show that while manpower accounted for 21 percent of total expenditure in Steel Authority of India units, it was a mere 3 percent in two big private companies. Extrapolating from figures provided by D’Mello (1991: 195), labor costs in the Indian

steel industry at the end of the 1980s—that is, before liberalization—had accounted for about 15.7 percent of total production costs.

3. The Marwaris are a well-known mercantile community from Rajasthan who now have huge commercial and industrial interests throughout the subcontinent and in many other parts of the world. Lakshmi Mittal, owner of the Temirtau steel plant, is a Marwari, as is Anil Agarwal, the founder and executive chairman of the Vedanta mining company, which figures in Lee's chapter.
4. Compare Teitelbaum (2011), whose argument on this, and on a number of other points, converges with Agarwala's.
5. See also the current Code of Business Ethics issued by the Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works. One of the clauses relating to the "Observance of Employees' Labour Rights" commits the company to fostering "labour traditions and so-called 'labour dynasties'" in the interests of promoting "corporate loyalty, labour discipline and productivity" (<http://eng.mmk.ru/upload/iblock/717/Code1.pdf>; last accessed 19 October 2017). Publicity material from the United Cement Group's plant at Semei in Kazakhstan proudly includes an account of the Belenko family's association with it over three generations (<http://www.unicementgroup.com/news/show/id/27/lang/en.html>; last accessed on 19 October 2017).
6. The sources on such practices are legion, but see, e.g., Breman (1996: 66), Sen (2008), Ramaswamy (1988: 29, 39, 181–182, 1994: 116–117), Chandavarkar (1994: 225), Holmström (1984: 214–6), De Haan (1994: 208), Parry (2013a).
7. More precisely, this category includes all who have posts in public-sector concerns but only those private-sector workers with regular employment in the largest, most modern and most bureaucratically organized factories. Only on these do the labor laws have any real purchase, and only such workers are said to have *naukri*.
8. This was the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, mentioned earlier.

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