Afterword: Work, Place, and the Value of Ethnography

Sarah Besky, Cornell University
sb2626@cornell.edu

Discussions of work in South Asia, especially in anthropology, often revolve around classic industrial formations, from brick kilns to tea plantations to textile mills and garment factories (see Besky 2014; Finkelstein 2019; Jegathesan 2019; Karim 2014; Shah 2006). Questions of compensation, migration, rights, resistance, and the uncertain future of work punctuate these discussions. This collection constitutes a welcome expansion of the empirical and conceptual grounds for thinking through these questions.

Specifically, the contributors to the collection aim to dislodge the concept of work from dominant ways of apprehending everyday life. As these authors recognize, the naturalization of both work and the categories used to describe it demand critical scrutiny. The articles depict people in a variety of settings asking: What does work mean? How is work sustained? How should it be done?

Too often, the answers to these questions appear self-evident. In prompting *AWR*’s readers to think in an explicitly regional register about work, this collection suggests that the emic concepts, categories, and interpretations that can only be drawn from extended ethnography may form the strongest basis for a transformative theory and politics of work. In short, these papers ask us to be led by the stories of others, rather than by the terms of grand theory. Each author explores how people make and remake work, discursively and materially. The contributions reveal that how work is talked about is linked to how it is valued and in turn to the social relations it creates, maintains, or destroys. What I see here is a set of place-based critiques of capitalist logics.

This place-based framework is perhaps most explicit in Ishani Saraf’s article on scrap-breakers and scrap-traders. In Leela Market, which is composed of multiple owner-run workshops, the work histories Saraf recorded consistently contained descriptions of scrap traders and workers “having blackened their hands.” घाट केले करना, or “blackening one’s hands,” indexes the actual grease and funk of working with scrap metal, but it does more than that. It is a mimetic archive, in William Mazzarella’s (2017) terms, of a long history of how manual labor has made and maintained the infrastructures of capitalist circulation in a global city. The blackness caked onto one’s hands indexes symbolic pollution and material toxic exposure. Saraf takes this semantic refrain and casts it as a theoretical “refrain,” a la Deleuze and Guattari. Doing so, Saraf highlights “the place-making potential of repeated expressive forms, and...how a particular quality and world of work is invoked to claim rightful presence and legitimacy in the city.”

The refrain has much in common with the attunement of the tradespeople on Delhi construction sites—sites just down the road, perhaps, from Leela Market. As Adam Sargent’s article shows, for construction tradespeople, repeated work became an ādat, or habit. But the English translation doesn’t do justice to the richness of this concept. Ādat describes a worker’s ability to withstand the particular kinds of exposure that a given trade necessitates. To signify their ādat, bar benders would tell Sargent of their callused hands or their imperviousness to the heat of steel rods left in the sun.

In his contribution, Sargent makes a conceptual move that will certainly be of interest to scholars of work. He draws on work in Science and Technology Studies about how bodies become attuned to their surrounding environments through exposure: “As trade workers ‘kept doing’ their work, their bodies interfaced with the same environmental stimuli, from rusty rebar to stone dust, and these stimuli changed their bodies. At the same time that ādat refers to a process of bodily attunement, it is also a general theory of productive action.” Concepts like the refrain and ādat enrich studies of work by helping us understand the mundane, rote, and everyday features of material production and what they mean to the people who wear those features on their bodies.

Though many of the papers call attention to how repeated work forges an embodied connection to place, whether it is Leela Market or the Delhi high-rises, the wastescapes of Lahore (Butt), the farmscapes of Bihar (Kantor), or the Pakistani water grid (Hayat), places of work in all these contributions are also revealed to be liable to deterritorialization, displacement, and decay.

The feminist political theorist Kathi Weeks (2011) has critiqued a feminist impulse to parse the divide between productive and reproductive work. It’s all work, after all. Discerning between types of work fails to question the centrality of work—its seeming inescapability—in understandings of what it means...
to be human. It is exciting, then, to see how people contemplate the future of work outside of the Euro-American contexts to which Weeks is most closely attuned. One thing this collection provides is a means of grappling with an uncertain future of work in South Asia in the context of precarity, marginalization, unemployment, and uneven (or non-existent) social service provision.

For example, public services and bureaucracies have often been treated as exceptional in the scholarship on work. As Maira Hayat notes in her article on bureaucratic labor at the irrigation department in Pakistan’s Punjab, government jobs are salaried, but even if the salaries are low, the stability of the government job indexes social prestige. As a means of rationalizing and modernizing Pakistan’s water governance infrastructures, low-level bureaucrats, or patwari, are being phased out. By focusing on modes of compensation—government officials’ salaries as well as licit and illicit practices of supplementing them—Hayat seeks to situate the bureaucrat more squarely within conversations about labor. In an innovative move, her analysis brings corruption into the labor process, instead of viewing it as outside of, or a denigration to, that process. The narratives of the patwari show us that corruption can be stretched and made richer by paying attention to “hierarchies of authority, effort and remuneration”—in a word, labor. Even though corruption moves throughout the ranks of government bureaucracies like the irrigation department, it is the patwari who are most readily associated with it, both in public discourse and in the eyes of the powers on high in the bureaucracy.

In Pakistan and elsewhere, the World Bank is ushering in new ways of thinking about and governing water. This ideological shift—and a shift of expertise from bureaucrat to technocrat—is actively moving to diminish the role of the patwari. All this prompts Hayat to think about how the bureaucratic work of the patwari is beset by a progressive devaluation. Drawing from Raymond Williams’ now-classic idea, Hayat frames devaluation not just as a change in managerial priorities but as a “structure of feeling.” Patwari work today is marked by a tentativeness, an unknowing quality, especially in the context of World Bank interventions. As Hayat notes: “Such a structure of feeling not only alienates officials from their roles, it also erodes trust in the organizations seen to be authoring reform.” Whereas Saraf’s refrain and Sargent’s ādat connote claims to connection, Hayat’s structure of feeling points to a condition of being adrift or abandoned.

Like Hayat, several of the contributors to this collection are careful to situate the place-based stories they tell within larger-scale stories about the convergence of development policies aimed at improvement and neoliberal strategies aimed at efficient accumulation. Saraf ends her article by recounting how India’s National Green Tribunal recently determined the Leela scrap market to be harmful both to the workers within it and to Delhi’s environment. Here and across the collection, we see (an albeit non-Deleuzian) refrain about the role of technocratic governance in shaping the future of work. As scrap work and the recovery of machinery becomes scapegoated for the city’s chronic air quality problem, the blackening of one’s hands is, to use Hayat’s words, “devalued,” rendered into a signifier not of belonging but of pollution and abjection.

As rationalizing and neoliberalizing governance regimes are rolled out, work does not disappear exactly, but the ability of workers to determine how it will be valued is diminished. In his article, Waqas Butt takes us to Lahore, Pakistan, where a kind of public-private partnership (PPP) has replaced the city’s Solid Waste Management Department. Such PPPs have become a model in global development, touted as a means for making public works more efficient, productive, accountable, and transparent. As in Hayat’s article, we can see a “structure of feeling” at play, in which ideas of shiny, modern technical expertise come to be the organizing ideology for service delivery. A (literally) messy social process, sanitation in Lahore, is reordered and revalued under globalized and abstracted forms of knowledge. For development planners and reformers in Lahore, as in Punjab, technocratic standardization is a means of hedging against corruption.

In Butt’s article, we see how the establishment of PPPs for waste management rendered “solid waste” into a bounded object that could be improved through technical expertise. This allowed labor to become a mere input. PPPs and other similar governance models extract labor from waste, rendering it a merely technical aspect of a wider social process. Butt shows that by prioritizing the technical over the social relations necessary to actually move and dispose of waste, the PPP situates the entire labor process with a productivist framework. In this framework, the Android camera phone—once a symbol of connectivity for the worker or the low-level bureaucrat—becomes a key technology in the making and monitoring of laboring subjects.

The assertion that one of the original forms of capitalist violence is the reduction of work to productivity and efficiency is something of a refrain in critical studies of labor. In many of the papers here, “productivism” is a central concept. In Butt’s account of the semi-privatization of waste management in Lahore, however, technical and productivist logics pull towards different ends. On one hand, a view of waste as a technical problem “views labor as a...component of
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A larger part,” an abstract, modular, interchangeable part. On the other hand, smartphones and photographic surveillance, mechanisms designed to ensure productivity, “[target] the actual workings and social relations of the labor-force (both sanitation workers and supervisors).” Despite attempts to rationalize waste management, Butt shows how the public-private regime actually called into question the very definition of work as a kind of action. Rather than deterritorializing or disembarking waste and waste-work from place, professional experts found themselves “pulled into the everyday workings and social relations of waste disposal.” Place—which includes physical geography, material things, technologies, and forms of social relation—persists.

Productivism is also a central theme in Sargent’s article on high-rise construction workers. Construction tradespeople have fought to ensure that their activities are not categorized as “labor” but as “work.” To be called a “laborer” is to have one’s actions, and indeed one’s sense of self, denigrated. As Sargent writes: “to allow oneself to be treated as a laborer was, for the construction workers I knew, to put oneself at risk of becoming one.” An anxiety about how categories can become ad hominem epithets also frames Hayden Kantor’s article on the problematic figure of the “farmer” in Bihar. As one field worker tells Kantor, “I’m not a farmer, I’m just labor.” Such boundary drawing around work allows us to see how agriculture work today is fracturing, how it is being spread across different bodies and different categories of work, including sharecropping, farming, and employment. We see Kantor’s interlocutors thinking through these different categories and debating what makes them up. The slippages between them and the work that constitutes them reveal paradoxes at the core of contemporary agriculture, including the disconnect between the national icon of the farmer and farmers’ lived experiences.

As Kantor asks: “How had the figure of the farmer, once hailed as a bastion of respectability and the backbone of the nation, become a curse?” Countless studies have pointed out that many rural people don’t actually aspire to be farmers, but as Kantor observes, what remains somewhat conceptually stable in these studies is who and what the farmer is in the first place. This is an excellent point that allows us to think not only about the diversification of rural livelihood strategies but also about how such change over time shapes notions of personhood. Kantor argues for the reframing of language around the specificity and materiality of rural life, “while also foregrounding the ambivalence, vulnerability, and incompleteness that inheres in agricultural labor.”

While Kantor’s interlocutors venerated the wage work that might be found in the city, among the urban tradespeople in Sargent’s account, “laborers” were often rural to urban migrants, driven to toil through destitution. The tasks given to laborers were physically demanding, but unlike those of tradespeople, they did not require specialized skills. Productivism, then, allows us to put bureaucracy and bar-bending into conversation. Productivism also allows us to think about knowledge—about the different ways in which techné (knowledge as embodied craft or skill) and episteme (knowledge as systematic classification) intersect.

This is precisely the dilemma faced by the scrap traders depicted in Saraf’s article. Within Leela Market, there is an ostensible distinction between those who do the work of cleaning and breaking machinery and vehicles for scrap and those who own the shops where this work takes place, yet all of those involved assert vehemently that they possess a unique, and uniquely embodied, skill. What is striking is that scrap work is described at Leela Market not as a fixed social category set apart from leisure but as an ongoing and iterative process of “blackening” one’s hands.

Initially, it seems as if everyday semantic patrollings (between landowner and sharecropper, tradesperson and laborer, salary and cash gift, materials and bodies) are means of creating class distinction, but class as an analytic also has some limitations. Many of these papers shift our attention, as Sargent puts it, from class to personhood. The scolding question that provokes Kantor’s reflections in this collection, “Do you want to grow up to be a farmer (kisan)?” points to the ethnographic necessity of such a shift. Bihari landowners were far from post-agrarian, but they were certainly not willing to rest their children’s futures on idealized images of a fulfilling worklife. Like Saraf and Butt, Sargent and Kantor want to highlight how persons are made and remade through the material processes of work. As Sargent explains, to begin with worker notions of personhood allows for a more nuanced account of worker politics than an account that begins with class (and all of its attendant conceptual rigidity) might allow.

Attention to personhood further allows for greater attention to workers’ own understandings of the material processes of production. “Starting from worker reflections on and interventions in the materiality of work, as opposed to more formal sites of struggle,” Sargent suggests, “allows us to track the limits and possibilities embodied in everyday contestations over productive action and its transformative effects.”

It is interesting that tradespeople in Delhi are refusing to be lodged in the sociological labor slot, while skilled trades remain the basis of the labor movement in the United States and elsewhere. By shedding light on the fragility of the concept of labor (Sargent), unsetting the facile label of “farmer” (Kantor), and forcing us to reconsider what counts as bureaucratic
work (Hayat), these pieces open up questions about the potential for global transnational solidarity movements or organizing. The very basis of work categories is shifting and unstable.

Reading this collection together, then, opens up wonderful possibilities for work, whether it blackens one’s hands or greases the wheel of bureaucracies—to come more squarely into the frame of studies of global environmental governance and international development. Such governance regimes, as seen in the findings from the 2014 National Green Tribunal, are about presence or absence. They are blunt-force projects that turn things, whether they be labor or cars on the road, into abstractable and stable objects. Ethnographic narratives, like the excellent examples in this collection, reveal that it is the qualities of social life that matter.

Works Cited


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