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The International Political Economy of Work and Employability **By Phoebe V. Moore-Carter**

Review by Ian Bruff¹

There is much to admire in Moore's book. It is an ambitious discussion that covers a range of literatures (IPE, Gramscian studies, labour process theories, autonomism, comparative political economy) in order to remind us of the centrality of work to the ongoing reproduction of capitalism. This is underpinned by an emphasis on the production of subjectivity and selfhood *through* work, which seeks to outflank both what Moore sees as objectivist biases within IPE plus the excessive focus on discourses within poststructuralism. Moreover, and this is what I find most interesting, she shows how different 'types' of capitalism (UK, South Korea, Singapore), with clearly distinctive histories and capitalist trajectories, seem to moving in step with each other when it comes to employability. This attempted inculcation among their populations of the ideal type of a 'new worker', who is now employable rather than necessary employed (p. 3), frequently takes place not through 'the market' but via the mobilisation of institutional power – within the firm and governing institutions – in novel ways. Finally, she emphasises, in a commendably lengthy final chapter, how these new forms of capitalism bring with them new potentialities for resistance and therefore a post-capitalist world.

For me, the most powerful aspects of the book relate to skills revolutions in the 'East', for it is easy – and misguided – to, from a UK perspective, assume that 'manual' jobs are now in regions containing emerging and/or middle-income capitalisms, resulting in the consolidation of frequently precarious, insecure, 'flexible' political economies in the most developed part of the world. However, she shows that such processes have been growing in importance for South Korea and Singapore as well, with the crisis of the late 1990s serving as the catalyst for a decisive shift towards employability. Highly striking here was the rhetoric of competences oriented around so-called 'international' skills such as knowledge of the English language and the possession of a 'good' personality, for this secures more firmly the discourses of necessity which grew in importance after 1997. For example, South Korea's vulnerability within a global economy meant that the government would help individuals to self-improve via the renewed development of skills and competences (p. 101), rather than shield them from the exigencies of this global economy. Such vocational and educational training (VET) programmes were thus at the heart of the attempted reorientation – by firms and governments – of workers' subjectivities towards a new form of selfhood which accepted and internalised the 'need' for self-improvement in the light of external forces that one could not control (p. 114).

This is all crucial for the development of a more genuinely interdisciplinary and holistic IPE, for IPE seems to have lost sight of the importance of work. As Moore argues in a forthcoming paper, this 'is surprising not least because political

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economy was originally a study of labour and work.² As such, we should welcome this argument for the reintegration of seemingly disparate strands of political economy analysis, which in previous decades were clearly connected to each other. However, as in her earlier monograph on South Korea's transition to capitalism and subsequent trajectory,³ I find her arguments more convincing when discussing more empirical issues. Therefore, the rest of this contribution to the review symposium will focus on Moore's theoretical points, especially those related to Gramsci's concept of passive revolution.

As I have argued elsewhere,⁴ if one is to invoke passive revolution as a key conceptual scaffold then one must be clear how this relates to his more well-known discussions of hegemony. This is because, in much of the literature on passive revolution, hegemony has in effect been restricted to instances of active consent by the masses to their continued subordination to leading social groups. Yet I feel that, for Gramsci, hegemony was as much about contained, muted dissent as active, spontaneous consent. One key example is the fact that he almost always placed spontaneous in quotation marks, revealing in the process the importance of how consent is *organised*. This is because no matter what concessions are made by leading social groups in return for the consent of subordinate groups to lead, 'there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic'.⁵ Therefore, constantly shifting yet constantly unequal social relations are a permanent feature of capitalism, and reluctant acquiescence to such circumstances is at least as likely as genuine consent.

One other notable consequence of the growth of interest in passive revolution has been the downplaying of *trasformismo*, that is the process by which previously excluded social groups are, in an ongoing, molecular process, increasingly incorporated into existing regimes without altering the foundations of such orders. I suspect that this is partly due to the aforementioned difficulties related to passive revolution and hegemony, for one could recruit *trasformismo* to either the former – fundamental changes in the organisation of production, be it the transition to capitalism or transformations within capitalism, which are initiated by the state and exclude many social groups from the process – and the latter – organic relationships between leaders and the led based on exchange of concessions between different social groups via a process of neutralising rather than marginalising dissent and resistance. In other words, the required conceptual clarity has yet to be achieved in general, and here Moore reproduces the already-existing limitations in the wider literature.

For example, at one stage in the opening chapter Moore aligns *trasformismo* with passive revolution, because of how it captures the consolidation of 'ideologies from contrasting perspectives' in the aftermath of failed constructions of hegemony (p. 13). This deliberate ambiguity between rule and resistance, however, does not sit easily with the earlier assertion that ideas become hegemonic through *trasformismo* (p.

² Moore, P.V. (forthcoming) 'Where is the study of work in critical IPE?' *International Politics*.

³ Moore P.V. (2007) *Globalisation and Labour Struggle in Asia: A neo-Gramscian Critique of South Korea's Political Economy*. London: I.B. Tauris.

⁴ Bruff, I. (2010) 'Germany's Agenda 2010 reforms: passive revolution at the crossroads'. *Capital & Class*, 34:3, 409-28.

⁵ Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 161.

10). The lack of clarity can also be observed later in the book: when discussing South Korea, Moore is clear that the changes to technical qualifications and associated VET programmes entailed the *exclusion* of workers from dialogue about such developments (p. 98). However, at the beginning of the chapter we are told that this was part of a larger hegemonic project (p. 73). The switching between passive revolution – marginalisation – and hegemony – neutralisation – unnecessarily dichotomises what should be viewed as a nuanced and dynamic continuum, with fully-fledged hegemony at one end of the spectrum and comprehensive passive revolution at the other.⁶

While this may seem a small point, it has two significant consequences. Firstly, it points to a broader ambivalence about the Marxist tradition when it comes to subjectivity and self-government, for *trasformismo* is at times connected to poststructuralist discussions of governmentality and technologies of the self (for example, 35-6). This regression is, for me, unnecessary: there are plenty of examples from within Marxism of precisely these processes, perhaps the most obvious being E.P. Thompson's discussions of working time in capitalism.⁷ I guess Moore would counter that Thompson did not, as with others such as Marx and Braverman, consider the implications of the shift towards post-Fordist societies. Nevertheless, such discussions are already present in Nicos Poulantzas' later work,⁸ and indeed in Gramsci's famous essay on Americanism and Fordism (in particular his notes on sexual libertinism plus animality).⁹ Why is this important? Put simply, Foucault, Rose and others do little more than provide an incomplete account of capitalist societies, on the one hand sanitising and neglecting the horrors inherent to processes of primitive accumulation, and on the other resorting to thick description of institutional/governmental processes rather than exploring how and why certain processes will be both more significant and more enduring than others.¹⁰

Secondly, Moore is too keen to, when considering resistance, ally herself with autonomists. These perspectives stress the role of the multitude in carving open post-capitalist spaces that exist simultaneously within and outside capitalist social relations. Such 'commoning' processes entail (and require) new worker subjectivities that seek to bring capitalism to crisis point in the name of alternative value systems. However, the overlap between these arguments and the anti-statism of poststructuralists (especially on notions of biopower) leads one to conclude that the state is neglected. This is crucial, for the state is perhaps *the* example in contemporary societies of a 'universal subjective' which exudes an aura of natural, autonomous, 'real' properties.¹¹ In the process, the richly suggestive commentaries in *State, Power,*

⁶ Cf. Morton, A.D. (2010) 'The continuum of passive revolution'. *Capital & Class*, 34:3, 315-42; Femia, J.V. (1981) *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*. Oxford: Clarendon, 46.

⁷ Thompson, E.P. (1967) 'Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism'. *Past & Present*, 38:1, 56-97.

⁸ Poulantzas, N. (1978) *State, Power, Socialism*, trs. P. Camiller. London: New Left Books, 54-75 especially.

⁹ Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 279-318.

¹⁰ Cf. Bruff, I. (2012) 'The body in capitalist conditions of existence: a foundational approach', in A. Cameron, J. Dickinson and N. Smith, eds., *Body/State*, Farnham: Ashgate.

¹¹ Bruff, I. (2011) 'Overcoming the state/market dichotomy', in S. Shields, I. Bruff and H. Macartney, eds., *Critical International Political Economy: Dialogue, Debate and Dissensus*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 80-98; cf. Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 445-6.

Socialism's final chapter on the transition to a democratic socialism are not mentioned, and nor are Gramsci's nuanced discussions within his notebooks of the integral state. Taking the latter, he contends that we should not abolish the barometer (the state) in order to abolish bad weather (capitalism), and as such the 'end' of the state should be viewed as the point at which the ethical state is created in the name of a regulated society based upon equality. Therefore, an emancipatory statolatry is that which identifies the struggle for a transformed society with new forms of state life which are no longer phenomenologically separate from civil society.¹² While it is most welcome that Moore considers the possibilities for emancipation at such length, to some extent the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater.

It should be stressed, in conclusion, that some of the above points have been made a little more provocatively than would normally be the case, given the nature of this forum. In that sense, I would like to reiterate that this book contains numerous positives, especially when it comes to issues that IPE scholars have barely considered (if at all). Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that, in breaking so much new ground, some aspects of the argument would be left open to question. As such, it is a book which is highly recommended for its integration of a range of literatures into one monograph, plus for the compelling case for the limitations inherent to much IPE scholarship, 'critical' or otherwise. I look forward to further developments and elaborations of these points in future publications.

¹² Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 257-69.