discourses on work although, from a historian's point of view, on the basis of outmoded concepts of intellectual history.

Josef Ehmer

Department of Economic and Social History, University of Vienna
Universitätsring 1, A-1010 Vienna, Austria
E-mail: josef.ehmer@univie.ac.at

Breman, Jan. At Work in the Informal Economy of India. A Perspective from the Bottom Up. Oxford University Press, New Delhi [etc.] 2013. xiii, 457 pp. £32.50. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000029

Jan Breman's *At Work in the Informal Economy of India: A Perspective from the Bottom Up* is a magisterial volume which is at once an indispensable text on the concept of informality, as well as an important collection of the author's seminal contributions to the study of labor in south Asia. The book takes the form of a case study, as the evidence presented in it is mostly culled from the author's forty years of field research in the state of Gujarat. This regional ethnographic focus in no way limits the conclusions drawn in the book to the case of India alone. Indeed, Breman's theory of informality applies to global political economic processes, as we witness the increasing informalization of labor in the West, and not just in the "rest".

The book is divided into two distinct parts. The first part is intended as a textbook which covers the history of the concept of informality as well as key debates within the field – including structuralist and neoliberal perspectives on informality; the conditions of work at the bottom end of India's labor hierarchy; the increasing informalization of the state and governance; and the possibilities of resistance and collective action. The second part is a collection of ten of Breman's ground-breaking articles on informality and labor. These articles variously present: early ethnographic descriptions which challenge the conceptual division of the economy into two distinct sectors; the literature on the formal industrial sector in India; Breman's critique of Hernando de Soto's theory of property titling and prosperity in the informal economy; and a critique of informality as an endlessly expansive safety net for the poor. For Breman, unrestrained capitalism, rising inequality, and the growing informalization of labor under conditions of globalization present the danger of a new Social Darwinism, where "a huge reserve army waiting to be incorporated in the labour process becomes stigmatized as a redundant mass, an excessive burden that cannot be included, now or in future, in economy and society" (p. 142).

The breadth of Breman's theoretical engagement with informality, as well as the clarity and conciseness with which the text is written (for example, Breman dismantles the theoretical apparatus of dualism in twelve concentrated pages) make it essential reading on the topic. I assigned it to my first-year students, and on the first reading they were able to understand and critique the concept of dualism and engage in complex discussions of how informality shifted from being seen as a problem to a solution under conditions of neoliberalism. This is no mean feat. In the forty-odd years since K. Hart's coining of the concept, informality has been analyzed through a variety of theoretical perspectives, and Breman's work is one of the few which is able to present and analyze them coherently. Breman rejects reformulations of informality as a site of entrepreneurship and possibility,

and analyzes the informal economy "as a regime to cheapen the cost of labour in order to raise the profit of capital" (p. 1).

For Breman, neoliberal approaches which present informality as the solution to the problem of poverty, rather than the structural problem of "an economy of predatory capitalism unwilling to incorporate the labouring poor in decent conditions of employment", are a sleight of hand, which ask us to celebrate the degrading and inhumane conditions under which the working poor labor, and which preclude the possibilities of collective action (p. 109). This very argument is driven more strongly home by turning to the second half of the book, where one gets to read in rich ethnographic detail about the conditions of neo-bondage under which those at the bottom of the labor hierarchy toil as they are forced to sell their labor power in advance. And reading about the loss of formal sector work for 125,000 workers in Ahmedabad, who experience this job loss as a "fall from paradise", demonstrates just how much is lost in the process of de-industrialization. Breman argues that many forms of self-employment in the informal sector are concealed wage labor conducted under the most exploitative of conditions, such as piecework. Far from a field of self-employed entrepreneurs, the brutal conditions of life for those in the informal labor market are brought to palpable life when Breman talks of Surat as a "transit camp" for footloose labor, mostly young and male, set against one another in an "economic jungle" which ever threatens to erupt into violence, as with the riots of 1992.

Breman also effectively debunks the idea of the informal sector as a social safety net with an endless capacity for absorbing the rejects of the formal sector in productive employment. The trend is towards high entry barriers in informal sector jobs such as street vending and even begging, which Breman interprets as "a signal that the informal economy is getting saturated with an oversupply of labour that is already in a state of reserve" (p. 42).

The state bears a great responsibility for the current state of affairs, Breman convincingly argues, first through failing to develop effective labor laws and policies, and then for deliberate and systematic failures in implementation, and finally through actively encouraging processes of informalization and deregulation after economic liberalization. In effect, the state has consistently favored the interests of capital over those of labor.

In this dire circumstance, for Breman, there is little space for hope, except in the continuing, but fragmented resistance of the poor, where the "thoroughly informalized workforce does not accept the treatment meted out willingly and docilely" (p. 135). Breman further argues, somewhat less convincingly, that the informal workforce, at its lower levels, has a social consciousness which is proletarian in nature. And yet, in terms of a larger labor movement, trade unions have had limited interest and negligible success in organizing the unorganized, with notable exceptions such as the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), with a membership of 1.7 million. Breman is critical of more recent attempts at informal organizing, which have reformulated the claims of workers in the informal sector as those of citizens who appeal to the state for their basic entitlements and rights, rather than as employees who appeal to employers. This reformulation shifts the burden of ensuring basic welfare on to the state, and absolves capital from meeting these costs. In addition, he is skeptical of the state's commitment and ability to reverse the race to the bottom. For Breman, what is required is the reduction of inequality, as well as the formalization of the rights of the deregulated and vulnerable workforce.

In Breman's analysis the informal workforce is a reserve army "that is firmly part of the capitalist mode of production" (p. 141). And yet, despite Breman's exhaustive analysis of the current state of the informal economy within a Marxian framework, he repeatedly acknowledges and addresses the ways in which India's trajectory deviates from the classical model. Breman dismantles the idea of the informal sector as a "waiting room" on the way to industrialization and formal-sector employment. He also accepts that the classification of sectors of the informal economy into categories of "petty bourgeoisie" and "sub-proletariat" may be insufficient, given its hugely heterogeneous composition. There is a need for new

classifications, and Breman includes a brief consideration of K.P. Kannan's division of the informal population into *aam aadmi* (the common people) and the rest.

Given his acknowledgment of India's deviations from the classical model, I would argue that Breman is too hasty in his dismissal of Kalyan Sanyal's important opening into rethinking the trajectory of post-colonial development, where Sanyal divides India's economy into two sectors of need versus capitalist accumulation as salient categories of division. Breman strongly critiques Sanyal's idea of a need economy, arguing that "any classification is quite unacceptable when it starts from the assumption, as Sanyal does, that both the owners of workshops and other small establishments and the labourers whom they exploit share the same social plane" (p. 89). And yet, what do we make of people who move between categories of worker and petty owner, as frequently happens in India's informal economy? Further, what are we to make of a sub-proletariat in conditions of de-industrialization, acting as a reserve army for an all-but-vanishing industrial workforce? New concepts and categories are urgently needed.

Of India's workers, 93 per cent labor in the informal sector. Breman's perspective from the bottom of this labor hierarchy presents an essential, urgent, and deeply unsettling account.

Durba Chattaraj

Critical Writing Program, University of Pennsylvania
3808 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA
E-mail: durbac@sas.upenn.edu

Debord, Guy. Un art de la guerre. Sous la dir. d'Emmanuel Guy et Laurence Le Bras. Bibliothèque nationale de France; Gallimard, Paris 2013. 223 pp. Ill. € 39.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000030

Guy Debord (1931–1994) arguably entered labour history when he chalked *Ne travaillez jamais* on a wall of the Institut de France sixty years ago. It was a gesture in the futurist spirit of Kazimir Malevich who in 1921, against both capitalism and communism, had proclaimed laziness the "truth of mankind". It also reflected a moment, now long forgotten, when sociologists were beginning to worry about the imminent explosion of leisure that would undoubtedly result from the further rationalization of industry. In post-World-War-II Paris and a few other cities, avant-garde artists were expanding the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the point where it spilled over into everyday life. "Never work!" was a battle cry that summed up an essential part of their programme.

In 1957, a small group of those artists founded the Situationist International (SI). Among them were Debord, his wife, Michèle Bernstein (the daughter of an antiquarian bookseller who supplied many a document to the IISH), and the much older Asger Jorn, who helped to fund the movement even after he left in 1961. The SI renewed itself continually: it had seventy members throughout its fifteen-year existence, but never more than fifteen at a time. Debord alone was to be present at both its birth and its burial, and edited all twelve issues of its journal, *Internationale situationniste*. Moreover, he wrote what many consider its bible, *La Société du Spectacle*, which in some 200 densely reasoned paragraphs presented a theory of the modern world.

It explained how commodity fetishism, as famously defined by Karl Marx, had invaded every aspect of human existence, generating an endless stream of increasingly autonomous images that had come to replace reality. This process had transformed our contemporaries into consumers of prefabricated lifestyles, suggesting abundant choice while preventing