

Book Review

Andreas Eckert and Felicitas Hentschke, eds. 2021. *Corona and Work around the Globe*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter (Work in Global and Historical Perspective). 255 pp., ISBN: 978-3-11-071689-4 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-11-071824-9 (eBook), € 24.95

Reviewed by **Remus Crețan**, Faculty of Chemistry, Biology and Geography, West University, Timișoara, Romania. E-mail: cretan.remus@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9053-8394>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0038>

Corona and Work around the Globe is an interesting collection of chapters which provide a worldwide perspective on how the coronavirus pandemic has brought significant transformations to labour. The impact of COVID-19 is reflected through a selection of country-related case studies. The book looks at how the pandemic has changed work practices and labour relations in different parts of the world, with debates sometimes connecting to historical perspectives and narratives.

The innovative aspect of the book is the excellent presentation of the experiences of workers during the pandemic: how many have resisted political measures, how some professions have been more exposed to the virus than others, the changing nature of certain professions, as well as how workplaces have been transformed and others have (almost) disappeared. The major questions of the book address to what extent the COVID-19 disruptions have instituted changes for the better or worse in labour activity and/or if changing aspects of labour have been related to pandemic-driven changes in urban areas and in welfare politics, resulting in a more acute awareness of the democratic order when it comes to, for example, exposing the strengths or failures of national and local governments. In short, this book is about how the pandemic has affected working people.

Developed around two thematic ideas—inequality and the contestation of democratic principles—the book starts with a prologue written by *Mahua Sarkar* who debates the case of the university as a place of work during the coronavirus pandemic. The transformation of face-to-face teaching into online teaching has confronted teachers and students with constraints in relation to their academic freedom, because “not all students have the kind of space at home that supports uninterrupted class attendance. Many lack access to stable internet connections, while some are obliged to share a single computer with multiple working members of the household” (XIV).

In the first section, “Despair and Indifference at the Margins”, the authors analyse the way in which marginalised people have been affected by the coronavirus. *Supurna Banerjee* looks at Indian experiences of insecurity, more

specifically how workers who do not benefit from broader social safety and employment security have been harshly affected in the informal sector of Kolkata. The author interviewed migrant and local workers for whom the lockdown period brought job loss, and who were forced to find new jobs for which they had no skills. *Chitra Joshi* also underlines the severity of the catastrophe which has affected Indian labour migrants, focusing on measures taken against pandemics both currently as well as prophylactically in the past.

In a European Union marginalisation context, *Alina-Sandra Cucu* interviewed a 23-year-old woman in the Romanian town of Craiova about her economic situation during the pandemic. COVID-19 has harshly affected Romania's domestic and transnational labour.¹ Cucu reveals how her interviewee had to switch from job to job and take on whatever she could find on the labour market, regardless of her skills. The author highlights that "there is little hope of new articulations of a radical political imaginary that would refuse the return to a 'normal' of existential fragility, social inequality, and injustice" (11). Through her anthropological approach, Cucu shows how the pandemic has exacerbated several fracture lines in Craiova's labour landscape, among them "the one between the permanent and the temporary employees of the biggest companies in the city—mainly Ford, its suppliers, and hypermarkets like Lidl" (15). *Nicole Mayer-Ahuja* discusses labour inequalities in Germany, specifically the solidarity that emerged in several cities across gender, class, and race boundaries in the first period after the lockdown. She highlights how solidarity has been one of the few ways to successfully handle the social challenges of the pandemic.

The second section, "Being 'Relevant to the System' is Female", consists of three chapters. *Larissa Rosa Corrêa* and *Paulo Fontes* present the situation of domestic workers in favelas in Rio de Janeiro, an area affected by high infection rates. Workers had to stay at home and suffered income loss, thus becoming unable to support their families. Delivery workers were exploited for extra work, usually unpaid, and exposed to the virus, so that the pandemic "brutally exposed the precarization and the exploitation" (42). *Bridget Kenny* analyses the constraints on low-paid service workers under the various government Covid measures in Johannesburg, South Africa. Female cleaning personnel employed to clean streets and buildings in the city centre were among those particularly affected by the pandemic. A feminist perspective is also adopted by *Bahru Zewde* who tells the story of a female fashion designer in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, who adapted to the pandemic by producing masks, thereby becoming integrated into the Ethiopian health care system.

1 Crețan, R., and D. Light. 2020. "COVID-19 in Romania: Transnational Labour, Geopolitics, and the Roma 'Outsiders'." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 61 (4–5): 559–72.

The third section, “The Health System in Which We Live”, includes four chapters on the limitations of various welfare systems. *Marcel van der Linden* looks at nurses across the globe who are underpaid, work in risky environments, are fighting for better wages and struggling without the national health care system coming to their aid. *Deborah James* analyses the changing care networks in the United Kingdom, highlighting the relevance of the third sector when the state is affected by austerity and withdraws from health care. *Preben Kaarsholm* discusses pandemic-induced changes in the care system in Denmark, taking a comparative look at Norway and Sweden. The failure of neoliberalism becomes evident when taking into account how policies of debt financing and public investment have proven crucial in coping. *Yoko Tanaka* writes about the evolution of the crisis in Japan, where the gap between government self-appraisal and the realities on the ground has increased.

Section four, “Thwarted Youth”, focuses on young people and their careers—teaching careers in particular. *James Williams* presents the negative effect of school closures on teaching and learning in Great Britain. *Mary Jo Maynes* and *Ann Waltner* describe the career difficulties faced by young people in Minneapolis, United States, who have been disconnected from school and jobs—especially first employment and volunteer work. *Babacar Fall* studies the Sahel, including Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, and Chad, engaging in a critical discussion of the Sahel Women’s Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD), a regional project aiming at empowering young girls to train for a profession. Once more, the focus is on mask production, turning the girls into contributors in coping with the pandemic.

In the fifth section, “Fighting for Justice in the Pandemic”, the authors present the fight of citizens against state institutions, such as the police force and in military aviation. *Leon Fink* compares low-wage immigrant poultry workers and the US police force, revealing how the two groups are at opposite ends when it comes to welfare, health, and autonomy. *Cristiana Schettini* focuses on sex workers in Argentina fighting to keep working and uncovers the harsh state measures implemented against them. She concludes that the “failure of the state to register popular economy workers and the increased visibility of organized prostitutes at a time of generalized uncertainty raise both challenges and possibilities in the struggle for labor rights during and after pandemic times” (206). Finally, *On Barak* explains how, in civil and military aviation, Israeli pilots with a military background have been more protected in the global aviation crisis than their civil aviation colleagues.

The final section, “When Private and Public Spaces Become Blurred”, is dedicated to the online working conditions that have emerged during the lockdowns. The three chapters by *Jürgen Kocka*, *Sandrine Kott*, and *Daniel Eisenberg*

respectively, focus on the home office and remote working conditions. Besides pointing to the limits of telework, for example due to bad internet connections, and the lack of social interaction among employees, they hint at the advantages. Sandrine Kott aptly sums up how “managers have discovered that remote working has actually increased productivity. Not to mention that employees who save time on commuting often demonstrate more readiness to work longer” (230).

Lastly, the volume includes contributions by two photo artists, *Maurice Weiss* and *Ellen Rothenberg*. Weiss’s photo collection entitled “Black Ward” shows the helplessness of COVID-19 patients at the Ernst-von-Bergmann-Hospital in Potsdam, Germany. Artist and feminist activist Ellen Rothenberg contributes a photo collage on “voting as work” during the primary elections in Wisconsin and Georgia, United States, in April and June 2020. She visually highlights the cost of exercising the right to vote under the conditions of the pandemic. Both “shutter release” contributions are accompanied by interesting interviews conducted with the two artists by co-editor Felicitas Hentschke.

The coronavirus crisis has strengthened antidemocratic forces and intensified poverty on a global scale. This book demonstrates very well how inequalities have deepened. The vulnerable have become even more disadvantaged; the burden of family and hospital work has fallen mainly upon women; young people have fought hard to adapt to (online) learning and get their career going in spite of huge obstacles; middle-aged people have had difficulty in adapting to telework, while categories of “workers in power”, such as police officers and military pilots, have been privileged in their work situation. The tone of the book derives mainly from the intimate atmosphere created in each of the chapters, often through ethnographic approaches. The volume is a useful tool for researchers, practitioners, students, and anybody interested in the impact of COVID-19 on people’s changing and adjusting work contexts.

In conclusion, the volume is based on both the authors’ personal experiences and their concerns related to labour. All of us have had experience of lockdown: empty streets, closed shops, and other effects of government decrees such as social distancing, disinfection regulations, and mask requirements. But what this book by Andreas Eckert and Felicitas Hentschke offers is a more comprehensive reflection by highlighting where welfare concepts have worked, where human rights have been an issue, and how much work has changed over the last year and a half. It underlines how these changes have impacted on women, the younger generation, and marginalised people, much more than others. In other words, this book reveals the limits of the welfare state and the failures of neoliberalism. As the authors comprehensively show, the pandemic has functioned as a looking glass of sorts.