

Exertions • Book Reviews

Book Review: Beyond the Wage

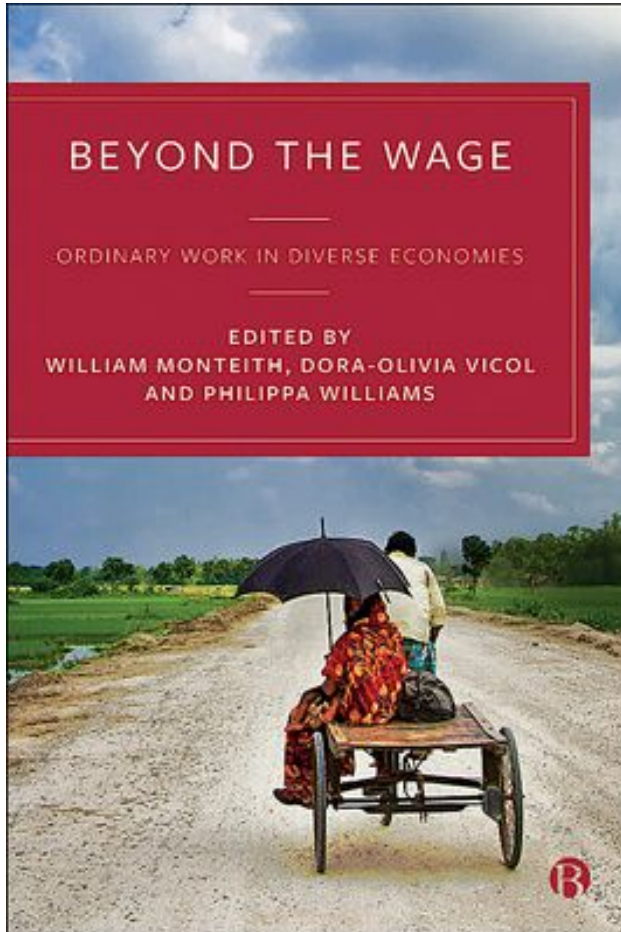
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***Beyond the Wage: Ordinary Work in Diverse Economies*, edited by William Monteith, Dora-Olivia Vicol, and Philippa Williams (2021), Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.**



Focusing on the concept of “ordinary work,” *Beyond the Wage* proposes to overcome the binaries and simplifying and homogenizing logics that have too often dominated the socio-anthropological analysis of work. In order to better address the complexities defining the social world of work, William Monteith, Dora-Olivia Vicol, and Philippa Williams invite us to go beyond the three traditional ways of understanding work: in how it is connected to capital, to the state, and to employment security. These theoretical lenses have resulted in several unhelpful work-related binary oppositions, including commodified/uncommodified, formal/informal, and decent/precarious. Furthermore, the authors propose to “provincialize wage employment” in order to “examine the multitude of ways in which work is imagined and practiced in different regions of the world” (p. 2). Methodologically, *Beyond the Wage* is a call to understand the day-to-day experiences of work and workers, while also crossing conceptual and geographical boundaries –

thus drawing comparisons between contexts that are often considered to be opposites (such as the Global North and South). The various contributions in the volume develop this agenda via different perspectives.

The book has four sections. The first analyzes the dynamics of “*rupture*” from the vantage point of wage employment. It explores forms of work as well as work experiences in contexts where the Fordist model of wage labor is in decline or has never been the norm. The first two chapters engage with the notion of “hustle” to describe survival strategies in several economic contexts. In Chapter 1, Tatiana Thieme analyzes how people ordinarily articulate their “shit wages” and side hustles to make a living in Nairobi, London, and Berlin. According to Thieme, her interlocutors’ side hustles represent a pragmatic response to increased economic disfranchisement (p. 26). In Chapter 2, Samuel Strong shows how in the United Kingdom, conditionalities to access out-of-work payments make the daily work of job-hunting – as well as its corollary, the work of survival (through hustling, gifting, and volunteering) – an ordinary form of work. Using life stories, Strong illustrates

how these “ordinary” hustles, beyond the wage labor, combine daily production and reproduction, work, and life (p. 59). Extending these reflections, Claudia Strauss analyzes in Chapter 3 the question of workplace attachment for temporary workers in the United States including agency workers, direct-hire temporary workers, and “independent contractors.” Through a process of externalization, these workers are employed based on atypical contracts characterized by highly flexible work arrangements. To go beyond a “rights-based” approach to evaluating employment (p. 75), Strauss uses the meanings that workers ascribe to what they do as a starting point. Via different stories of workers navigating various forms of non-standard employment, she demonstrates how workers can yearn for forms of work that are considered a priori as precarious.

The second section of *Beyond the Wage* seeks “to play with the double meanings of the notion of ‘resignation’ as both an agentic act of exit and a submissive state of acceptance in wage-scarce economies” (p. 13; emphasis added). In Chapter 4, Asiya Islam probes the willful act of resignation of young women working in precarious jobs in urban India. Through a description of how these lower-middle-class women navigate the continuum of wage employment and several life-sustaining activities, Islam highlights the class and gender logics that determine these forms of work and their associated life trajectories (p. 99). In Chapter 5, Hannah Dawson takes us into a South African township and helps us to understand the logics behind young men’s transition from wage labor to “informal forms of entrepreneurship.” According to Dawson, this transition reveals her interlocutors’ aspirations to be autonomous even as they rely on their diverse social networks, in contrast to the individualistic vision of entrepreneurship advocated by development institutions. In Chapter 6, focusing on the Catalan context, Vinzenz Bäumer Escobar explores the systems of cooperation and the exchange of goods and services that take place without monetary mediation. In leaving wage employment, the people who join these collectives seek to give their work and lives a sense of ownership and self-mastery (p. 146). The author shows the tension that arises from the encounter between a desire for autonomy from the capital and the state, and the need, despite everything, to build a certain economic future – thus emphasizing the difficult articulation between private life, work relationships, and community dynamics. This section ends with Chapter 7 by Nithya Natarajan, Katherine Brickell, and Laurie Parsons, who analyze the mechanisms through which workers in Cambodian brick kilns become resigned to remain unfree through debt bondage. The authors reveal how indebtedness derives from particular socio-economic, political, and ecological transformations, resulting in the specific labor exploitation that these workers must face.

The third section of *Beyond the Wage* focuses on the “struggles” of workers and examines their evolving relationship with the state in diverse urban economies (p. 14). In Chapter 8, Annemiek Prins studies the precarization of rickshaw driving in Dhaka, a form of self-employment that offers flexibility and instant cash to drivers. Prins demonstrates how the casualization of this labor is related to the Bangladeshi state’s efforts at urban regulation, which seek to restrict the urban mobility of rickshaw drivers. In Chapter 9, Mechthild Von Vacano surveys the roots of the conflict between a locally designed digital platform offering passenger transport services, and the traditional collectives of motorbike taxi drivers organized around the informal *pangkalan* system in Jakarta. Von Vacano details how two visions of work interact through conflict and

reciprocity – and, in doing so, invites us to go beyond the formal/informal and stable/precarious oppositions to consider the complexity of “ordinary” and sectoral forms of work organization. In Chapter 10, Mara Nogueira documents the link between the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right former president of Brazil, and the successive Workers’ Party-led policies to clean up urban space by relocating street vendors. Citing examples from Belo Horizonte, Nogueira argues that this continuous urban policy based on exclusion, control, and discipline of informal workers leads street vendors to distrust this center-left party and, therefore, to vote en masse for Bolsonaro.

The final section of *Beyond the Wage* questions the “possibilities” that the decline of wage employment offer to re-formulate work and re-imagine the future (p. 15). In Chapter 11, Dora-Olivia Vicol takes us to London and provides an account of social work for precarious migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Confronting the limited state support for migrant workers, Vicol shows how the work of charity becomes a complex translation, whereby social counselors become the migrants’ “interface agents” between different social worlds. In Chapter 12, E. Fouksman analyzes the perception of social grants by the long-term unemployed population of Namibia. She demonstrates that although social assistance is not denigrated per se, the respondents expressed strong feelings against any form of entitlement and dependency and, as a result, preferred other forms of redistribution such as job-creation programs. For Fouksman, such a stance reflects her interviewees’ moral, psychological, and social attachment to wage employment (p. 289).

In conclusion, the call of *Beyond the Wage* for additional examinations of diverse forms of work and ethnographies of workers’ daily lives across the Global North and South allows us to overcome the limitations of work-related binaries and the simplified interpretations of these oppositions. From this point of view, the concept of “ordinary work” is an analytical and operational tool that helps us better address the complex dynamics of value production, taking into account the specificities of different economic and sectoral contexts. However, when reading the book, one often has the impression that adopting this perspective results in a highly descriptive phenomenology of work configurations and their workers’ experiences therein. This sometimes leads to the authors overlooking the societal conditionalities (normative, axiological, cultural, economic, political, et cetera) that may be specific to particular contexts and that, in certain respects, result in said work becoming “ordinary.” Overall, *Beyond the Wage* is a significant contribution to the debate about the future of work; it provides an original conceptual tool and leads us to explore, beyond the standard norm of wage employment, the social realms of work that are still under- or mis-analyzed.

Biography

Ludovic Bakebek is a doctoral student at the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences of the University of Liège (Belgium). His research focuses on labor dynamics in the construction sector in Cameroon. He is

currently developing a critique of the concept of “informal economy” while proposing alternative ways of understanding urban economies in contemporary Africa.