

Book review: Family and work in rural societies - perspectives on non-wage labour

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Family and Work in Rural Societies -Perspectives on non-wage labour. Edited by Norman Long. New York: Tavistock Publications in association with Methuen, Inc., 1984.

This compilation of papers¹ aims to analyze "forms of co-operation and the division of labour among rural producers in contrasting social contexts in both industrialized Europe and the less developed countries." The editor, Norman Long, reviews the debate over whether the survival of non-wage labor constitutes a transitional phase; a structure with its own logic, reflecting a rural people's resistance to the penetration of capitalism; or a condition preserved by capitalism to facilitate the extraction of surplus value. He maintains that reality represents no simple either-or concept. He notes that some authors have likened the non-wage aspects of women's work with that persisting among men and women in rural third world communities.

Long tells us the book aims to contribute to a more careful specification of the nature and function of non-wage labor. Each chapter explores the labor processes within and between rural households in a particular social structure and

1. presented at a Working Group on "Non-wage remuneration and informal cooperation in rural society" at XI Congress of the European Society for rural Sociology held in Espoo, Finland, August, 1981

cultural framework, ranging from Egypt, Argentina, Peru and Iceland, through more industrialized Finland and Poland, to women in southwest England and an Israeli kibbutz. Long tries to unify this diverse fare by grouping the chapters around themes (17):

<1> the factors that promote or inhibit the persistence of peasant forms of organization and the family farm;

<2> the question of inter-household exchanges and community-level patterns of co-operation;

<3> the changing roles of women within the division of labour within the household and the wider community."

These three themes, he argues, are

"closely interrelated and of central importance in the analysis of the social consequences of capitalist expansion among agrarian populations, both in Europe and less developed countries."<17>

In the brief space here available, it is difficult to review adequately the diverse nature and range of individual case studies. Despite Long's heroic efforts to pull these diverse chapters together into a cohesive theoretical framework, the fact that each author formulated and implemented her/his separate research design to test quite different hypotheses in widely varying contexts reduces their contribution to the achievement of Long's broader objectives. Even the question of whether the same factors affect women's work in industrialized countries and

non-wage activities in Third World countries remains open.

By focusing on particular cases, the book does contribute to a greater insight into the way various social and cultural factors interact in widely differing communities to lead to sometimes unexpectedly differing patterns of the changing division of labor. For example, in relation to women's work: In Finland, Abrahams shows that increased capitalization of dairying -- previously a woman's task -- created conditions in which women became equal partners with their husbands in joint dairying ventures. This varies significantly from the more usual experience, illustrated by Johnson's Iceland study, where improved technologies led to more varied and better-paid employment opportunities for men, while women tended to become unpaid housewives, or obtained only unskilled paid employment in factories or as servants. Bowes' Israelian kibbutz case suggests that, despite a powerful ideology urging equality between men and women, an emphasis on productivity together with the requirement that women receive maternity leave may push women into less attractive 'non-productive' service jobs -- which turn out to be traditional 'women's work': cooking, clean-up, children, etc. The theoretical conclusions these studies offer in relation to the concerns Long identifies as central, however, remain unclear.

Long's introductory essay suggests all the authors sought to examine the interaction of national and even international

dimensions with those operative in local communities. In fact, however, several of the studies failed to give adequate consideration to the impact of objective external influences. For example, Skar argues that Peruvian families' cultural values hindered them from selling maize, potatoes, grain and beans for money, although she herself points out that markets were remote and cash returns uncertain. She assumes, without proof, that the families' own values blocked their production for the market, rather than the uneven and exploitative nature of capitalist penetration of Third World countries like Peru. She fails to test alternative explanations, for example, by examining the objective conditions that historically led to the families' 'cultural reluctance' to enter the market.

Melhaus terms Argentinian sharecroppers' subordination of their subsistence crop cultivation to tobacco production for the landlord, 'self-exploitation'. That term tends to obscure the way the landlord and the tobacco firms, aided by the state, created objective conditions that enabled them to extract super-profits from the peasants. Her own evidence shows that objective conditions left them little choice: if they did not grow tobacco for the landlord, they would lose their access to the land altogether. A closer analysis of these conditions would seem critical to understanding capitalist expansion and the extraction of surplus in any Third World context.

Kocik's chapter analyzes Polish farm families' custom of 'paying off' family members who migrate to the cities, that is, giving them a monetary payment equivalent to their legal share of their parents' land and farm buildings. Kocik points out that, although the nation has adopted a policy of public ownership, in the countryside some 3.1 million individual farm families own 80 percent of the total arable land. About half of these families own only 5 hectares, not enough to support the family, so some members must seek non-agricultural sources of income, mainly in the cities. The custom of 'paying off' persists although it drains resources from the farms and the law forbids the practice. Kocik concludes with an apparent tautology, that 'paying off' "theoretically" should disappear "when the land and the farm come to represent purely commercial and professional values." (140) One wonders if examination of the larger context might not show that the custom constitutes the families' way of dealing with Poland's crisis that stems in large part from the nation's failure to carry through the agricultural transformation required to attain balanced national development.

In sum, this slim volume provides a grab-bag of rich case studies depicting aspects of the way social and cultural factors interact to shape wage and non wage work opportunities of women and peasant families in widely differing socio-economic contexts. However, the fact that each author explored a variety of unrelated hypotheses -- sometimes in conflict with that proposed

by the editor -- rather than agreeing in advance to test a common set related to a basic thesis, limits the book's overall contribution to the theoretical questions identified as central.

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