**Daniel Berliner, Anne Regan Greenleaf, Milli Lake, Margaret Levi and Jennifer Noveck, Labor Standards in International Supply Chains – Aligning Rights and Incentives.** Cheltenham, UK – Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015. xi + 205 pp. (hbk)

In the introduction the authors describe a factory fire that resulted in the tragic loss of 146 immigrant workers’ lives, people who prior to their deaths were systematically subjected to exploitative labour practices by subcontractors. While the reader is likely to believe this passage refers to recent disasters at manufacturing facilities in Bangladesh, in actual fact these terrible events occurred in New York City in 1911. This powerful opening passage achieves two things: first, it makes the reader realise that supply chain labour exploitation is not an entirely new phenomenon; and second, it begs the question why – well over a century later – intolerable working conditions and events similar to the disastrous fire in New York City still regularly happen in other parts of the world.

Using compelling case studies from the United States, Honduras, Bangladesh and China, which describe sectors prone to labour exploitation such as the footwear, apparel and electronics industries, the authors critically discuss the developments surrounding labour standards, specifically focusing on the dynamics between key stakeholders in four clusters: workers and allies, businesses, governments and consumers. The authors aim to specify the ways in which the alignment of interests of these stakeholder groups can advance or undermine the struggle to improve working conditions in countries around the globe. In addition, on an international scale, the authors quantitatively analyse the relations between labour standards and other key factors such as the role of the state, political parties, international norms and the interests of business.

It is argued that opportunities for leverage and making changes to working conditions in supply chains arise in three different ways: when there is alignment of interests within a specific cluster of stakeholders, when there are conflicting interests within the cluster that is under pressure to change, and in instances where there are cross-cluster alignments of interests. By creating an analytical framework based on the four key clusters and the configurations of interests, the authors contend that stakeholders can be incentivised to change their attitudes about the benefits and penalties of their actions, and well as their beliefs about what is considered to be appropriate and acceptable behaviour in the context of labour standards in international supply chains.

The main findings of this book are that opportunities for change are most likely to arise as a result of workers and consumers coming together to change the attitudes of brands, which is usually achieved by threatening the brand’s reputation. However, while this pressure can ostensibly alter the beliefs of brands about appropriate labour standards, and these actions can change working conditions at suppliers in the short term, achieving sustainable change in working conditions in supply chains remains a critical challenge. The authors demonstrate that neither international norms nor the existence of private regulation are in themselves sufficient to achieve enduring supplier adherence to appropriate working conditions: government regulation and enforcement are indispensable.

While the book commences by drawing a powerful parallel between the factory fire in New York City a century ago and contemporary disasters resulting from systemic labour exploitation, thus showing that twentieth century exploitative working conditions still exist, there is much left undiscussed and the reader will find that the case studies and quantitative examination warrant an extended analysis and in-depth theoretical explanation of underlying factors. Although the authors compellingly describe actor configurations that can contribute to changes in working conditions, the question what distinguishes contemporary supply chains from those in the early twentieth century, apart from their global upscaling, is largely left unaddressed. The elegance and simplicity of the analytical framework, which gives it its explanatory strength, does not distinguish between supply chains then and now, and would seemingly be as applicable a century ago as it is today.

As a consequence, the authors miss the opportunity to describe what is fundamentally different about modern supply chains: the fact that we live in the information age, characterised by radical transparency, in which information technology pervades and influences all aspects of society, and individuals and organisations are increasingly clustered in real and virtual networks. Crucially, these developments helped to shape novel production methods such as lean manufacturing and just-in-time production, thereby structurally altering the features of supply chains, the opportunities for actors to express agency within them, and the possibilities to change working conditions. The authors do briefly allude to the role of information in the conclusion, discussing its role in the alignment of interests and formation of coalitions, but neglect to discuss the critical role of information in shaping contemporary social organisation and changing relationships of production, power, and experience.

Nevertheless, this book constitutes a valuable contribution to a growing and increasingly important scholarly field, and will prove to be useful for anyone interested in learning more about the factors that contribute to the shaping of working conditions in global supply chains, whether they are academics, students, campaigners or practitioners. Most importantly, the book provides a clear illustration of the economic and self-interested motives of brands – who are only swayed by the threat of reputational damage, while furthermore highlighting the shortcomings of corporate social responsibility and self-regulation as well as the imperfections of international norms, ultimately necessitating a strong and assertive role of government and the effective enforcement of regulation.

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