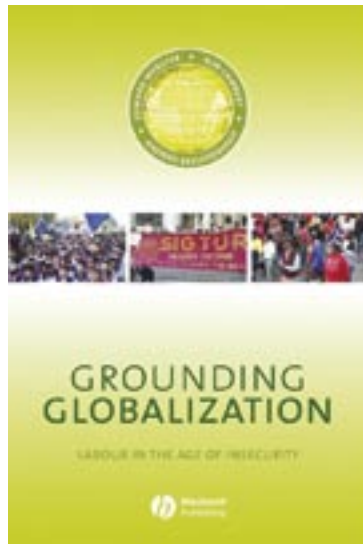


Grounding Globalization

Labour in the Age of Insecurity

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Edward Webster, Rob Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout
Blackwell: Malden MA, 2008. 261 pp



Grounding Globalization is, as its title suggests, an attempt to relate globalisation to the “facts on the ground”. Embedded in a substantially theorised framework of social and human implications of globalised capitalism – the model theorist is Polanyi – is the story of three communities and three household appliance (“white goods”) factories: in Ezekheni, KwaZulu-Natal; Orange, New South Wales; and Kwangjong, South Korea. Webster and Bezuidenhout are South African sociologists, while Lambert is from Western Australia, and the three co-operate well in their studies.

What they find is, unsurprisingly, insecurity. The Defy factory at Ezakheni is threatened by foreign imports and the workers, while nominally protected by labour laws, are constantly worried by low salaries and difficult working conditions. The LG factory in Kwangjong is threatened by LG’s desire to improve market share by moving production away from the expensive and unduly democratic working environment of South Korea to more totalitarian, less

human-friendly conditions in other Asian countries – promoting insecurity that shocks a populace unfamiliar with employment problems. The Electrolux factory in Orange has been virtually shut down, its Swedish parent deciding to pursue LG’s strategy even more extremely, with calamitous consequences for the inhabitants of this company town.

The authors are careful to situate these developments in a broad political context. In some ways this is a little oversimplified, and even rather misleading. For instance, they praise the autarchic policies of the Park dictatorship in South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s, which were indeed good for Korea’s industrial development, comparing this favourably with the “market liberalisation” pursued by the Australian and South African governments in the 1990s and after 2000 (especially in the case of Australia). There may be some validity to this, but the global conditions were very different. Korea in its developing phase had the Vietnam War and Japanese industrialisation on its doorstep. South Africa and Australia in the 1990s were resource-rich but capital-poor. It is possible that the latter countries’ decision to “liberalise”, while wrong, may not have been capricious. Also, of course, South Korea liberalised at much the same time – which provoked the calamitous crisis of 1997–99.

Ironically for a South African, despite the best efforts of the authors to make South Africa look as bad as, or worse than, the other countries, South Africa seems to come off better than the others. It is the only one where the workers interviewed had any faith in political leadership; the only one, too, where unionism seemed genuinely strong and trustworthy. It was the only factory to be indigenously owned – even if the survival of the Defy factory was uncertain. “You can rely on Defy” seems a happier slogan than “Nothing sucks like Electrolux”.