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**DOI**

[10.4337/9781785363849.00023](https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785363849.00023)

**Publication date**

2018

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Handbook on the Geographies of Globalization

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Arnold, D. (2018). Labour geographies in a globalizing world. In R. C. Kloosterman, V. Mamadouh, & P. Terhorst (Eds.), *Handbook on the Geographies of Globalization* (pp. 187-196). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785363849.00023>

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## 13. Labour geographies in a globalizing world<sup>1</sup>

*Dennis Arnold*

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, the growing power and reach of global capital has exceeded the ability of nations and labour movements to regulate it, exacerbating inequality, accumulation of debt, precarious work, and broader social precarity. Numerous labour trends have been associated with neoliberal globalization, including a decline in attachment to employers, an increase in long-term unemployment, growth in perceived and real job insecurity, increasing nonstandard and contingent work, risk shifting from employers to employees, a lack of workplace safety, and an increase in work-based stress and harassment. The lack of public and private investment in skills and development is accompanied by a lack of access to schooling, where women and ethnic and racial minorities disproportionately bear the brunt of these disadvantages, particularly those in or from the South. Yet precarity is about not only the disappearance of stable jobs and other workplace-specific issues, but also the questions of housing, debt, welfare provision, and the availability of time for building effective personal relations.

These trends are not entirely new, and follow previous patterns. Capital is continually in search of spatial, technological, and product fixes, but with each phase of innovation the intensity of capital investment and productivity requirements increases (Harvey, 2003; Silver, 2003). Not only have global production networks stretched across national boundaries to cover greater geographic scope and new ‘frontiers’, but also lead times have become shorter to respond to oscillations in consumer demand. As the geographies of production continue to expand, the process is often reproduced with tighter margins for lower tier producers and employers, which tend to provide lower remuneration for workers. Greater flexibility is the mantra of the day, from labour-intensive garment factories, to retail and service sectors, to knowledge work in the academe. In short, precarious labour regimes, and the central role states have played in configuring and reproducing them, have reconfigured the geography of the reserve army of labour.

In this chapter, I will unpack these and other trends that highlight increasing disparities in power and wealth in the global economy. This will be done using three analytical lenses: the ‘bordering’ of precarious and migrant labour, labour geography, and labour regimes. The three varyingly utilize geographical tools including space,

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter draw on Arnold, Dennis (2017) ‘Labour Migration’, in Richardson, D. (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment, and Technology*. London: Wiley Blackwell and Association of American Geographers.

place and scale, however, rather than restrict analysis to intra-Geography literature the article instead briefly investigates these three approaches from a wider disciplinary optic.

## BORDERING PRECARIOUS AND MIGRANT LABOUR

Taken in broad terms, Schierup and Jørgensen (2016) drawing on Bourdieu's (1999) view of precarity as 'flexploitation', speak of precarity as a mode of keeping the 'reserve army of labour in labour', thereby maximizing both productive activity and placing downward pressure on wages. They assert that precarization of work develops in tandem with a precarization of citizenship as the dual contingencies of the (global) restructuring of economy and labour markets alongside a fracturing of frameworks of citizenship. Precarity is structured as a condition embodying imperatives of flexibility and multilocality, designating the centrality of mobility in workers' behaviour and struggles (Schierup and Jørgensen, 2016; Standing, 2011). Scholars and activists have long argued that working conditions migrants experience, as well as the labouring poor in the Global South addressed in the following section, are becoming increasingly common among formerly privileged white male workers in the advanced industrialized economies (Bernstein, 2007; Breman and Van der Linden, 2014). Migrants, whether rural-urban in China and Myanmar, or cross-border from Mexico to the USA or Africa to Europe, are increasingly at the centre of the contemporary labour process (Wills et al., 2010).

Studying migrant labour reveals a general shift of responsibility that follows the capitalist dream of an available labour force disconnected from the need for its reproduction. Not only has capital increasingly outsourced beyond national borders in the contemporary wave of globalization, so too has the social reproduction of labour been outsourced across (national, rural-urban) borders, generally to migrants' home communities and countries. The neoliberalization of social reproduction entails a reduction in state-provided social assistance for its citizens. Migrants are often not afforded any support for the social reproduction of their own families, whether in their home or host country. This is a clear example of re-regulation that places burdens on families and individuals, away from capital and states.

In addition to their appeal to capital, they also have major political advantages as a flexible labour supply, even those who cross borders legally and find themselves politically disenfranchised. Lacking citizenship, they are more likely to encounter restrictions on their access to employment, welfare, and the political process. In contemporary globalization, migrants are not only less likely to organize trade unions, they are the sine qua non of flexibility that many employers seek. Migrant workers are attractive to employers precisely because they are migrants (Wills et al., 2010).

This line of analysis leads to a simple equation: the less social support and the fewer rights migrants have, the more vulnerable and docile they are likely to be (Samers, 2010). While not a universal truth, this contention helps to understand the rights claims that migrant labour may or may not make of employers and states. This is most salient when workers fear being sacked and/or deported. Clearly, a precarious migrant labour force has been central to processes reworking the balance of power between capital and

labour. With that in mind, consideration should be given to how it is that migrant labour has come to be viewed by many analysts as a key contributor to economic development, and how migrant subjectivities are understood in relation to global-scale transformations.

Labour migration has always been a contested field in state regulation of populations in capitalism. Capital's solicitation of labour mobility has always gone hand-in-hand with manifold attempts, particularly on the part of states, to filter, to curb, and even to block it (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Geographical literature has been attuned to heterogeneous migrant, state, and capital practices through the continuous reworking and reshaping of both social and geographical borders and scales. Cohen (2006) provides a summary of the shift from open immigration policies in much of Western Europe and the United States during the post-war era, to the more restrictive policies from the 1970s when sharp restrictions were first imposed (while in the United States there has not been an absolute decline in legal immigration, there have been significant qualitative changes in the occupational and legal categories admitted – from immigrants to refugees and from agricultural and mass production workers to the professional, technical, and independent proprietor categories. Japan has not permitted significant numbers of labour migrants throughout the post-war era). Cohen attributes the shift to several factors, including:

- The oil crisis, which contributed to a wave of redundancies in energy-intensive industries.
- The rise of xenophobia, particularly among the working class fearing competition in the labour market.
- The organization of migrant workers who increasingly pushed for family reunification policies, contributing to many politicians and interest groups pressing for more restrictions.
- The rise in the cost of reproduction in terms of child care, language training, and education.
- Economic restructuring, or the general shift from Fordist mass production to flexible specialization and off shoring of production and services.

Speaking to contemporary state policy, Cohen contends that the modern state has sought to differentiate the various people under its sway by including some in the body politic and according them full civic and social rights while seeking to exclude others from entering this 'charmed circle' (Cohen, 2006). Currently, formal citizenship and visa regulations are the most prominent form of regulation at national governments' disposal. Typically, they are used to control access to and the duration of different kinds of work. This is known as 'differential exclusion', describing the incorporation of migrants into some areas of national society, especially the labour market, and their exclusion from others, such as social welfare and citizenship. While a good starting point, this binary concept is easily complicated when considering the different experiences of skilled and unskilled migrants, those 'legal' or not, and variation across national contexts. It is more useful to view migrant labour management as creating different degrees of precarity and vulnerability, as well as opportunities and empowerment.

Today, globalization has both deepened and extended these dynamics and altered the effects they have. Far from flattening the world and reducing the significance of borders, the contemporary social regime of capital has multiplied borders and the rights they differentially allocate across populations (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). To understand how migrants traverse and reshape the multiple spaces of globalization, the study of borders and labour migration provides much insight. Borders are complex social institutions that can both connect and divide not only migrant labour, but also the times and spaces of global capitalism. This includes both political borders, whose relevance has altered yet certainly not gone away, and the multiplication of social borders that very often shape migrant workers' experiences. In migration studies, the border has typically been comprehended as a wall, both literally and figuratively, that excludes migrants from a national territory. The US–Mexico border is the prototype of the border-as-wall, an 'economic dam' that seeks to prevent migrant flows from 'contaminating' the US body politic, an approach and discourse that has been replicated elsewhere. Border securitization has not only failed, it has contributed to riskier efforts on the part of migrants to evade authorities, while also leading to a proliferation of human traffickers and others capitalizing on the criminalization of certain migrant labour populations – very often police and military officials mandated to 'protect' the border.

Borders have become a key site of articulation for capital, especially as a means for differentiating between labourers according to skill level, nationality, race, gender and class. Not only have borders multiplied, but labour has as well with the intensification of labour processes combined with the tendency of work to colonize life. Viewed in relation to one another, a range of state and economic actors use borders to create territories and spaces of regulatory inclusion and exclusion for labour (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Indeed, national borders are no longer the only or necessarily the most relevant borders dividing and restricting labour mobility. Migrant labour encounters complex sets of social relations that seek to reinforce labour power as a commodity by turning migrant flows into mobile governable subjects. Indeed, the production and reproduction of differences is key to capital accumulation strategies. Impacts include the differential allocation of rights across populations. Very often, this entails being 'in one's place out of place' and 'out of place in one's place' (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). All labour is subject to bordering, yet migrant workers' experiences are most pronounced. In particular, capital has proven particularly adept at exploiting the continuities and the gaps – the borders – between different migrant populations.

Studies on precarity, migration and borders highlights important labour trends in the global economy. They do, however, tend to suffer from the tendency toward a 'catch-all' bias in which borders and precarity are 'everywhere', leaving insufficient analytical space to unpack the nuances of particular formations of labour. The following sections address this shortcoming with attention to labour geographies and labour regimes.

## LABOUR GEOGRAPHIES

The globalization of production and outsourcing of world production from North to South has necessitated theories on global space production. Capital flows, labour mobility, technology diffusion, international subcontracting chains, information networks, just-in-time production, are transnational processes that not only require intensive reconfiguration of time, but also rapid reorganization of space (Harvey, 2003). On the one hand, globalization of production is a response to competitive pressures from capital, and on the other, the need for greater flexibility in labour management and reach of capital is a reaction to strength of labour in the industrialized countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Hardt and Negri, 2000). The saturation of markets, along with the high levels of competition that introduced the process of global outsourcing, obligated firms to develop techniques and technologies to enhance or create mobility and flexibility, which also created new barriers to labour organizing. These processes have diminished workers' bargaining power at the point of production and national scale, while at the same time generated new forms of struggle on the part of feminized and racialized labour forces.

One of the most noticeable implications for labour is the rapidly diminishing trade union density since the end of the 1970s. The representational gap or its absence is inherently linked to the increasing precarization of labour and social insecurity and inequality (Standing, 2011). Thus, the lack of workplace and social representation is a central element producing, reordering, and perpetuating social, economic, and political disparity, as well as marginalization and vulnerability. Yet understanding global labour trends and particular labour regimes is not only about the paralyzing blows from inscrutable macro-scale political economic forces (Barchiesi, 2011). It is also about how workers position themselves in production systems and co-constitute the changing geographies of globalization.

Contemporary geographic labour research has coalesced around a core set of conceptual categories and theoretical concerns anchored in place, space and scale. A prominent shift has been from the 'geography of labour' which privileged the determinate role of capital in producing its social and geographical landscapes, toward 'labour geography' which foregrounds workers as active geographical agents who co-determine the mutational parameters of the global economy. Peck (2013) has argued that the ground-breaking work of Doreen Massey could be categorized as labour geography, and that intellectually and politically, Massey was a labour geographer long before the label existed. The path-breaking analysis in *Spatial Divisions of Labour* marked a paradigm shift in economic geography, from positivism and location theory to critical realism and political economy, while centring labour as a social agent (Peck, 2013).

Later iterations of labour geography began as a neo-Marxist critique of structuralist work. Much structuralist work had been concerned with the breakdown of Fordism and the Keynesian welfare state, an era in which labour in the advanced industrialized countries had an unprecedented power to shape the geographies of capitalism at the national scale. In other words the determinative role of capital in the neoliberal era had been, rightly, emphasized. Alongside emphasizing the geographies of capital and firms' management strategies, the core critique of labour geographers is that workers are too



often treated as passive victims. Andrew Herod, a prominent figure in the field, offers four central tenets of an alternative approach, labour geography (Herod, 1997: 16–18, cf. Das, 2012: 21):

- The ‘production of the geography of capitalism is not always the prerogative of capital’ – labour plays an active role in creating this geography. In some places and times, capital is not even the most significant actor.
- The agency of workers is related to ‘their desire to implement in the physical landscape their own spatial visions of a geography of capitalism’ in the interest of ‘their own self-reproduction and social survival’. Like capital, labour resorts to spatial fixes in its own interests. Labour’s fixes may or may not coincide with those favoured by capital.
- This means that the production of space is contested, and that processes of class formation and inter- and intra-class relations are geographical processes. Workers produce landscapes in ways that increase their power and reduce that of capital.
- Workers produce scales, which impact their agency and capitals. For example, their ability to win wage increases and shorter hours help determine the size of travel to work areas and thus the urban scale. When unionized workers create regional and national contracts to equalize conditions across areas, they make it difficult for employers to play one locality against another.

A core concern with Herod and other labour geographers is that labour is not a spatially homogenous category. Scholars have developed this contention, with Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) identifying four distinct thematic strands within the literature, each of which is underpinned by its own bodies of theory. The first has been concerned with the collective organization of workers through labour unions and the reassertion of the potential agency of these groupings. A second has theorized the formation of geographically specific local labour markets/regimes and their ongoing regulation and segmentation, including charting the shift from welfare to workfare regimes in many nation-states and regions. The third has explored the intersections of employment relations with other facets of personal and workplace identity, including a large body of feminist work focusing on unpaid reproductive work, gendered divisions of labour and worker identities and subjectivities, among other themes. The fourth is concerned with exploring the role of the material landscape in shaping labour struggles and their outcomes, examining how workers shape landscapes, but also how landscapes influence worker action. A critique Coe and Jordhus-Lier draw from this review is the lacunae of theorization around workers’ agency. Thus, they call for notions of agency that are conceptualized and fleshed out in terms of its multiple geographies and temporalities, and that the potential for worker action should always be seen in relation to the formations of capital, the state, the community and the labour market in which workers are incontrovertibly yet variably embedded.

Despite this nuanced perspective on structure-agency debates as they pertain to labour geographies, Das (2012) argues that the labour geography literature falls flat in terms of conceptualizing the materiality of labour, pointing to two tendencies. One is the emphasis on the labour *market* and on its re-regulation in the neoliberal era, usually *in abstraction* from ‘the hidden abode’. Thus labour appears mainly as sellers of a

commodity. Das (2012: 22) points out, drawing on Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*, that 'equating labour market, the realm of exchange relations, to the sphere of production is completely wrong. This sort of serious conceptual slippage is not atypical in labour geography and (indeed in much "critical" human geography).' He goes on to note that to the extent that labour process issues are raised, the discussion is often one-sidedly focused on identity, language and culture, leaving the materiality of the labour process under-developed. This line of critique, then, leads to a productive interface among labour geography and labour regime literatures. It is in this respect that labour geography studies are being strengthened with attention to labour regimes, the focus of the following section.

## SCALING LABOUR REGIMES

The concept of 'labour regime' draws on two major theoretical sources of inspiration: Braverman's studies on control of workers at the point of production, and the regulation approach which, primarily through analysis of Fordism, focuses on periods of national-scale stabilization despite inherent crisis tendencies in capitalism (Arnold and Campbell, 2017). In its most restrictive use a labour regime is seen simply as firm-level forms of labour recruitment and use, hence primarily linked to the labour process (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015), defined here as how people work, how and who manages their work, the skills that are utilized, and how workers are paid. More generally, 'labour regime' conceptualizes the interconnected ways in which workers, labour processes and employment are organized and regulated in particular spaces. Bernstein (2007: 7) defines the term as the 'interrelations of (segmented) labour markets and recruitment, conditions of employment and labour processes, and forms of enterprise authority and control, when they coalesce in sociologically well-defined clusters with their own discernible "logic" and effects'.

Critical labour scholars deploying the labour regime concept often draw inspiration from Michael Burawoy's (1985) 'factory regime', which addresses specific industries' position in the wider spectrum of social relations relevant to particular forms of capital-labour relations. Burawoy's (1985) related work on 'politics of production' brought back the political and ideological effects of production regimes, emphasizing the role of the state in shaping national modes of production as well as labour politics in the workplace. Thus, Burawoy set out to understand the international as well as the national sets of relations of which the industry was part (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015). A core intervention of Burawoy's work is conceiving of labour regimes as hegemonic projects aimed at securing worker acquiescence to unequal and exploitative employment relations. This is a conceptualization rooted in Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the Fordist production model, in which prominent (largely male) segments of the working class were provided stable, secure and often unionized employment with relatively high wages as a means of garnering their consent to a regimented and intensified industrial labour process (Arnold and Campbell, 2017). Fordism, then, as a consent-seeking labour regime, served to bolster conditions for industrial peace as a precondition for stable capital accumulation. What was missing from Burawoy's early



work was the *spatial* aspect of production, addressed above, which has become an area of concern in labour regime theorizations.

Pun and Smith (2007) explore a particular locality effect, the construction of export-orientated factories in China, and the role of the Chinese state, transnational capital and internal migrant labour in producing an exceptionally productive labour regime. In the context of China's rise as 'global factory' and its many-fold spatial fixes, they examine the linkages between the production and reproduction of labour power in this transnational labour process space. Their primary contribution to the literature is identifying a new form of labour regime, the *dormitory labour regime* in China. This labour regime reproduces low labour costs, high worker productivity, and access to extensive low-cost labour reserves that is institutionalized within a political economy between state and market. Importantly, this form of labour capture maintains access to cheap labour without a labour movement that could organize and contribute to better working conditions and labour solidarities, as the Chinese state has pre-empted grassroots mobilizations through Party domination of the trade unions. Any potential for workers' agency is tightly circumscribed by an array of structural forces. Indeed, Pun and Smith find that the systemic provision of dormitories for internal migrant labour within or around factories facilitates continuous access to labour reserves from the countryside, thus depressing wage demands and affects collective organization by workers in a particular industrial space.

Pun and Smith's dormitory labour regime conceptualization is, like many labour regime studies, about extensive, multi-scalar forms of labour regulation and control, under-analyzing workers' role in co-constituting and potentially transforming the regimes. Chan (2014) addresses this shortcoming by utilizing Coe and Jordhus-Lier's 'constrained [labour] agency' framework identified above. Chan finds that in China's manufacturing regions Chinese migrant workers have been actively participating in the shaping and reshaping of labour standards in the global factories thereby challenging global capital and the party-state regarding labour regulations. However, the political and economic constraints on labour agency should not be underestimated. He argues that the authoritarian nature of the Chinese party-state and the legacy of socialist trade unionism have impeded the rise of effective trade unionism. Furthermore, China's continued dependency on FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) and export-oriented industry in driving its economic development strategy reproduces global capital's huge leverage in influencing local labour policies.

Other labour regime studies have more explicitly centred geographical concepts including the politics of scale that have been influential in labour geography literature. Through a case study of labour agency in Yangon, Myanmar's export garment sector, Arnold and Campbell (2017) draw on Burawoy's Gramscian understandings of hegemony in labour regime analysis. They argue that the emerging labour regime in Myanmar constitutes a nascent hegemonic regulatory assemblage shaped by forces and actors at multiple scales. This assemblage involves a mix of consent-seeking discourses and labour-relations practices, including social dialogue, labour law reform, and the legalization of workers' institutional representatives, alongside coercive measures like the violent crackdowns on striking workers and implementation of repressive colonial-era laws. Discursive norms centred on building a 'clean' image for garment manufacturing have been introduced, contributing to a changing capital accumulation strategy in

the sector after years of economic sanctions of the European Union and United States – the two largest apparel consuming markets globally. These relations are varyingly scaled through ‘opening’ to Western markets and investors and with them the discursive introduction of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and other norms and development practices. In the process, the state seeks to gain worker consent at the scale of the nation – through national trade union federations and discourses of national development. Yet they assert that the hegemonic project is fraught, as workers are contesting the terms of their insertion into industrial capitalism, as well as union and other actors’ efforts to scale-up the workplace into national social dialogue that contributes to notions of ‘globalization with a human face’. This rejection challenges developmental assertions that workers should make ‘short term’ livelihood sacrifices for long-term national economic development planning – thus ‘flattening’ the scalar register of social and political action.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past 30 years, global outsourcing and precarization of work have become central in reconfiguring labour geographies. Both trends have contributed to delimiting the collective power of labour. Indeed, economic growth has occurred alongside a reduction in workers’ share of overall wealth. In the process, migrant workers have become the paradigmatic figure in the contemporary labour process. On the one hand, global capital drives migration and reshapes its patterns, directions, and forms. On the other, however, labour migration is an important factor in bringing about fundamental social transformation of both home and host countries, and is, in turn, itself a major force reshaping communities and societies.

The study of borders and states’ efforts to manage mobile capital and labour focuses on classed hybridity (the multiplication of labour), and the implications of racialization, gender, and citizenship in shaping labour markets. It is an approach that recognizes global capital trends without viewing them as paralyzing blows that determine subjective experiences. Instead, the spaces that migrants traverse are mutable and multiple, offering opportunities and constraints. The spatial reorganization of labour has multiplied and fragmented its forms. In these and other debates, geographically inspired literature has been attuned to the continuous reworking and reshaping of migrant experiences. The theoretical and empirical diversity of research has made significant contributions to understanding important political, economic, and social changes.

Studies on labour geography and labour regimes offer at times more nuanced accounts of both mechanisms of labour control at the workplace and how workers co-determine the labour process and wider regimes of accumulation. At stake is developing better understanding of how labour regimes reproduce excessive share of profits to capital at labour expense, how and why workers acquiesce to their own exploitation, and the cracks and fissures that emerge in labour regimes over time – highlighting both workers’ success stories as well as failures, as part of wider efforts to mitigate inequalities inherent in contemporary capitalism. Labour regime studies have, taken as a whole, usefully adopted core concerns of labour geography theorizations.

These studies include but clearly extend beyond debates within the disciplines including Geography and Sociology, rather comprising a renewed cross-disciplinary orientation around political economy.

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