

Chakravarti, Leila Zaki. (2016). *Made in Egypt: Gendered Identity and Aspiration on the Globalised Shop Floor*. New York: Berghahn

Made in Egypt is a rich ethnographic account of shop floor culture in a private garment factory located in Port Said, Egypt. Based on fieldwork in an economic ‘free zone’ at the height of Mubarak’s liberalization policies between 2003 and 2005, Chakravarti explores the lives of factory workers, supervisors, and managers with a focus on their conceptions of gender, labor, and religion. The monograph’s architecture is loosely framed by retrospective glances at the link between Egyptian labor movements and the 2011 Revolution, but it is mainly structured around different aspects of factory life.

The introductory chapter describes the overall organization and labor process of the factory. Chakravarti insists that this ‘blueprint’ description mirrors the management’s view of manufacturing practices, which ignores the rich representations, motivations, and aspirations of female and male workers on the shop floor. The remainder of the monograph leaves the ‘blueprint’ view aside to describe working lives on their own terms. The second chapter explores the patrimonial relations between the factory’s ownership and its working force, both of whom jointly participate in a discourse of ‘firm-as-family’ to further their respective ends – e.g. to retain a skilled workforce, to get a job for one’s kin. The remaining chapters respectively document the workers’ marriage ambitions and consumption practices, the shop floor supervisors’ at once harsh and nurturing working style, as well as the factory management’s brief overhaul late in Chakravarti’s fieldwork, when the ‘firm-as-family’ model was slowly broken down by an external management company.

An important merit of Chakravarti’s ethnography is the detailed attention to emic conceptions of gender and labor. She provides an excellent description of the notions of ‘loyalty’ (*ikhlaas*) and ‘respect’ (*ihthiram*), both of which are integral to working relations and wider social interaction in urban Egypt. In a similar vein, she proposes an interesting description of ‘tomcat femininity’, a concept which artfully articulates a heteronormative gender performance characteristic of many feminized professions in Egypt, such as shop floor supervisor or school mistress. More broadly, Chakravarti situates the factory between local and global pressures. The free zone in Port Said is under the constant threat of capital flight in a volatile global garment market. Moreover, it has a hard time retaining its skilled working force in a city marked by a history of import-export commerce, which made most of its inhabitants into ‘wheeler-dealers’ uninterested in manufacturing work (pp. 5-16). The patrimonial discourse of ‘firm-as-family’, in this context, becomes the contested idiom through which workers, supervisors, and management apprehend such economic pressures and their own hierarchical struggles.

The monograph’s greatest merit, perhaps, is that its descriptive content calls for stimulating expansions and elaborations. Workers and their supervisors on the shop floor get a great deal of attention by Chakravarti, but it would be interesting to read more about the middle managers (*edara*) and their world of paperwork, which is briefly broached in the introductory chapter. This exploration could have given a more detailed insight into the ‘blueprint’ view of the factory, not just to show that this view cannot map onto actual work on the shop floor – which is to be expected – but also to show how this view is rooted in socio-material practices enacting the ‘blueprint’ as part of the factory’s daily grind, beyond the shop floor.

A more detailed outlook on managers might have equally clarified the question of class, which is not addressed head-on by Chakravarti even though she describes the hierarchical relations between top management, middle-management, supervisors, and workers with great precision. Glossing over class is not a default in Chakravarti’s analysis: rather, it is a general lacuna of the anthropology of the Middle East, where emic notions of class are difficult to square off theoretically with either an orthodox Marxist definition or a Bourdieusian one.

Unpacking local categories of class in greater depth, including via better descriptions of both ‘lower’ and ‘upper’ strata in work settings, is an urgent task with important theoretical consequences to Middle East specialists – a task which is well within Chakravarti’s grasp, even though the monograph does not elaborate on the issue explicitly.

Overall, *Made in Egypt* reveals a world of industrial labor that has seldom been explored in a city that has seldom been covered in the ethnography of Egypt, which has been dominated by works on Cairo in recent years. The monograph will speak to all students and researchers with an interest in the sociology and anthropology of industrial work, in addition to being an invaluable contribution to the literature on gender and labor in Egypt.

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