

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



***From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State*, By Ally Shireen, Ithaca: ILR Press, 2009, 228 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8014-75870.**

Andrew Sparks

Volume 66, numéro 3, été 2011

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1006355ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006355ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Sparks, A. (2011). Compte rendu de [*From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State*, By Ally Shireen, Ithaca: ILR Press, 2009, 228 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8014-75870.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 66(3), 486–488. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006355ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2011

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

can be said of Stanford's treatment of the household as the site of reproduction. That is to say, there is enough in his schematic presentation to allow both instructors and students to delve deeper into subject matter should they choose.

The third section introduces the dynamic elements of capitalist economies: competition, investment and growth, employment and unemployment, distribution and the environment. Each is taken up with the same rapid fire vigour which, like the previous sections, should serve to stimulate the curiosity of students.

The fourth section is likewise a rather hefty presentation of the "Complexities of Capitalism". The list of topics covered is too extensive to present here. All the traditional macroeconomic policy questions are dealt with from monetary and fiscal policy through to international trade and development which culminates in the presentation of a basic macro model of the economy. What I found interesting about this section was that it also raised three issues not customarily broached in introductory texts: the financialization of the economy, pensions and a rather long discussion of that much neglected topic in orthodox textbooks – the state and liberal democracy.

The last section deals with the age old dispute between reform liberals, socialist reformers and revolutionaries. It is a muddled conversation and I wish Stanford had simply presented the Nordic model as one possible alternative vision while noting Kelecki's observations about the instability of high road equilibrium strategies. Students would be better served, in my opinion, to focus their attention on the structural barriers to any serious project of economic reform. This could have been partially accomplished by referring back to the chapter on the state and liberal democracy. The question is not *if* another world is possible for, in the abstract, it always is. The real question is *how* and under what conditions it could be possible.

The fuzzy nature of the last section is in no small part, perhaps, a function of Stanford's agnostic radicalism. Indeed, the weakness of this text would only become apparent should Stanford choose to write an intermediate version. Then all the serious disputes between heterodox economists could not be papered over by the authority of the hegemonic voice that is characteristic of introductory textbooks.

That said, this is an introductory textbook and a very good one at that. It can be used in whole or part, depending on the needs of the instructor. There is also an online resource which has course outlines and lesson plans along with additional resources. Union educators and summer session instructors will particularly appreciate the truncated lesson plan for short intensive instruction.

Travis Fast
Université Laval

From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State

By Ally Shireen, Ithaca: ILR Press, 2009,
228 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8014-75870.

This book presents an examination of the domestic worker issues in South Africa, in the post-Apartheid era. What makes this study relevant is that, in the period under examination, the African National Congress (ANC) government has been partners in a long-term alliance with the dominant trade union federation. Furthermore, they have been substantially supported by the working class, who at the time of the first democratic elections in South Africa, were predominantly made up of the black Africans. Among the first laws introduced by the ANC government was an overhaul of employment legislation, which significantly benefited black workers, and domestic workers perhaps more than any other. The book adopts a radical feminist approach to the analysis of the issues, and thus explores

issues of power (held by the state, employers and employees) and exploitation, in the various relationships.

It argues that, under apartheid, domestic workers had almost no political rights and were subject to almost feudal levels of exploitation and servitude in the intimate relationship of employment within a private household. In contrast, in the post-apartheid era, they have full citizenship and protection under what is probably the most progressive employment legislation in the world, which has metamorphosed their role from that of servant to being employees. However, many other people around the world, particularly those from developing countries who work as domestic workers in developed and wealthier countries (such as Filipinas in the United States), are still subject to a more antiquated relationship of servitude.

It also notes that, in the post-apartheid era, “nouveau-riche blacks increasingly employ domestic workers” (p. 7). However, the scale of this is hugely downplayed to focus exclusively on those working in white households, in spite of quoting official statistics which show that some 60% of South African households employ a domestic worker. In a country where the white population represents a relatively small minority, this implies that a very significant number of domestic workers are employed in Black households, but the workers in these households do not feature in the research.

Even at the height of Apartheid, with its ubiquitous controls on all aspects of workers', and particularly domestic workers' lives, the author argues that domestic workers still found ways to restructure the working environment in order to retain some control over their private lives. One of the most common ways was to spurn the “live-in” arrangements of living in the back-yards of their employers, in favour of finding their own accommodation, often miles from work, and then commuting.

This gave these women who were being paid to look after other people's families, the first opportunity to also look after their own families.

The sector has also seen a shift towards part-time work, but interestingly, for some this was introduced by the domestic workers rather than by employers, as it facilitated a shift from selling their labour power, to selling labour services. This meant that when the set tasks were completed, the job was done, rather than having to continuously clean up behind the family.

Among others, this switch was at the behest of the employer, justified on the basis of affordability. These employees appear to frequently fail to find sufficient work to fill the working week, and these workers often expressed dissatisfaction with this working arrangement. Curiously, rather than arguing that these employees are dissatisfied because they have had the working arrangement thrust on them and that they had lost power in the working arrangement, instead of accepting it voluntarily as a way of retaining power of their labour power, (which would fit better into her radical feminist framework), the author attempts to argue that they find the working arrangement unsatisfactory because it is accompanied by work intensification (p. 57). This paradox is never explained or even mentioned.

In tracing the development of domestic labour under Apartheid, Shireen argues that all of the legislation affecting women in the domestic sector was aimed at controlling, rather than protecting, the employees. This control, and the state agencies that administered it, served to exacerbate and intensify the exploitation of women.

In contrast, when the post-Apartheid government sought to protect them, the workers decided *en masse* and apparently spontaneously to eschew the formalization of their employment relationship through the legislation, which branded domestic

workers as vulnerable, and therefore set out to protect them. However, the workers, to a large extent, did not regard themselves as vulnerable. They certainly did not want to exchange the maternalist relationship they had successfully negotiated with their employers, for a paternalist relationship with the State. The concept of power is seen as being important here, and whereas the workers had managed to negotiate a certain degree of power through the intimate working relations, they did not want to relinquish this to a state that sought to protect them, while they had not sought such protection.

A methodological weakness of this book stems from its claims to be examining the relationship between the workers and the State, whereas in reality, it includes

an extensive discussion of the workers' relationship with their employers. This is at the heart of its greatest weakness. The author's claim to be looking at the relationship between workers and the state is used to justify not including any private employers in the research. The result is that the employers get vilified (not always unjustifiably), but do not even get an opportunity to explain the relationship from their side.

Nevertheless, this book is recommended as an in-depth look at a subject area that has attracted less attention than it deserves, in a setting that provides some interesting challenges for workers, unions, employers and the state.

Andrew Sparks

DeMontfort University