

## Those Who Serve

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## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

### Those Who Serve

**Steven Tufts**

Patricia Adler and Peter Adler, *Paradise Laborers: Hotel Work in the Global Economy* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press 2004)

Rachel Sherman, *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2007)

Dan Zuberi, *Differences that Matter: Social Policy and the Working Poor in the United States and Canada* (Ithaca, NY: ILR/Cornell University Press 2006)

IN THE MID 1990s, when I first became interested in the challenges facing hospitality workers and their unions, there was relatively little literature outside of human resource management perspectives on the subject. It was as if researchers were misinterpreting the ‘please do not disturb’ signs guests hang on hotel room doorknobs as a message to leave the entire hospitality sector alone. Rare exceptions were Dorothy Sue Cobble’s *Dishing it Out* and Roy Wood’s study of working in catering and accommodation in the UK.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, hospitality work has attracted a greater number of scholars interested in ‘new’ economy labour issues. Hotels are of particular interests as post-industrial workplaces that employ growing numbers of marginalized workers, including new immigrants, racialized workers, women, and young people in increasingly polarized global cities. New research addresses an imbalance in labour studies which has arguably tended to focus on workers in ‘core’ manufacturing industries at the frontlines of global economic restructuring and transition.<sup>2</sup> Three

1. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing it Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana and Chicago 1991); Roy Wood, *Working in Hotels and Catering* (London 1992).

Cobble’s landmark historical study of waitress unionism in the US discusses the potential of women’s organizing in the service sector. Wood’s study of issues facing hospitality workers in the UK is more contemporary. While rooted in a traditional (and some would say conservative) sociology of work perspective, the important study is only cited in Sherman’s book.

2. In the case of Canada, consider the relative amount of text labour researchers continue to

recent studies specifically explore work in North American hotels and resorts. These studies provide different approaches to the study of hospitality work and workers and, although uneven, contribute to our understanding of issues facing workers beyond rustbelt industries and regions.

*Paradise Laborers: Hotel Work in the Global Economy* is the product of over a decade of research on resort workers in Hawaii by Patricia Adler and Peter Adler. The book opens with a description of what it is like to 'land in paradise' from the perspective of a tourist. A somewhat strange introduction to a book which focuses on workers and their post-modern existence employed in large full-service resorts, but it is indicative of the struggle the authors have escaping what I feel is an overly romanticized account of hotel work in 'paradise'. Based in Colorado, the Adlers come clean with their initial conceptualizations of these workers. To their "initially unseasoned eyes, resort workers had it all. They live where the weather was always temperate, they had enough discretionary income to pursue leisure activities, and even on the grimmest day of work, they could look at the scenery and find all tranquil with the world." (23)

A romantic view of hotel workers as prototypical of the growing number of 'trapped' and 'transient' workers who increasingly flow through the global economy continues throughout the book. The end result is a study of hotel workers that, at times, is as labourious as it is provocative. The central argument of *Paradise Laborers* is that people living and working in postmodern communities and workplaces (i.e., hyper-imaginary resort destinations) "cling to a modernist model of the self." (8) The review of the theoretical literature which provides the underlying framework for the authors' thesis and the Weberian typology of hotel workers is sparse and condensed. An expanded section or chapter situating the work in more detail rather than relegating numerous references to footnotes would have added value.

The study is largely based on traditional ethnographic methods which at times frustrated the researchers. Securing access to hotel and resort workers is difficult, but I was somewhat dismayed at the way the authors sought access to workers through management. While initial interviews were 'voluntary,' the authors' approach of telling workers they had "official permission from management" did create suspicion and unease among participants (admitted in note 6, 242–243).<sup>3</sup> Over the years, the authors largely funded their research through teaching stints and expanded their research methods to include a 'membership role' in which they befriended resort workers over longer terms. In reporting the findings, the authors use extensive quotations from interviews with over 100 hotel workers listed in an appendix. While these well chosen

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dedicate to the trials of the auto sector and the Canadian Auto Workers.

3. I am not convinced that some of the methodological choices made by the authors would have made it through a Tri-Council ethical review found in Canadian universities. Similarly, the anonymous photos of workers in the book may also be considered ill advised by some, even if permission was given.

excerpts from the transcripts do give the hotel workers voice, their length and volume become cumbersome and, at times, detract from the narrative.

The authors do write accessibly and provide an insightful typology of diverse hotel workers in the global labour market. They categorize the resort workers they have studied as: new immigrants; locals; seekers; and management. They consider the first two groups to be ‘trapped’ in paradise, although in keeping with their predominantly post-structuralist approach, the Adlers state that “new immigrants and locals were trapped in paradise by choice.” (62) These workers are often limited to the lower paying ‘back of the house’ operations (working, for example, as room attendants and kitchen workers) in the resort, with language barriers, limited formal education, and racialization segmenting the hotel labour market.

The more transient hotel workers are either ‘seekers’ or management. Here the Adlers’ romanticism embeds itself with the categorization of these workers as engaged in a larger spiritual journey, using seasonal or temporary hotel work to supplement their mobile lifestyles (e.g. students combining work with travel). These workers tend to have greater amounts of cultural capital and are employed in ‘front-of-the-house’ positions which involve direct interaction with guests. Resort managers may not necessarily be on a spiritual search, but the contemporary practice of the hotel industry is to move managers from property to property frequently. The geographical metaphor of ‘trapped’ and ‘transient’ workers provides the analytical framework for the remainder of the book.

The authors uncover how degrees of transience are shaped by the industry, and with what impact on family life and friendships, including how transient support networks shape hotel worker existence. They provide some interesting interpretations that counter accepted notions of the contingent nature of much hotel work.<sup>4</sup> While seasonality is a disruptive force that threatens the income security of workers, the Adlers also highlight the liberating aspects of seasonality that give local workers a reprieve from long hours during high season and allow ‘seekers’ to pursue leisure travel. The importance of ‘seniority lists’ in providing some protection for long-term workers against seasonal cutbacks in employment is noted, but the role of unions, which often implement such lists or force non-union firms to mimic seniority provisions, is not explored in depth throughout the study.

An interesting chapter on temporality discusses how the expansion of time in resorts to allow for 24-hour service has been used as a temporal fix for increasingly competitive hotel capital seeking to commodify the guests’ entire stay. The impact on workers’ lives has been significant as the control over time, shift preferences, for example, becomes even more important. At this point the

4. It must be noted that the authors define the contingent nature of work more narrowly than recent research which has addressed the ‘precarious’ nature of even full-time permanent work. See Leah Vosko, ed., *Precarious Employment: Understanding Labour Market Insecurity in Canada* (Montreal 2006).

Adlers return to a traditional Marxist interpretation of the commodification of consumption space-time. (138) Similarly, the following chapter exploring the racial and gender stratification of hotel labour markets which typifies much of the global industry resorts to a rather simplistic 'false consciousness' explanation of worker legitimization of different pay scales and power with little reference to the role of collective action. Chapters 9 and 10 expand the discussion of labour market segmentation through an examination of career paths in the industry. The authors argue that hiring networks, extent of burnout, and exit strategies differ greatly among 'trapped' and 'transient' workers. The system supports transience and high turnover but short-term careers are often created through seniority lists that provide some reward for returning workers who otherwise make the same amount as new workers. Again, the role of the union as a regulatory mechanism in this process is underdeveloped as is the role of the state and labour law in regulating the sector.

The concluding chapter makes the case that the subjugation of hotel workers found in other accounts of low-wage service work is not present in the Hawaiian case. Instead there is a voluntarism to post-modern transience that the industry has adapted. In true post-modern fashion, contingent work is simultaneously empowering and oppressive, tourism service work provides both good and 'bad' jobs, and ethnicity may be a less important factor in marginalization (and the propensity to unionize) than the extent to which workers are invested or 'trapped' in the community. The Adlers argue that a true understanding of resort work requires that notions of the political economy be opened to include how organizational structures accommodate both trapped and transient workers, how these existential workers adapt in different ways, as well as the realities of globalized labour markets.

In contrast to the Adlers, Dan Zuberi offers an account of hotel workers located in the margins of the growing ranks of North America's working poor. In *Differences that Matter*, Zuberi provides a comparative 'Global Hotel' study that examines how social policy shapes the lives of hotel workers in Seattle and Vancouver. Through interviews with workers employed by hotel chains with properties in each city, Zuberi convincingly argues that the Canadian social policy regime, although limited in many respects, much better serves the working poor. The book illuminates the widely held belief that social policy in Canada creates greater economic equity with insurmountable evidence. A further contribution of the book is its attempt to shift the balance of applied sociology's attention from concerns of welfare policy to the implications of social policy for the working poor. Similar to the Adlers' book, the theoretical and conceptual discussion is limited and much rich information is buried in the endnotes, not only in the conceptual chapter but throughout the text. Zuberi briefly introduces several literatures ranging from social policy research and the poor to comparative US-Canada research.

After establishing the setting for his study, the reasons for choosing the two lower tier global cities, and his chosen methods, Zuberi lays out his findings

with a strong narrative style. As opposed to the Adlers, who rely on excerpts, Zuberi complements his quotations with a refreshing descriptive narrative that brings his participants to life from the opening paragraph. It feels as if he has genuinely taken the time to 'know' his participants' experiences and relishes telling their stories.

Zuberi systematically addresses the differences between hotel workers in Seattle and Vancouver through an examination of key arenas of social policy. First to be considered is the difference in union power as the greater union density in the Vancouver sector and more labour-friendly regulatory regime allows low-wage private sector workers a greater opportunity to organize. Zuberi notes the 'divergence' of labour union density between the US and Canada in the last several decades and its impact on the relative ability of the two countries' working poor to organize so as to extract significant surplus value from employers.<sup>5</sup> Zuberi recognizes that Vancouver is an exceptional case as the major local of UNITE-HERE has largely organized workers across the province in two large master agreements. This has improved wages and working conditions for significant segments of the hotel industry in the province. It is here where my biggest question concerning Zuberi's comparative method is raised. Specifically, has he chosen the most relevant *scale* of analysis? While there are several differences between the working poor living in Canadian and US cities, how would his analysis have changed if he chose two cities in the same country (e.g. Vancouver versus Toronto)? Is international comparison the most interesting when exploring social policy initiatives involving the working poor or would we learn more by exploring the differences among hotel workers in low-union-density Dallas versus high-union-density Las Vegas? It must also be noted that with the emergence of sectoral bargaining in 2006 with UNITE-HERE's major campaign to harmonize standards across North America, the success of hotel unionism is increasingly linked across borders to markets where hotel unions are strongest (i.e., San Francisco, Vancouver).

Nevertheless, Zuberi does assess the role of national and regional policy and regulation on low-wage hotel workers. His examination of the different health care systems goes beyond the simple lack of health insurance for many working poor in America to include an examination of the well-being of families and the extent of preventative health care programs. Zuberi reinforces the myths of the superior Canadian healthcare system, but does not widely explore the present changes affecting the system and the number of crises (real and imagined) confronting universal health care in the country. He is slightly more critical of social welfare policies, but again focuses on Canada's greater commitment to 'high road' training through the Employment Insurance program

5. Zuberi provides a brief overview of the convergence-divergence debates surrounding gaps in union density between Canada and the US. A further key work on this issue is Pradeep Kumar, *From Uniformity to Divergence: Industrial Relations in Canada and the United States* (Kingston 1993)

and more accessible (relative to the US) post-secondary education.<sup>6</sup> Zuberi also identifies the greater extent to which US hotel workers rely on familial and social networks for financial support in the absence of progressive social programs. It is here that he could ask more complex questions confronting workers in a global economy with respect to the divergence/harmonization of state programs. He clearly highlights the role EI supports in Canada played in assisting laid-off hotel workers following 9/11, but the same programs were arguably less effective in helping workers in Toronto weather the SARS crisis in 2003.<sup>7</sup>

Zuberi addresses local social programs as well and his chapter on city-level investment demonstrates the impact of differences at the urban scale. He makes a strong case for the greater investments in public infrastructure (parks, community centres) in Vancouver and the extensive rejuvenation of the waterfront compared to Seattle, but he unnecessarily overstates his case. An example is the manner in which Vancouver's Lower East Side, perhaps the most notorious site of disinvestment and hardship in Canada, marked by poverty and Aboriginal dislocation, is only briefly mentioned (127) as he chooses to compare North Rainer Valley in Seattle to Kensington Cedar Cottage in Vancouver, neighbourhoods where many hotel workers live.

An innovative aspect of Zuberi's qualitative research design is the examination of the subjective perceptions of hotel workers. Vancouver hotel workers rated their jobs much higher on a scale comparing the interesting and high-paying jobs with mundane and low-paying occupations. Further, workers in Vancouver were far more optimistic about their children's future in Canada than American workers, especially with respect to the ability to send them to university. Again, an interesting question is whether this same optimism is shared among hotel workers across Canada.<sup>8</sup>

Zuberi's concluding chapters provide an impressive wish list for social policy reforms necessary for the working poor on both sides of the border. The list is comprehensive, ranging from EI reform to public healthcare in the US to subsidized daycare in Canada. While his program is complete, he only alludes to a political project to force these changes, largely based on contemporary social movement theory, mainly grass-roots community coalition building. Overall,

6. In 2007, a task force organized by UNITE-HERE Local 75 in Toronto released a report calling for state support for a High-Road Partnership for the hotel sector.

7. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in Toronto March 2003 resulted in a World Health Organization Travel Advisory which curtailed tourism in the city. The result was that seasonal workers at the end of their EI benefit were not called back to work and the EI program failed to change the qualifications. Steven Tufts, "SARS and New Normals: Health and Hospitality Workers Fight Back," *Our Times* (August / September 2003).

8. In fact, Paul Watt, a UK researcher studying hotel workers in Toronto, commented during a question and answer period at a recent (October 2007) conference on hotel workers at which Zuberi was in attendance that he felt Toronto hotel workers were less optimistic than the workers depicted in Vancouver.



the book is a much anticipated achievement that moves discussions of social policy beyond polemical critique to a concrete examination of what the state can do (and cannot do) for the working poor.

In an approach that more closely deals with issues raised by the Adlers than Zuberi, Rachel Sherman has produced what is arguably the most ambitious treatment of hotel workers. A rigorous participant observation which places the author directly at the 'front-of-the-house' is the empirical base of *Class Acts*, the most theoretically dense of the three works and perhaps the most fun to read. Through stints working in various 'interactive' positions in two hotels (one chain, one independent) as well as with interviews with workers, managers, and guests, Sherman provides a lively narrative that puts you inside the hotel while maintaining a scholarly tone. She seeks to uncover the process by which workers in luxury hotels consent daily to 'serving' the wide range of demands put on them by guests ranging from the practical (carrying luggage) to the emotional (listening to their complaints and problems). Specifically, the author argues that consent is 'manufactured' in hotels by providing front-of-the-house workers with measured autonomy in their dealings with guests and normalizing the behaviours and social distance among workers and guests alike. Inspired by the work of Michael Burawoy, the author applies and reformulates theoretical lessons learned by observing 'shop floor cultures' of the factory to the sometimes bizarre 'service theatre' of luxury hotels.<sup>9</sup> Although the work is more theoretically dense, once again the review of literature is condensed and much is 'hidden' in extensive endnotes.

Sherman's understanding of the labour process in hotels is unparalleled by anything I have read. Anyone who has worked in the hospitality sector will relate to the routinization of requirements to anticipate guests' demands (e.g. run errands for VIPs) and to provide services in ways that give individual recognition to guests' demands. Her attention to detail and ability to capture the 'little things' that hotel workers perform as they provide special service to elite hotel guests, such as turndown service in rooms at night, makes for a thorough and entertaining examination. Sherman also understands the macroeconomic environment of the hotel sector and the diverse practices of hotel capitalism as she categorizes her two hotels' management of autonomy differently. In one hotel, a large chain, service and the labour process are tightly controlled through surveillance and standardized practices in a process referred to as 'hierarchical professionalism' while the other hotel, an independent operation, manages workers through a model of 'flexible informality' which lends more autonomy to workers with greater cross-training and limited subcontracting. The two different experiences are compared by Sherman throughout the book. In contrast to the Adlers's typology of hotel workers based on identities, Sherman's categorization is based on the degree of interaction with guests. Workers are either 'invisible' at the 'back-of-the-house' with no guest interac-

9. Specifically, Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent* (Chicago 1979).



tion; semi-visible with limited guest interaction in a tightly controlled setting (e.g. reservations); or 'front-of-the-house' workers with a high degree of interaction. It is the latter category which is the focus of Sherman's study.

In three distinct chapters Sherman examines the process of consent and normalization in hotels by decoding the workers' maintenance of personal autonomy, equality, and superiority. The 'autonomous self' is largely maintained through a series of games that workers play with each other, management, and guests. The demands of the guests are the 'raw material' that front-of-the-house workers use to exert control over their work. These diverse games range from how best to control the speed of processing requests in order to manage unpredictable flows of guest activity to risk games associated with overbooking the hotel to ensure a 100% occupancy rate.<sup>10</sup> Meeting the unpredictable needs of guests in innovative ways as well as competition and collaboration with workers for gratuities (or 'making-out') are all ways in which workers 'resist' direct managerial control over work. As traditional shop floor resistance is hindered by the production-consumption nature of hotel services, such games are necessary to both normalize the labour process and ensure that workers consent to maintaining levels of service.

Similarly, normalization and consent occur as workers 'recast hierarchies' through creating senses of superiority over other workers-- men over women, new over experienced, workers with cultural capital versus those who lack it, gratuity earners over non-gratuity earners, racialized groups over non-racialized groups. Through insightful analysis Sherman also details how workers maintain a sense of superiority over those they serve in the hotels by playing up guests' 'tacky' uses of wealth, misplaced senses of entitlement, and other transgressions, such as the case of a guest who urinated in a waste basket. (166) Management plays a role in supporting this important 'superior self' by reinforcing the 'prestige by association' gained through work at a luxury hotel or the 'authentic empathy' workers should have for their rich patrons. Superiority is crucial to the labour process as it disciplines the entitlements of guests and creates alternative hierarchies that never challenge the material social inequalities among guests and workers.

A further chapter examines the importance of the 'equal self.' It is here that the author brings the hotel guests into her analysis as they also play a role in the 'service theatre.' Sherman theorizes that guests and workers are involved in a complex exchange of 'recognition' (i.e. to see workers as people) and for authenticity (i.e. non-commodified, individualized affection for guests). The influence of Arlie Hochschild becomes most evident here as a great deal of emotional labour is required in this process.<sup>11</sup> What Sherman notes is that

10. Hotel reservationists will overbook a hotel knowing that a certain percentage of cancellations are imminent. The goal is to neither undersell the hotel or oversell and be forced to relocate guests.

11. Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*

guests themselves supply labour through their personal interactions that in turn allow workers to 'customize' guests' experience and establish a personal bond that brings them back to the hotel. If guests fail to participate in the process properly by acting inappropriately, revenge may be taken in the forms of deference and disdain. However, proper participation can be rewarded with special treatment endorsed by managerial practice, such as complimentary gifts and room upgrades. In a further substantive chapter, Sherman continues to explore the role the luxury hotel experience plays in reproducing relative class positions. Her analysis complicates traditional notions of such services as mere positional goods, and provides an in-depth account of how guests 'legitimate' their consumption experiences through a variety of strategies ranging from displacement (I'm only here because I have to be) to reciprocity (I'm giving people a job). Nevertheless, the author notes that a sense of entitlement is created quickly as the luxury hotel experience is a place where elites 'learn' to consume and exercise their 'authority in reserve' through the power of complaint if their expectations fail to be met.

*Class Acts* is a powerful, evocative, and I would dare say groundbreaking study. I imagine it will entertain students of 21<sup>st</sup> century labour process for years to come. My only significant criticism of the book stems from perhaps its greatest strength. Sherman has written a richly detailed account of hotel work from a sound and impeccable class perspective, but issues of race and gender evident in her analysis are placed on the theoretical margins. An in-depth theoretical treatment of labour process in hotels that places equal emphasis on class with gender and race is necessary given the demographic composition of hotel labour markets. A second criticism of Sherman is that she sells her empirical findings short. Because she has only studied 'front-of-the-house' workers (although she claims to have had an eye on other 'invisible' work) her only comment on strategies of non-interactive workers to subvert the labour process is that they are played out under a completely different context. While there is undoubtedly a significant difference, Sherman may be prematurely discounting her theoretical achievement; some of her findings likely also apply to other workers in the 'service theatre' who have less interaction with guests, such as room attendants.

Work on the hotel sector has been slow to emerge, but these three books make a substantive contribution and lead us to possible directions for future research. From a theoretical perspective Sherman's contribution is the most impressive. All three books suffer from theoretical discussions muted by the limits of page length and the practice of hiding details and references in end-notes. I blame the authors less for this than the current practices of publishers. I suspect that more dense theoretical discussions can be found in Zuberi and Sherman's dissertations from which their books are drawn.

All the authors also come clean regarding the ethnographic challenges

in studying hotel workers. The Adlers spend significant time 'positioning' themselves and their methods in their book while both Zuberi and Sherman include detailed methodological discussions in appendices. The methodological discussions are paramount to sociological inquiry and are important tools for the reader and future researchers. Many of the experiences and confessions are quite common to work with marginalized workers and participant observation; more work is needed to illuminate the specific pitfalls of working with hotel workers and the impact these methodological challenges have on the overall findings.

Finally, these books all fall short of achieving a realistic program of what is to be done next. Specifically, the findings must be applied to concrete and achievable political projects to fight for greater justice for hotel workers. Zuberi's call to engage in grass-roots politics for social policies friendlier to the working poor is warranted, but remains programmatic. Similarly, the Adlers and Sherman conclude that there are implications for organized labour as unions targeting the sector need to consider the hotel worker identities and labour process. However, much more is needed than a few speculative pages. Sherman rightly identifies UNITE-HERE's 2006 round of bargaining in the sector as a starting point, but her work in particular points to the need for a radical reworking of organized labour's strategies given the implications of the complex class processes she uncovers and the challenges to disrupting the labour process in hotels. Nevertheless, political action is the necessary next step if the true value of this work is to be realized for those who serve.