

Book Reviews

Scott B. Martin, João Paulo Cândia Veiga, and Katuscia Moreno Galhera, *Labor Contestation at Walmart Brazil: Limits of Global Diffusion in Latin America*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index, 336 pp.; hardcover \$74.99, ebook \$59.99.

As the global reach of multinational enterprises continues to expand under neoliberal, finance-led capitalism, their influence over the governance of national and transnational-level trade regimes, regulatory bodies, and labor relations systems has also substantially increased. The actions of US-based multinational retailer Walmart have been seen by scholars and civil society activists as an example of some of the inherent moral and social dangers linked to the seemingly unbridled power of transnational corporations.

This is evidenced by Walmart's unscrupulous dealings with local regulatory agencies in countries such as Mexico and India; the hazardous working conditions endured by many of its own direct employees, as well as workers in its supply chains; and its consistently antithetical position with respect to workers' freedom of association. However, using the example of Walmart's Brazilian operations during the period 1995–2018, Scott Martin, João Paulo Cândia Veiga, and Katuscia Moreno Galhera show that this control can be effectively conditioned by the strategies of actors within local labor relations institutions, especially in moments of economic and political flux. As they convincingly demonstrate, even the world's largest retailer is not always able to shape institutionalized labor and employment policies entirely to its liking, despite the striking power imbalances between the players involved.

The authors argue that Walmart's unwillingness to adapt its "made in Bentonville, Arkansas" labor relations regime, based on "repressive familiarism" and antiunionism, to distinct local realities, coupled with the agency of unions, regulatory bodies, and labor courts to actively enforce legal norms, led to high levels of labor contestation in Brazil. This, in turn, negatively affected both the company's public image and its profitability, inevitably leading to the corporation's exit from South America's largest domestic market.

The authors underpin their arguments with gradual institutional change theory, which explains how ongoing processes of contestation and reinterpretation of formal legal as well as informal norms play a part in shaping the contours of existing institutions. In particular, from the redemocratization period in the 1980s through the political interregnum following the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff

in 2016, the Brazilian state-led model of labor relations was gradually and haltingly transformed, in part to allow for more autonomous action by both unions and employers. This new normative framework was selectively interpreted and utilized by labor market actors in accordance with the political and economic opportunity structure at defined moments, thus creating “institutional layering,” in which old rules are papered over but not entirely replaced by new norms.

While the book principally focuses on Walmart’s 23-year trajectory in Brazil, it also compares the company’s labor relations dynamics in Brazil to those at its operations in Chile, Argentina, and Mexico in order to better understand the contingent institutional configurations that allow for greater or lesser acceptance of Walmart’s exploitative, largely unilateral style of employment relations in these distinct contexts. The rich empirical evidence provided by the authors allows for a robust comparative analysis to answer the question, Why did Walmart dramatically fail in Brazil while it succeeded in implanting its homegrown, repressive workplace regime and becoming an uncontested market leader in Mexico? The answer to this question can be seen as a cautionary tale for human resources scholars and practitioners, but can also be interpreted by labor studies researchers and union activists as a story of successful institutional mobilization in favor of labor rights compliance. That makes this book an important resource for a variety of audiences across academic disciplines and labor-management divides.

The opening chapters outline the uniqueness of the “Walmart way”— a highly personalistic system of worker domination that attempts to create a pseudofamilial relationship between managers and employees while severely punishing deviations from company norms and rejecting any day-to-day influence of so-called outside actors, namely trade unions. Even though unions legally represent workers and conduct collective bargaining with a not insignificant number of Walmart global subsidiaries, including Brazil, the authors argue that this is a result of already existing institutional arrangements that the company is legally obliged to respect. In contrast with the theories of Carré and Tilly, the authors argue that the company’s true antiunion pattern of practice becomes evident when examining the day-to-day efforts by Walmart managers on the local level to undermine the associational power of unions on the shop floor. This contributes to making jobs at Walmart stores in Latin America worse than at other retail competitors, even though this may be hard to determine through looking only at information on wages and benefits.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the trajectory of Walmart in Brazil from its initial foray in the late 1990s, in the search for new markets and greater profitability in the Global South, through a period of heightened contestation and conflictual cooperation in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Drawing on dense empirical evidence collected over two decades, the authors show how the multinational enterprise took advantage of Brazil’s highly pulverized structure of union representation to implant its model of deinstitutionalized, repressive labor relations (imported almost without adaptations from the Bentonville global headquarters) in its local superstores. However, this process of imbedding a labor relations culture very

different from the Brazilian status quo was not linear or conflict-free. It met resistance from diverse actors, including unions, labor inspectors, and special prosecutors linked to the labor courts (*Ministerio Público do Trabalho*).

Labor contestation against Walmart's unique "repressive familiarism" heightened as the reach of labor courts was significantly extended under the prolabor *Partido dos Trabalhadores* governments from 2003 to 2016 and as more unions became emboldened to claim worker's rights through more forceful actions, in a conjecture marked by tight labor markets and real wage growth. Despite growing public consternation with Walmart's labor practices in Brazil during the first decade-and-a-half of the twenty-first century, the company refuses to change course and tries to mask this underlying discontent with strong growth in revenues and expanding national presence.

Chapter 5 deviates from this narrative to compare and contrast the labor relations regimes at Walmart in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico with those in Brazil. Once again employing gradual institutional change theory, the authors argue that the process of implanting the "Walmart way" of labor relations was highly contested in Chile (not unlike Brazil), moderately contested in Argentina, and practically uncontested in Mexico. These significant differences across cases can be attributed to institutionally nested agency (or the lack thereof), with labor courts and regulatory institutions instigated¹ by union actors playing a powerful role in Chile and a much less active one in Argentina. In the case of Mexico, the strong presence of "paper unions" in collusion with employers in the retail sector has prevented the emergence of active, democratic labor organizations. Likewise, the action of local labor boards (*Juntas Locales de Conciliación y Arbitraje*) has been known to be extremely permeable to the influence of employers, leaving Mexican workers unsatisfied with working conditions at Walmart but with few institutional spaces in which they can seek effective remedies.

The final two chapters of the book reflect on the motives behind Walmart's exit from the Brazilian market and on lessons learned regarding the successes and failures of processes of global diffusion of home-office labor practices by multinational enterprises. As an employer-friendly labor law reform was enacted in 2017 by the interim Temer administration, Brazilian unions used their residual bargaining power to condition the company's full implementation of the reform. At the same time, unions, regulators, and labor prosecutors continued to contest Walmart's labor policies in the courts, leading to significant fines and a tarnished public image. Eventually these factors, as well as a contracting consumer market, led the company to cut its losses in 2018 and abandon Brazil altogether. As the authors show in the final chapter, this was not an unprecedented move by Walmart, which was also forced out of German and South Korean markets in the early 2000s, due to resistance from unions, regulators, and consumers. As the authors conclude, "the rise, expansion, decline, and exit of Walmart from Brazil is a cautionary tale about the excesses and even hubris in the practice and execution of global expansion by a company that has trouble overcoming its parochialism even as its ambitions for growth know no territorial boundaries" (283).

As other multinational enterprises known for their *sui generis* yet consistently antiunion labor relations regimes, such as Uber and Amazon, expand their presence in Latin American markets, this masterfully told story of overreach and insensitivity to local norms and practices by Walmart in Brazil gains new relevance. The tale of successful resistance by subaltern actors presented in this book should also serve as an important reference for the new cohort of Latin American union practitioners and labor studies scholars who are involved in transnationalized struggles in favor of decent, dignified work.

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NOTE

1. Instigated? lobbied? provoked? (The institutions already existed)

Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia, *Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective*. Translated by George Ciccariello-Maher. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021. Notes, bibliography, index, 208 pp.; hardcover \$64.95, paperback \$22.95, ebook \$18.

Seven Essays on Populism expressly takes the title of one of the founding texts of Latin American politics: *Siete ensayos sobre la realidad peruana* by José Carlos Mariátegui. Following the example of the Peruvian essayist, the aim of this book is to show, behind populism, the singularity of Latin America's historical, cultural, and political trajectory (54–55). From there, it tries to show its “situated universalism” (xxiii). However, the main difference with Mariátegui's perspective is the scientific purpose of such an analysis. Unlike the Peruvian sociologist, Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia reject any objectivity: their aim is not to produce a scientific analysis of populism, informed by sociology or history, but to develop a militant strategy based on the phenomenon (xxii).

Each of the essays focuses on a problem related to populism. The first one provides a theoretical framework for rethinking populism: the authors reject its definition as a “political moment” (4) or a “conjunctural political strategy” (20) in order to develop an ontological understanding. Following Laclau and Mouffe, they define populism as an ontological construction of politics: a certain logic of structuring political identities. The second essay follows this idea to criticize the

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