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**Review of *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*. Rina Agarwala. Reviewed by Jennifer R. Zelnick.**

Jennifer R. Zelnick  
*Touro College*

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middle class has just begun; we have much to learn yet about this category of the Mexican American population.

*Celestino Fernández, Dept. of Sociology, University of Arizona*

Rina Agarwala, *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*. Cambridge University Press (2013). \$29.95 (paperback).

*In Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*, Rina Agarwala challenges assumptions about the ability of informal workers to organize and pessimism about the prospects for workers' organizing under neoliberalism and global capitalism that are characterized by precarious employment and shrinking prospects for the welfare state. This is an exciting book that describes successes of informal worker demands in India where workers have used strategies that target the state rather than the employer in the context of economic liberalization—the term used by Agarwala to capture privatization and the shift to forms of production that rely on flexible informal employment—and where seek to “dignify” the workforce through citizenship demands.

Her study of organized informal workers in the bidi (hand-rolled cigarettes) and construction industries begins by considering several phenomena; that informal workers *are* organized in India—at levels on par with workers in the formal sector (union density rates are roughly equal among formal and informal workers in the 4 states represented in this study), and that these organizations have won significant demands for social welfare benefits from the state. However, organizations of informal workers have not been uniformly successful, and the central question Agarwala examines is what conditions at the state level have been conducive to the success of these organizations.

This well researched and tightly argued book is based on 200 interviews with government officials, employers, and labor leaders of formal and informal workers organizations, and 140 interviews with members of informal workers organizations in 4 Indian States (Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Kerala). Agarwala employs several devices that make

her complex argument easy to follow. In her opening chapter, Agarwala presents her questions as "puzzles" that encompass interlocking factors that frame labor, state-labor, and state conditions, and then uses her research material to return to these questions, specifically in the concluding chapter, to comment on class formation among informal workers, state labor relations under liberalization and globalization, and the political context that supports effective organizing. She also presents an empirically derived 2 X 2 table to illustrate a fourfold ideal typology that represents characteristics that vary among states and are associated with successful campaigns by informal workers. The two variables Agarwala considers are the presence of competitive popular elections involving pro-poor political candidates, in which informal workers can provide access to blocks of votes, and states undergoing liberalization strategies that rely on a compliant informal workforce that can be aided by cooperative informal workers organizations. Agarwala uses her typology to evaluate social movement successes and failures among the states. Tamil Nadu—liberalizing with pro-poor political leadership in competitive elections—and Kerala—not liberalizing, but with pro-poor political leadership—have had highly successful campaigns. Somewhat successful informal worker organizing efforts have taken place in Maharashtra—lacking pro-poor leadership but engaged at liberalization on the state level. The least successful campaigns have taken place in West Bengal—interestingly lacking pro-poor competitive leadership, despite a long history of Communist leadership and not liberalizing.

One small weakness of the book is its scant attention to workplace conditions. Though work-related health and safety are mentioned sporadically throughout the book, more deliberate framing of critical health and safety threats for informal workers (toxic exposures in the home that also impact children and family members, environmental waste, building collapses and fires, workplace stress under lean production demands) could highlight the limits of the contradictory state politics that both protect worker welfare and employment forms that rely on deregulation.

Agarwala is careful to point out that the successes she describes are not a normative argument that "the new form of unionism is better than the conventional form," since its

“spotty implementation and non-universalist reach undermine the structural changes necessary to eradicate social injustices” and “welfare demands are not a perfect substitute for worker demands” (p. 196). However, as she qualifies:

...at the moment, however, India’s informal workers are attaining more success by mobilizing members and attaining state attention based on their welfare demands. We must remember that conventional approaches, although more ambitious, had failed to protect the vast majority of informal workers. To this extent, new informal workers movements warrant our attention. (p.196)

Nonetheless, the gains Agarwala describes are an antidote to common “mourning” about neoliberalism. In particular, the struggle of informal women workers to meet reproductive (health, retirement, education) needs suggests that bringing work into the home can politicize the needs of the home; and the success of the labor-welfare strategy that Agarwala describes results in expanding the welfare state during a period of contraction in Western developed countries that has been characterized by demands for austerity and continued stigma of benefits and beneficiaries will stand out to many *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* readers. For those interested in the possibilities for social unionism, development centered on empowered poor women, and organizing for a responsive welfare state, this book is a must read.

Jennifer R. Zelnick

Touro College Graduate School of Social Work

Kathryn Edin and Timothy J. Nelson, *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City*. University of California Press (2013). \$29.95 (hardcover).

Ever since Eliot Liebow’s ethnographic classic *Tally’s Corner* (1967), researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have—from time to time—tried to understand the experience of low-income men living in the inner-city. Much of the public opinion surrounding these men—especially as they take on the father