Ethnographies of Power


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It was May 2019, just after a high-stakes national election in South Africa, in which the power and popularity of the African National Congress (ANC) had been tested following nearly a year of public hearings on corruption related to Jacob Zuma’s presidency. A smaller media moment in the year’s elections was the rather embarrassing non-story of the newly launched Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) by its founding trade union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), which split from the historically powerful Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) over ANC Alliance politics. This new party of the nominal left did not win a single seat in parliament and got many fewer votes than its NUMSA membership figures would have predicted. Not only did the ANC’s hold on hegemony appear to endure with South Africa’s new president Cyril Ramaphosa seated, but the seemingly erstwhile trade union movement had little effect on this historical moment. This is a conjuncture on which it is worth pausing, if only for what it distracts us from.

Much of labour sociology in South Africa would argue that the changing class composition of the workforce, the increasing precariousness of work, as well as a reliance on non-wage income for household livelihoods, combined with organisational and political disabilities (and we might include abilities) of the trade unions over the past 30 years, explain the starkness of the decline in organised labour’s power.
Such assessments are commonplace. I cannot say that I know a single person working with the labour movement, except for the most disciplined of COSATU cadre, who would say that the labour movement is not in crisis. However, South African sociology would benefit from rereading Gillian Hart’s long-time efforts to instantiate gendered labour within multiple sets of relations in time and space (for example, Hart 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1997). I contend that this longer trajectory offers a demonstration of her moves toward a conjunctural analysis of capitalism. Hart (2018b, 388) uses ‘conjunctural’, quoting Antonio Gramsci, to refer to ‘the relations of force at various levels’, which articulate specifically and thus offer an ‘analytical tool’ through their very unpacking. Here, ‘articulation’ combines the double meaning of the word – ‘linking together’ and ‘giving expression to’, which emphasises the material relations and forces (Hart 2007, 91; Hart 2002; and see Hall 1980). For Hart, such analysis, then, is also always spatially situated; it demands attention to the connections between places and the production of their distinctiveness, emphasising their co-constitution, which opens politics and possibilities (Hart 2018b, 373). Such efforts can help to track meaningful and everyday relations not limited to institutional or electoral politics.

Tracing Hart’s work on gendered labour, specifically, from her fieldwork in the 1980s to her later work on South Africa, I play with three conjunctural moments of her expanding work. If ‘thinking conjuncturally’, as John Clarke says of Stuart Hall’s work, involves an ‘orientation to the particularity of the conjuncture’, understanding the moment through ‘the forces, tendencies, forms of power, relations of domination and subordination that were condensed’ therein (Clarke 2014, 115), then situating Hart’s conceptual development helps to track both her deepening practice and how her work has intertwined with my own engagement.

The first conjuncture is epistemological. As Hart argues in ‘Relational Comparison Revisited’, methods are theory and vice versa (Hart 2018b). Her work on divisions of labour of rural producers in
the 1980s and early 1990s posed questions about how relations and meanings are articulated historically. Thus, while broader debates in the anthropology of work at the time examined multiple forms of resistance of newly proletarianised women workers, Hart documented both what enabled rural women to contest dramatically changing relations within the introduction of capitalist markets as well as where they faced limits and contradictions of their politics. Grounding her work (in particular, her work as an economist) in ethnography enabled her to demonstrate how to do an analysis of the important articulations (the identification of which was part of the process). Her early work, at least as I experienced it from the perspective of the anthropology of work, taught me that in fact, one has to enter that complexity and explain the concrete relations and meanings that track outward and back again, from households to world markets, from national political machinations to labour teams.

The second conjuncture is scalar. Relatedly, Hart’s work in the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated how multiple interconnected conditions and relations explained not ‘local responses’ to global phenomena, but the very nature and dynamic of multiply connected relations across scales themselves, which she made more explicit in her work in the 1990s and early 2000s. The significance of these multiple connections came, particularly to me, through how she traced shifts in such configurations in *Disabling Globalization* (Hart 2002). Gendered labour was one of these dimensions, but here she expanded her view of labour market changes within a much more complex set of forces. It influenced my PhD research, beginning in about 1997, in which I wanted to understand workers’ changing politics, not through a national institutional story of trade union power, but rather by placing workers (specifically women retail workers) within a generational history of local labour market changes on the East Rand (Ekurhuleni). Her argument in this book against an ‘impact model’ of political economy (Hart 2002) condensed what I had been attempting to defend through my in-depth ethnographic local labour market study.
Finally, I identify a third conjuncture important to my thinking in Hart’s ongoing and more explicit development of ‘relational comparison’ (2018b; see also chapter 3 in this volume), which has deepened her non-teleological and dialectical method. This approach helped me to frame a historical comparative project on women’s service labour in racially segregated cities and the temporality of these phenomena across space – in Johannesburg and Baltimore, Maryland, in the United States. Hart offers tools to understand the political logics of class, race and gender relations attuned to multidimensional political economies and thus brings much to South African sociology. Currently, the study of the discipline seems more and more compartmentalised, more inclined to isolate its sites of study from understanding how social relations and forces are reproduced and transformed beyond the immediate bargain in question.

**Tracing gendered labour: Epistemologies, scales and relations**

I read Hart’s work in the 1980s and early 1990s as part of a milieu of what was then called the anthropology of work. Feminist ethnographers (and the occasional economist) examined structural changes to capitalist relations and critiqued approaches to resistance against the backdrop of global Southern (then ‘Third World’) women workers entering production in the so-called new international division of labour (Elson and Pearson 1981; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1985; Lamphere 1987; Leacock and Safa 1986; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987; Stoler 1985; Ward 1990; Zavella 1987). This moment integrated critiques of a narrow focus on the workplace as a site of class politics with those of the household as a bounded and altruistic labour sharing unit. These thinkers insisted on examining the relationship of reproductive, unpaid labour with women’s waged work and in wider histories (see, for instance, Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Collins and Gimenez 1990; Fox 1980; Murray 1987; Smith and Wallerstein 1992).
Authors writing about gendered forms of labour and resistance problematised voluntarist or celebratory stories of resistance. They located women's labour within structures of power and explained specifically the forms that resistance took, within local and historical colonial systems of meaning, and the effects that these had (Ong 1987; Stoler 1985). Because many of the studies engaged with newly proletarianised 'peasants', debates raised questions of changes to the organisation of agricultural production and intersected with larger discussions on the character of the development of capitalism (see Arizpe and Aranda 1988; Stolcke 1984). Hart's work cross-cut these debates, engaging with the nature of resistance (or what she more simply called politics), labour use and relations, and the agrarian question (or rural transformation) within theorisations of capitalism (Hart 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 1989, 1997).

Hart's early work was of its time in taking up these questions and yet it was particularly clear for explicating a fine-tuned sensitivity to the conjunctural importance of a host of historical relations explaining a range of 'market dynamics'. For instance, in her journal article 'Exclusionary Labour Arrangements: Interpreting Evidence on Employment Trends in Rural Java' (1986a), Hart examines changes in agricultural and non-agricultural labour arrangements in rural Java in the late 1960s and 1970s. Her concern is to explain rural labour demand and supply dynamics at a moment when relations were indeed changing through wider political and economic forces, including stratified access to land, labour control mechanisms, relative household indebtedness, national political power and macro-economic policy, and gender and age differences of workers. By doing so, Hart argues, on the one hand, for the importance of local-level studies to offer explanations, which often belie interpretations of national survey and census data. On the other hand, she shows how local labour-control practices alone cannot explain changes in labour market dynamics. Rather, understanding the connections between the 'local logics' and the wider national political economic contexts is critical to differentiating labour use systems and
how those systems change over time (Hart 1986a, 681). In this early piece of work, there is already an analysis of the connection of local and wider relations that explain labour patterns in place.

Towards this effort Hart offered country comparisons as a mechanism to identify specific historical and situated dynamics of labour control (Hart 1986b), state patronage (Hart 1989) and post-colonial state power and its relation to rural elites (Hart 1988) to explain enduring and changing rural labour systems (of sharecropping specifically) and agricultural production in general. While this early work examined the specifics of different countries in comparison with one another, Hart emphasised in each context the complexity of inter-scalar dynamics through which rural labour systems were reproduced and changed. Changing labour markets could not be explained by market efficiency, nor could tied labour (a range of forms of bonded labour) be seen as a remainder of pre-capitalist arrangements. These were dynamic terrains, which required attentiveness to the embedded divisions tracking the logics of control, relative stability, reproduction and critique under changing national political economic contexts, which required in-depth, local-level study attentive to comparative difference.

I was a student of anthropology and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 1989 to 1993. Hart’s demonstration of this type of analysis was energising. As we debated the importance of contemporary changes to capitalist relations (that would later be called neo-liberalism), it was to these debates about the nature of capitalist change in post-colonial places that I was most drawn. If we were to explain, as I was interested in doing, the significance of the wage labour relationship and labour politics in a place like South Africa, not only did we have to understand the history of labour as embedded relationship of power, but we also had to see forms of taken-for-granted agency as specifically constituted in place and time, meaningfully as well as materially.

Indeed, as part of her critique of multi-scalar power relations explicating labour systems, in ‘Engendering Everyday Resistance’, an article published in the Journal of Peasant Studies, Hart (1991, 95)
offered a complex rendering of politics. Rather than assuming resistance, she showed how specific people engaged in politics in specific (and changing) ways. A major contribution to my thinking from her work in this period was how these processes are always contradictory. We do not find pure subjects, nor do we arrive at predicted actions and outcomes.

Hart made important epistemological and methodological interventions. She raised questions that challenged neoclassical and neo-institutional economists and conclusions based on generalised (and predicable) ‘household behaviour’ (Hart 1992, 1997). She interrogated notions of uniform subaltern ‘agency’, such as in James Scott’s (1985) Weapons of the Weak (see Hart 1991, 1997). Instead, the questions she asked pushed analysis to why differences existed among subalterns, in her case by ethnicity, class and gender. She asked what could explain why working-class women workers in rural Malaysia acted collectively as workers but the men did not. She did not toggle from class politics to peasant informal resistance, but showed how multiple responses occurred within the same locale among rural labourers, which demanded a more complex explanation of actions (indeed, of capitalist relations). She demonstrated how politics was co-constituted through national party politics, local patronage networks, religious and ethnic factions, regional and local elite networks of power, and intra-household gender relations and divisions of labour (Hart 1991).

Poor women workers’ situated critique of employers and of husbands showed the intertwining of gender and class consciousness as well as the spaces of workplace, household and community (Hart 1991). Drawing on the work of Joan Wallach Scott (1988), Hart emphasised how gender was both imbricated with other social relations and meaningful – that is, the semiotics of gendered meanings served to give force and content to political struggles (Hart 1991, 95). Hart offered a gendered critique of James Scott (Hart 1997, 22), thereby re-examining the Malaysian context from her own research for how gender worked to explain ‘everyday resistance’ among rural producers (Hart 1991).
Furthermore, intra-household relations explained differences in labour deployment but also gendered meanings of collective identification (Hart 1992, 1997). The household was not an altruistic unit that could be assumed to be acting together, as economists argued, but another space of power and politics. Neither the market nor the household were ‘natural’ institutions predicting behaviour as neoclassical and neo-institutional models suggested (Hart 1992, 1997). Hart argued that intra-household contests and hierarchies of power explained differences in labour use and, in turn, of women’s collective organisation. In ‘From “Rotten Wives” to “Good Mothers”’ she wrote: “Taking gender seriously is not simply a matter of adding women, recognising their contribution, or being more generous towards them. Rather, it forces attention to the exercise of power within and beyond the household. It also disrupts claims of prediction’ (Hart 1997, 14).

In short, gender relations and representations were ‘an integral part of the politics of production and class processes’ (Hart 1991, 115). As a result, then, gender ‘can only be comprehended in terms of how larger configurations of political-economic forces – in turn the product of the history of race-class struggle – have defined the terrain of conflict at the local level’ (110). For Hart, gender was not a vector to be intersected by other variables, but was always co-constitutive within this complex set of relations in time and space (see Hart 2002, 36–37). The stand she took to interrogate predictive modelling entailed a clear stake – for through such a focus, possibilities became open futures, not closed ones where prior abstractions were then demonstrated to confirm predictions.

Her analysis of intra-household tension and contestation produced a different analysis of rural villagers. Tracing gendered differences not only highlighted distinctive dynamics, but could also then offer a very different understanding of agency that did not locate it in a subject position defined a priori (‘peasant’), but explained people’s actions from their specific multiple and contradictory relations. Hart argued against a fixed identity from which people act and for an epistemology
that opens to how identities and interests are ‘forged through political struggle (in its extended sense)’ (Hart 1997, 20).

By the 1990s, Hart had come to be influenced by Doreen Massey (see Hart 2018a), who helped her to argue more forcefully for the relevance of space and place (Hart 1997). It was Massey’s ‘extroverted sense of place’ (1994, 155) to which she was drawn, in which place is ‘not a bounded unit but nodal points of interconnection in socially produced space’ (Hart 2018a, 80).

Hart had already noted this problem of scale clearly in relation to understanding changes to labour markets in her earlier work. In her article ‘Agrarian Structure and the State in Java and Bangladesh’ she wrote: ‘Contemporary theories typically abstract from larger structures of political and economic power’ (Hart 1988, 249) and she contended that ‘the analytical tools for linking local-level agrarian processes with the wider political-economic system are poorly developed’ (249–250). Her work, especially involving country comparison, sought to show differences in how state power, national accumulation, elite patronage networks, local labour use, histories of production systems, and gendered and class divisions of labour affected ‘power at different levels of society’ (250). This work showed definitively the need to ‘look beyond the labor market in order to explain the different patterns of agrarian relations’ (256) and the relevance of ‘a historically specific analysis of the exercise of power at different levels’ to rural relations (Hart 1989, 31). With Massey, Hart was able to move beyond country comparison to think about interconnections between spaces and how places themselves were constituted through these processes. As she says in her chapter in the edited collection Doreen Massey: Critical Dialogues, this is when she became a geographer (Hart 2018a).

Hart’s Disabling Globalization (2002) was a culmination of this evolving perspective. In this multi-sited ethnography, she showed the centrality of local government in Ladysmith and Newcastle to defining post-apartheid national terrain (and specifically so in the post-apartheid period) and thus the differential lineaments constituting local places,
as well as the significance of this for processes of national hegemony. In this story, gendered labour remains an important strand of relationship. The labour market, defined through low-wage, Taiwanese-owned textile factories in the 1990s in KwaZulu-Natal, was constituted through prior investment and state development agendas as well as through trade union organisation, itself gendered. In Hart’s book, we see how Taiwanese employers’ racist and sexist relationships to South African black women workers located power relations in the new factories, but also how they emerged out of longer historically determined social relations in Taiwan, imbricating masculinity, generation and class processes of reproduction there. Gendered and familial forms of factory discipline did not work in the same way in South Africa. Hart connected the deeper story of the precariousness of South African workers, in turn, to the forms of dispossession of the South African working class from the land with its gendered presumptions of wage work and reproductive wage-subsidising labour. She contrasts these articulations with Taiwanese industrialists’ investments in Taiwan and China, who benefited from land redistribution, which subsidised labour reproduction, and from differently gendered divisions of labour, labour use practices and relations of obligation (see Hart 2006; Hart and Sitas 2004).

Hart’s earlier focus on gendered labour becomes repositioned within this multi-scaled political and economic history in ways that de-emphasise labour as a site of political collective mobilisation. This also, it must be said, converges with a time when labour politics had become displaced by social movements in South Africa, including those demanding access to land. By linking women workers’ interconnected lives within these other sets of relations, Hart also signalled that she was moving towards other questions – around hegemony and its reproduction and transformation.

The analysis she offered in *Disabling Globalization* spoke back to South African labour sociology at the time, which was refiguring strategic union interventions by reimagining, for instance, ‘social movement unionism’, as a way to remobilise trade union politics where South Africa
was held up as an optimistic solution for modelling working-class politics (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout 2008). Hart showed, rather, how the very moment of the South African ‘transition’ was, in fact, multiply and contradictorily constituted simultaneously (Hart 2002, 2006, 2008). As Hart so carefully documented, local state forms themselves became recrafted through these contradictions in ways that left little room to a labour politics configured to defend wage-earners as workers (Hart 2002).

The interconnections between labour and longer histories of racialised dispossession have been primary in Hart’s work, precisely because of how an attentiveness to the often-forgotten third dimension of capitalist relations – nature/land (the other two being capital and labour) – spatialises and historicises post-colonial practices of exploitation and extraction in place. Thus, processes of ongoing dispossession explain the complexities of politics in South Africa (Hart 2002, 38; 2006; 2008, 694; Hart and Sitas 2004). This work marks a clear move away from labour politics per se, towards struggles and movements around reproduction and dec commodification broadly.

Finally, working on analysing South Africa’s contested hegemony in this period, particularly as anger with President Thabo Mbeki’s class project ushered in Jacob Zuma’s schizoid role as ‘popular’ leader (Hart 2008), Hart’s energies shifted to forms of popular nationalisms. In this, her gendered lens remained, as, for instance, in understanding how Zuma’s initial popularity drew on forms of masculinity to reinscribe state power and authority (Hart 2008, 692) – and indeed continues as one thread in her latest project, which tracks these forms across India, South Africa and the United States (Hart 2020).

With this latest demonstration of ‘relational comparison’, Hart gives clearer expression to her dialectical method, while moving away from grounded examination of gendered labour, in line with the trajectory that I trace above. In ‘Relational Comparison Revisited’ (2018b), Hart defines her method based on a non-teleological, open dialectics. By focusing on both what makes a method relational as well as what makes...
it comparative, Hart usefully elaborates a way of doing post-colonial research and writing. Following Harry Harootunian and Fernando Coronil, Hart begins from the premise that those having experienced colonisation or subjugation ‘live comparatively’ (Hart 2018b, 371, quoting Harootunian) – that is, they are held up within an already existing system defined through hierarchical classifying. She seeks, and indeed has practised in her work on gender throughout her career, a ‘Marxist postcolonial’ conjunctural analysis (372). For Hart, to be conjunctural means ‘bringing key forces at play in South Africa and other regions of the world into the same frame of analysis, as connected yet distinctively different nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies – and as sites in the production of global processes in specific spatio-historical conjunctions, rather than as just recipients of them’ (373). ‘Gender’ or ‘gendered labour’ is one of the many forces and relations that co-constitute these dynamics and places. The moments of Hart’s work that I outline bring together the imbrication of epistemologies, scales and relations as her way of doing feminist analysis. I turn now to the development of my own work, which tracks with these three conjunctures of Hart’s.

**Labour politics and intimate publics**

I began my scholarship analysing changes to the labour markets of contingent wage workers. This focus came out of my experience working for a workers’ advice office in Johannesburg, the Industrial Aid Society, from 1994 to 1997. The IAS was a historic worker advice office founded in the 1970s to support emergent independent trade unions organising black workers, which had continued to offer assistance to precarious workers during this heady time of change in South Africa. In 1997, I moved to the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand. Specifically, my early work for SWOP produced some of the first studies documenting the ongoing and changing forms of casualisation and externalisation of employment in
post-apartheid South Africa (Kenny and Bezuidenhout 1999; Kenny and Webster 1999). While this work was generally written for a South African sociological audience, which debated the character of labour market restructuring during South Africa’s democratic transition, my orientation was to try to understand what these changes meant to workers within their situated histories. Part of this involved research for my PhD, which focused on the regional dynamics of the East Rand (Ekurhuleni), east of Johannesburg. My larger question was about how these changes related to changing worker politics in these years.

My PhD work was influenced by discovering Massey’s *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (1984) in 1992 during my graduate studies. I initially planned a comparative project examining labour market shifts towards service work in the Eastern Cape and in Gauteng, two regions where manufacturing labour was key to constituting strong trade union politics. I wanted to think through changes to women’s labour opportunities in relation to changing national policies, global shifts and local labour market dynamics, to understand how labour politics had changed, and thus how workers’ politics might be understood in more nuanced, specifically located ways. The regional comparison was dropped in the final project, but I incorporated a historical examination of changes to the local labour market on the East Rand, a centre of manufacturing labour in Gauteng since the 1940s, the growth of service work in the 1970s, expansion in the 1990s, and the subsequent shifts to precarious service labour. These generational changes in place (following Massey) helped me to understand changes to worker politics and the production of new meaningful divisions of labour by workers themselves, specifically defined through gendered meanings and relations (Kenny 2004a).

Hart’s work from the 1980s and the 1990s influenced these concerns. I wrote about how casual and contract retail jobs had to be understood within more general shifts in household precariousness and changing gendered relations there, connected to shifting legal terrain and local economies. I linked workers across a range of contracts of employment, including casual, outsourced (‘contract’) and permanent,
to their household situations. I argued that workers across these contracts each dealt with relations and responsibilities within complex household arrangements (Kenny 2001). I engaged with the implications of these shifts within households in the local labour market of the East Rand, where workers’ parents migrated to the area in the 1940s and 1950s to get jobs in new manufacturing industries. The retail workers were the children of this earlier generation of migrants. They went to high school and were politicised by the 1976 school movement, influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement, and from there entered (white-collar) work of clerical and service jobs opening to black men and women at the time. This was the generation that mobilised in a trade union around militant race and class subjectivities defined by these broader historical and situated relations. It was they who were ‘full-time permanent’ workers when I did my fieldwork in the late 1990s, while those who were casual and contract workers had entered the labour market later, when full-time jobs were rarer. By the 1990s, the shifting terrain of labour demand and supply was shot through with changing gendered meaning, affecting ideas of masculinity, care, parenthood and dependency (Kenny 2003). In an article titled ‘Selling Selves’ in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* I detailed how gender, class and racial meanings of work and labour conditions constituted workers’ politics in different periods, how broader shifting political economic terrains helped to explain changing labour markets, and in turn how these relations affected how workers understood their collective identities, with the re-imagining critically shaped through gendered materialities and meanings (Kenny 2004b, 2007).

I also examined the gendered and racialised social constitution of employment law and sectoral legal categories historically from the 1930s onwards. Thus, ‘casual’ labour in the sector had a long history of use, for filling ‘extra time’, and was associated with (white male) student labour initially and then, in the 1980s, with black young people working extra jobs to assist families. ‘Part-time’ contracts emerged as a mechanism to keep white women in employment in the 1950s.
In the late 1980s, when retailers extended trading hours, employers and unions alike agreed to staff later and weekend shifts with ‘casual’ labour (not ‘part-time’) because of its association with dependency and youth, while at the same time trying to stabilise ‘adult’ full-time jobs as retrenchments loomed. These already constituted and meaningful legal categories influenced how sector labour use shifted, explaining the expansion of ‘casual’ labour in the late 1980s, which then became more widespread by the 1990s, and in turn affected regulatory reform in the post-apartheid period, when legislation inscribed new categories of ‘flexible’ labour as essential to the sector (Kenny 2009). In ‘Servicing Modernity’, published in *African Studies*, I considered how historically white women’s labour constituted the labour market and labour process of the jobs into which black women moved in the 1970s (Kenny 2008). Thus, my work detailed the changes to the local labour market of workers I spent time with and interviewed.

These changing relations were located within the specific time and place of greater Johannesburg. This work showed the meaning of service jobs in different periods, the gendered constitution of the work and labour market and legal categories, how changes within the townships, households and workplaces affected residents and workers as South Africa went through its democratic transition and how these in turn affected labour politics of newly segmented groups of workers. In my PhD, I argued that while it appeared from a distance that labour politics had been demobilised by the late 1990s, in fact, workers’ collective politics abided, but now within new (deeply gendered) divisions of labour, which could only be explained by how workers themselves remade the site of work meaningful (Kenny 2004a).

These various situated analyses helped me to move towards my book, *Retail Worker Politics, Race and Consumption in South Africa* (Kenny 2018), in which I rely on Stuart Hall’s concepts of articulation, conjuncture and ‘subjects in struggle’ (1980, 1985, 1986), Hart’s work pushing against an ‘impact model’ of change, as well as her intermediation of Hall through her expanded work on relational comparison (2002, 2018b;
see also Hart 2007). In this book, by examining the long history of retail worker politics in greater Johannesburg, I argue that the enduring appeal of the political subject ‘worker’ (or, really, the collective form, *abasebenzi* – workers in isiZulu) is a question that requires a historical and spatial explanation (Kenny 2018). My project, drawing on Hart’s conjunctural analysis, focuses on ambivalences as well as enduring meanings and subjectivities in order to open up possibilities otherwise foreclosed, as Hart notes so clearly in explicating her method (Hart 2018b). The book was partly aimed at critiquing two quite different orientations toward studying labour in South Africa. On the one hand, there are those that start from the assumption that workers enact labour politics and the question is to evaluate the ‘successes’ of these endeavours. These instrumental or strategic analyses of labour politics in South Africa have left unexplored all sorts of multiply determined, contradictory and historical reasons that explain why and when people act politically and collectively in specific sites. On the other hand, others start from the premise that wage labour is anachronistic (especially in the global South) and therefore labour politics is increasingly less relevant. These can be grouped with others who analyse worker politics through an evaluation of the (a priori) impossibility of labour as a site of emancipatory politics. Broadly, this latter combined group can be seen as the nay-sayers.

Both positions – the yea and the nay – within South African labour sociology have in common a similar political logic. The instrumental approach that seeks to find empirical cases of successful organising to model future strategy takes as its focus an external object, removed from infiltrative relations that may complicate the story. Often such analyses may also begin with an encompassing framing (see Hart 2018b), with the ‘case’ being studied presented as the local manifestation of the transcendent totality (for instance, ‘neo-liberalism’; see Hart 2008). Similarly, analysing the site of work either as anachronistic (because wage labour is less central to households) or (from the different perspective) as anti-black subjugation, takes the deep imbrication of labour and race in South African history out of situated historical relations
and, I suggest, following Hall and Hart, sidesteps a prior question about why people did (and do) struggle there and to what effect (not only for labour relations but, indeed, for social imaginaries). Ironically, both approaches – those that triumph labour politics and those that eschew it – meet the object of study as an abstraction; politics merely demonstrate the abstraction already demurred – the (prior) bargaining power of a situation tautologically explains the workers’ politics; the (abstract prior) evaluation that the source of income predicts the site of politics (the ‘kitchen table’ not the factory floor); or, the (prior) anti-blackness of a set of relations explains an already foreclosed politics (Kenny 2018).

I ask instead why retail workers (with many women workers) continue to enact a labour politics under conditions of deepened precariousness (and, indeed, increasing wagelessness). By examining the historical and spatial specificity of the labour market of the greater Johannesburg area, I argue that the political subject abasebenzi was ruptural – it upended political imaginaries, at a specific time and within a specific set of relations, and contested specific forms of relationship (Kenny 2018). This political subject contested forms of personhood (not merely recognition), which were affectively resonant specifically at the site of work and concretely so in retail spaces, which relied on service labour to project meanings of modernity, nation and polity in ways that shifted with forms of contract, labour law and struggle. My book’s analysis brings together language and meaning with structuring relations of capital, the organisation of retailing, consumption practices and collective politics. Exploring the changing politics of retail workers in greater Johannesburg over much of the twentieth century, then, I show how the contradictory and competing discourses of race, class, gender and nation – and recalling Hart’s (2013) work on the contradictory processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation – took effect to bolster workers’ politics in different ways at different times.

Kobena Mercer writes of Hall’s semiotics: ‘It is precisely the possibility of breaking with oppressive regimes of racial meaning that is at stake in the polysemic agency of difference’ (Mercer 2017, 17). My book
argues for the situated relevance of collective political subjectivity of ‘workers’ for nation, as produced and re-articulated by workers through changing social relations of precariousness, neo-liberalism and democracy. Thus, the ‘labour relation’ itself was reinvested politically by precarious women retail workers in a post-apartheid context, even while the site of wage labour has reproduced deep forms of racialised subjugation (Kenny 2018). I posed this endurance of labour politics as a paradox that required explanation rather than predictive teleology.

More recently, I have been working on a ‘relational comparison’ of racial capitalism from two cities profoundly divided by race and class, Johannesburg and Baltimore, Maryland. The project examines the interrelated yet different histories of the workplace and of the marketplace in these two cities, as spaces of ‘participation’, as terrains of politics. I begin with a historical relational comparative focus on the service work of women in department stores. The shift in racial and gender composition of sales workers from white to black women in both contexts occurred in the same period. In both cases, this involved a similar temporality of women’s life cycles and labour market opportunities, and in both was opposed by a white public (in quite different ways) (Kenny 2020). The project compares and interlinks differences between women’s life cycle and labour market histories, trade union and civil rights movements, law and gender, and race and class relations of consumption in these divided cities. It examines the active processes of contesting (white and black) women’s labour – what it is, where it belongs and what it demands – by a multiplicity of actors, including women workers, trade unions, social movements, the state, husbands and consumers within the semi-public spaces of department stores as evidence for how ‘femininity’, class respectability and racial relations of work extended expectations of political belonging. The project seeks to reconstruct theory on urban and racial formations by centring it around service labour – itself a place of intersection (of race, gender, age, class, of labour and consumption, of law, private property and labour rights).
This project furthermore extends to the character and effects of differences in ‘intimate publics’ materialised in mundane semi-public spaces, such as department stores, lifts, tea rooms, bioscopes, buses and city streets (Kenny 2020). It examines how such places, those semi-‘publics’ (on private property) became means through which the polity was debated. How have struggles around the market and the workplace related to each other or diverged? I problematise the terrain of the market and implicitly compare it to the workplace as space of action and politics (ultimately linking them). Through this conjunctural analysis, in which retail arenas (and other everyday social sites) become the site of comparison, themselves interconnected globally and imaginatively, this work seeks to explain how specific terrains and concrete places became contested as political.

In some ways, then, my current work examines how hegemonies operated on the plane of everyday racial (and class and gender) relations, from and within taken-for-granted sites, which often have not been deemed to be political. Hart deals with multi-varied political sites where state actors intervene, whereas my project seeks explicitly to stir up the ambivalences and gaps in those overburdened discourses of nationalism and belonging in precisely the locations where they were meant to play out seamlessly. In some ways, picking up on Hart’s criticism of the study of labour in South Africa as disconnected from processes of dispossession, I explicitly link my ongoing interest in labour as a meaningful relation with changing regimes of private property – for instance, with department stores and malls (Kenny 2019) – and how private property has been instantiated through concrete relations and struggles in two places where such spatialised relations are obviously racialised (Kenny 2020).

**Conclusion**

In returning to Hart’s pieces, I am reminded of how her analysis of articulated epistemologies, scales and relations is still so relevant today, particularly within South African sociology, enamoured as it is with
institutional politics. My work for the past 20 years has been to try to show the meaning of the ‘labour relation’ as a site of politics. Hart has laid the groundwork to explain where, how and why politics emerge as they do, situated and yet multi-determined, and imbricating contradictions that open onto new questions. A central insight of Hart’s feminism has been her understanding of politics. As she wrote in her article ‘Engendering Everyday Resistance’ in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, grounding her work in that of others before her: ‘Instead of referring simply to electoral politics and/or actions focused specifically on the state, politics has increasingly come to be used in a broader sense to refer to the processes by which struggles over resources and labour are simultaneously struggles over socially-constructed meanings, definitions, and identities’ (Hart 1991, 95).

Michael Ekers, Stefan Kipfer and Alex Loftus (2020, 1590) ask of her recent work: ‘Given that Hart’s work has slowly put more weight on the couplet of race and class, rather than gender, how do we bring cross-cutting considerations of gender, sexuality, and reproduction back into these articulatory analytical frames?’ Hart’s earlier work on gendered labour reminds us of her long-standing method: to analyse the contradictory, situated everyday relations that people live through, to think through multiple, co-constituting scales, to explain connections and dissociations, and to attend to meaning and translation. That it is difficult to do both the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’ – as Ekers, Kipfer and Loftus (2020, 1589) put it – in the same frame is one of the challenges. This is precisely the call that Gillian Hart’s life work has sounded to us.

REFERENCES


