

## *Global Issues*

### *On Uncompromising Pessimism: Response to my Critics*

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Antonio Gramsci is famously associated with the phrase, ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. Pessimism of the intellect refers to the structural determination of social processes, setting limits on the possible. Politics, on the other hand, requires optimism, concerned as it is with collective will formation, dissolving limits and striving for the impossible.

This distinction threads through Gramsci’s prison writings as he reflected on his early voluntarism. Recall that for the young Gramsci the appeal of Marxism lay in its power as political ideology, understood as a ‘concrete phantasy, which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will’. As he wrote in the ‘Revolution against “Capital”’ (1917), the Bolshevik Revolution was one such concrete phantasy that suspended Marxist science and its iron laws of history, in favor of the human capacity to collectively make history, replacing Marxism’s ‘positivist encrustations’ with its idealist essence. Thus, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, or at least Lenin’s rendering of it, Gramsci saw the factory occupations of Turin (1919-1920) as Italy’s counterpart to the Russian Soviets.

This was the early Gramsci, dominated by optimism of the will. The later prison writings reflect back on the failure of the factory occupations, the failure of the socialist revolution in Italy and, more broadly in the West. It was in the fascist prison, protected from Stalinism, that Gramsci elaborated the most original thinking within Western Marxism, the now familiar framework of hegemony in which the growth of civil society, the expansion of the state, and the power of ideology set limits on the possibility of revolutionary struggle. The youthful *Marxism as ideology* now calls forth its complement, the mature *Marxism as science*. Optimism of the will calls for pessimism of the intellect, and vice versa. They are Siamese twins. From prison he undertook the painful task of coming to terms with the misguided politics of ‘frontal assault’ and transformed the very meaning of revolution in the West as ‘war of position’.

Tracing Eddie Webster’s life as a sociologist – his adroit movement among public, professional, critical and policy sociologies – I have shown how attentive he has always been to the distinction between science and politics (Burawoy 2010). The organization he founded in 1983 and then headed for 25 years at the University of Witwatersrand – SWOP (Sociology of Work Program) – has long negotiated the connection between *sociological imagination*, which investigates micro-processes in their wider context, and *political imagination*, which turns personal troubles into public issues. Whether it was the study of the degradation of the craftworker, mine accidents, industrial violence, Eddie Webster was able to maintain the integrity of his sociological research, even as it

became the basis of public engagement. Thus, for example, time and again he would turn the sociological investigation of the institutionalization of conflict into a political weapon against the apartheid repression of trade unions. His participation in the registration debate – to register trade unions with the state or not – was informed by his research into the history of South African trade unions. His analysis of the post-apartheid dispensation and the class compromise it entailed gave rise to critical engagement with both unions and capital. His sociological writings show a rare sense of the limits of the possible just as he would push those boundaries in his political engagement.

In *Grounding Globalization*, however, Eddie Webster and his colleagues Rob Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout, deliver a very different genre of sociology. The first two parts of the book show the way multi-national capital localizes the experience of working class communities in the white goods sectors of South Africa, Australia and South Korea. To be sure the experience is different in each case but there is a radical disconnect between these sociological analyses and the utopias projected in the third part of the book – international working class solidarity and new forms of participatory democracy. If we are going to wade into utopias then they should somehow be connected to the lived experience of those who are to enact them. They should, in other words, be real utopias (Wright 2010).

In his response to my criticisms, Rob Lambert endeavors to demonstrate that international working class solidarity is indeed a real rather than an imaginary utopia. Indeed, his favored SIGTUR (Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights) figures prominently in *Grounding Globalization*. This is an important initiative to bring together unions in different parts of the South, but for the most part it is remote from the workers studied in the book. Lambert does give an example of a failed attempt at internationalism in Orange, attributing the failure to the Swedish metal union's partnership strategy with Electrolux. So, one might conclude that international collaboration, on the rare occasions it occurs, does so on an uneven terrain in which divergent strategies, unequal capacities, and contradictory interests are at play. Northern unions' interests in transnational alliances, are often an extension of protectionist strategies. Moreover, when they enter such international 'collaboration', they have greater resources to impose their will on weaker unions elsewhere. Peter Evans (2010) has done the leg work in gathering the data to advance the best possible case for the globalization of the labor movement, and while he is ingenious in turning global neoliberalism on its head, his examples of internationalism are few and far between, and they often have disastrous outcomes for Southern labor. Moreover, only a minority of Southern workers is even in a position to partner with Northern labor – an embattled, shrinking labor aristocracy whose horizons are narrowing not widening, only too ready to strike deals with capital or state. Perhaps there is a better chance for a labor internationalism that is confined to the South, but any such movement must place China at its center, a Sisyphean task if ever there was one.

In an era when the labor movement is in retreat in most of the world – with a bright patch here and there – holding on to the promise of global labor solidarity requires an uncompromising optimism. Indeed, Donella Caspersz makes a principle of such uncompromising optimism, calling it the 'Pollyanna Principle'. The pessimism of science, she writes, can only hold back 'acts of resistance that can destabilize capitalist's hegemony' (394). If science is at odds with politics, so much the worse for science. Here science loses its autonomy and becomes a tool of politics or science is simply irrelevant. In a similar vein Dan Clawson writes: 'On strictly academic grounds, a good case can be

made for [an uncompromising pessimism], but a historical understanding shows such a pessimistic logic to be at odds with what is *needed to make political breakthroughs*' (400). So it is politics to the for and '...the best theory comes out of an engagement in struggle not out of re-reading academic work ... praxis is ahead of theory' (399). Pessimism of the intellect is subordinated to optimism of the will.

Dan Clawson goes further. Uncompromising pessimism, he suggests, betrays my own cause of public sociology. If public sociology means the uncompromising politicization of sociology, then he is right. But I have always insisted on a division of labor between professional and public sociology. The division of labor implies contradiction as well as interdependence but sociology is of little use if it cannot give some guidance to labor as to the tendencies of capitalism, a theorization that pays attention to history and geography, it is of little use to labor if it fixes the data so that labor appears stronger than it is, or if it ignores the data and declares an imminent upsurge on the grounds that we can never know when the next upsurge will arrive. It is the responsibility of professional and public sociologists alike to combat arguments and claims that have neither concrete nor theoretical foundation. Public sociology cannot be the name for bad sociology, it cannot be vanguardist or populist, but must aim for a dialogue with labor on the basis of what we know as sociologists. Equally, professional sociology cannot be self-referential, we have to defend theoretical frameworks that cast light on the limits and possibilities of the labor movement. And that too is a political struggle, but one conducted on the terrain of the academy, and in accordance with its rules.

As I look back on 40 years of studying labor in Zambia, United States, Hungary and Russia, observing the way momentary hopes were dashed on the rocks of market fundamentalism, I ask whether the experience of the market has not been more profound than the experience in production. As I argued at length in my original review, looking at things globally, the experience of exploitation through wage labor is becoming ever more a privilege rather than a curse. As Polanyi argued, commodification is the more salient experience, potentially bringing together not only wage labor and the great swaths of informal, precarious labor, but also joining them to movements against the commodification of nature, of money, and indeed of knowledge. This leads one to think about labor in different ways. To say that the distinction between exploitation and commodification is a false dichotomy – we don't have to choose, we can have our cake and eat it too – may work for politics but in science it represents a refusal to rethink what we have taken for granted. Following Gramsci, in times of defeat and retreat as intellectuals we should be all the more ready to rethink our assumptions, redirect our studies, and entertain alternative theoretical frameworks.

In writing of politics Max Weber endorsed the pursuit of the impossible in order to achieve the possible, but he always distinguished politics from science. Precisely because they feed each other, we should not confuse science and politics. Science should be a corrective to politics, challenging assumptions, asking uncomfortable questions, projecting longer time horizons. If it is to formulate utopias these must be real utopias, rooted in lived experience, and we have to be extra vigilant in examining their conditions of existence, their internal contradictions, and their possible dissemination. In all cases science loses its *raison d'être* when it loses its autonomy, its critical pessimism. If it takes a bit of combat to jolt widely held preconceptions, then so be it.

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