

Global Issues

Global Crisis: Global Opportunity? Trade Unions, Migration and Social Transformation

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Preface

As we enter uncharted waters in terms of the outcome of the global crisis of capitalism which has only got more serious since 2007 we might well ask if it represents a new global opportunity for labour and the subaltern classes more generally. In particular I seek to address the complex and sometimes conflictual relations between trade unions, migration and the ongoing processes of social transformation. In the first instance I pose the *Challenges* which migration represents for trade unions in the context of globalisation. More broadly I examine the challenges for progressive social theory posed by the current global crisis. I then move on to the *Mutations* of the global system on the basis of Gramsci's dictum that 'the old has died but the new has not yet been born'. This is the necessary framework for the subsequent analysis of *Workers* in the context of the processes of globalisation and precarisation. My hypothesis is that we are now moving beyond the categories of North and South in terms of the mutations of capitalism and their impact on the workers of the world (see Munck 2011). Finally, I turn to the sometimes under-rated *Complexity* of the way workers are responding to the mutations of capitalism and thus posing a very real challenge to the stable reproduction of capitalist rule. I sketch out the limitations of a rights-based labour response to exploitation and the opportunities arising for a new multi-scalar global social unionism.

Challenges

Trade unions today face many challenges as a result of a quarter century of neoliberal globalisation and its resultant decomposition of labour. Migration – the free mobility of labour – has traditionally been seen as a problem for trade unions. Migrant workers have been seen as undermining well established labour norms and, for that matter, a 'difficult to organise' sector. Much as workers are divided by gender, age and ethnicity they are also divided according to national origin and citizen status. What I am proposing here, in terms of turning capital's global crisis into labour's global opportunity, is a decisive shift towards migration as a hinge in terms of the future of globalisation and as an opportunity for a trade unions revitalization in pursuit of social transformation. At a historical conjuncture when national protectionism, xenophobia and racism are bound to come to the fore, this approach may, at the very least, play a positive role in terms of defending democracy and, perhaps, forwarding social transformation.

At a broad level we can state that neoliberal globalisation has always contained a contradiction in regards to the free mobility of labour. In a no doubt apocryphal tale neoliberal guru Milton Friedman once said that, 'About labour migration the least said the better'. There is indeed no theoretically coherent explanation as to why one factor of production – capital – should have free mobility and not another. Roberto Unger has argued against this selective understanding of freedom, that 'nothing would contribute more to a rapid moderation of inequalities between nations than a greater freedom for the movement of labour' (Unger 2011: 130). His proposal is for an in principle agreement to free movement and then small cumulative steps that capital and labour take together. This would produce a shared commitment to the building of a common future. Of course the global order and the nature of the states which make it up would have to be thoroughly transformed. Whether we think that 'open borders' is a viable political strategy or not, whatever happens at this global level will have a serious impact on social transformation at national and local levels.

As to trade unions – as organisers of the 'factor of production' labour – they have often throughout history, in practice if not programmatically, displayed a protectionist attitude towards the free mobility of workers. There are many historical examples of trade unions opposing the entry of foreign workers into the national labour market or seeking social exclusion of those already there (see Penninx and Rossblad 2001). More recently there has been a recognition, from within the trade unions themselves, that 'solidarity with migrant workers is helping trade unions to get back to the basic principles of the labour movement' (David 2002: 2). One argument is that to 'democratize globalization' the same level of movement by workers which applies at the national level should prevail. Latin American trade unions have committed to 'promoting increasing, strengthening and guaranteeing the freedom of movement for all workers... to stay in their own land, emigrate, immigrate and return' (Godio 2005: 56). As against the contradictions of neo-liberalism, a labour movement should recognise that migrant workers are an integral part of the working class and that they have often played a pivotal role in the making of labour movements.

In recent years trade unions in most parts of the world have begun to recover from the impact of neoliberalism and its unregulated market approach. This has occurred at peak level with the formation of a unified trade union confederation as a result of the end of the Cold War. The old International Trade Secretariats also become energised as the new World Councils which organise internationally across a given sector. At a national level there has been a certain resurgence by trade unions in some regions such as in Latin America, while in the US there was a marked political radicalization at peak level. The growing academic literature on trade union revitalization has found evidence transnationally of advances in key areas of activity such as the organising of new sectors of workers, greater political activity, the reform of trade union structure, building of coalitions and, not least, an increase in international solidarity activity (Frege and Kelly 2003). We could argue that we are at the start of a phase when trade unionism will yet again be reconfigured and revitalized to meet the new conditions it faces.

Labour has always been slow to adapt to capital's mutations and crises. That there has been a time lag of 25 years between the neoliberal capitalist offensive and labour's re-composition is hardly surprising and fits the pattern of 19th and 20th century waves of labour disintegration and recomposition (Arrighi 1996: 348). This cyclical nature of labour-capital relations seems to

have been ignored by analysts circa 2000 who perhaps reflected the mood at the time that US capitalism had really broken the cyclical nature of capitalism. Thus Castells argued that, ‘The labour movement seems to be historically superseded’ (Castells 2004: 425) because while capital is global, labour is local: ‘labour is disaggregated in its performance, fragmented in its organization, diversified in its existence, divided in its collective action’ (Castells 1996: 475). While some of these points were conjuncturally correct the overall analysis ignored the fact that labour is a social movement. A more long-term view of the last century would show that trade unions have not only endured but that they have also been ‘making society more democratic, more respectful of the poor, moving human rights above the claims of capitalist property’ (Friedman 2008: 10). That is no mean achievement given the brutality of the neoliberal counter-revolution.

If the current crisis poses a challenge to the organised labour movement it also requires a more robust response from critical social thought than we have seen until now. At one level the current crisis of capitalism vindicates the traditional Marxist reading of capitalism and its contradictions. This has been recognised across the political spectrum – albeit grudgingly – since the outbreak of the crisis in 2007. Since the last major crisis of capitalism in the 1930’s the world system has embarked on two major policy regimes. Keynesianism led to the Bretton Wood ‘embedded liberalism’ (Ruggie 1984) regime which lasted until approximately 1975; allowing for market allocation of resources but constrained by the political process and allowing for social need. This was followed by the neo-liberal ‘efficient market hypothesis’ (Farmer and Lo 1999) which provided the rationale for globalization and the extension of a new economic order across the globe. Today we are faced with the conundrum of ‘financial regime change’ (Wade 2008) which the powers that be will find no easier to achieve than the ‘regime change’ in Iraq carried out at the peak of US arrogance across the globe.

Marxism allows us to understand the re-making of the working class on a global scale over the last 30 years or so. The dynamic (yet destructive) nature of this system is evident not least in the rise of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) as vibrant centres of capital expansion and accumulation in a ‘classical’ mode. New working classes are being forged in these regimes and the future of class struggle will depend largely on their outcome. As Mike Davis puts it laconically, ‘Two hundred million Chinese factory workers, miners and construction labourers are the most dangerous class on the planet. (Just ask the State Council in Beijing.) Their full awakening from the bubble may yet determine whether or not a socialist Earth is possible’ (Davis 2012: 15). What we need to add, however, to this classic Marxist perspective is an understanding of how ‘primitive accumulation’ continues to operate through ‘accumulation through dispossession’, a ‘Third-worldist’ perspective articulated before its time by Rosa Luxemburg against Lenin and the other orthodox Marxists of her day.

Karl Polanyi – coming out of the European socialist tradition but also influenced by Christian thinking – developed a bold new paradigm of capitalist development following the Second World War. While much of his analysis of capitalist development is recognisably Marxist he departs from this analytical tradition in several key ways. His broad sweeping ‘double movement’ thesis – market deregulation followed by society protecting itself – captured the mood that neo-liberal globalization had its limits. Protests against environmental degradation, movements against ‘free trade’ agreements or struggles against factory closures could find a unifying thread here. This was not the inevitable working out of capitalist contradictions as in an

economistic Marxism, but a perspective which allowed free rein to human agency and society. Against the class reductionism still present in much of Marxism, Polanyi argued that only a perspective from above that of a particular social class could be successful in articulating a counter-movement. Finally, Polanyi argued explicitly against Marx that labour was *not* a commodity: 'Labour is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself it cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused without affecting also the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity' (Polanyi 2001: 75-6).

It is in relation to decommodification that Polanyi probably provides his most powerful strategic insight into current movements beyond neoliberalism. The socially disembodied self-regulating market will inevitably be challenged by the self-protective tendencies in society. Thus, for example, according to Polanyi the function of trade unions was not to get a higher price for the commodity of labour but, rather, 'that of interfering with the laws of supply and demand in respect of human labor, and removing it from the orbit of the market' (Polanyi 2001: 186). All moves from within the social realm aimed at constraining the unregulated operation of the market – decommodification – thus challenge the market economy in its fundamentals. The strategy of decommodification and of re-embedding the economy within society can serve as a 'logic of equivalence' acting to articulate a range of very diverse protective or defensive struggles by subaltern nations, classes and ethnic groups. This is a necessary supplement to the classical Marxist analysis of capitalism and its contradictions.

Mutations

It seems clear we are now living a historical period similar to that which Antonio Gramsci characterised as one in which 'the old has died but the new cannot yet be born' (Gramsci 1970: 276). While neoliberal globalisation continues to dominate it no longer has hegemony. Dominant class strategy is in disarray across the world and in some regions it has reached crisis point. Are we at one of those conjunctures when major mutations of the system are about to occur? What are the prospects for the elaboration of an alternative hegemony emerging from the subaltern nations, classes and ethnic-religious groups? Whatever our answers to these difficult questions I think we can agree on the need to pose them in an affirmative way. Too many interventions around workers and migrants (not to mention the precariat) are posed defensively as a reaction to the violation of assumed human rights. Now is perhaps the time to forge alternative hegemonic thinking and put some shape on the hitherto rather vacuous formulation that 'another world is possible' (cf. Santos 2006).

The dominant economic model generated massive social transformation via globalization, financial deregulation, privatization and commodification of the life course. The deregulation of the financial markets – as the Eurozone now acknowledges – created a series of asset bubbles which came to a head in the US in 2007. A shadow banking system had outstripped the regulated banking sector. So then, as Robin Blackburn puts it, 'The banks heedless pursuit of short-term advantage led to the largest destruction of value in world history during the Crash of 2008. Government rescue measures were to offer unlimited liquidity to the financial sector, while leaving the system largely intact' (Blackburn 2011b: 35). That is to say, neoliberal ideologies and their supporters have lost hegemony but they remain dominant. While Keynesianism is the

intellectual inspiration for all types of critics of the crisis, a coherent alternative path has not yet been forged and, in fact, most counter-measures will simply accentuate the crisis through so-called austerity measures against working people.

In the early days of the crisis mainstream interpretation pinned its hopes in the BRICS, now seen as detached from the financial crisis. China and India might slow their pace of growth but they would act as engines of global recovery. There were hopes pinned on the informal sector which would act as a safety net for those thrown out of work. The former Chief Economist of the IMF told us that, 'The situation in desperately poor countries isn't as bad as you'd think' (cited in Breman 2009: 30). In reality the crisis was very soon seen to be world-wide – an inevitable consequence of globalization – and thus it was clearly systemic. The much vaunted technological New Age had not materialized. The flotation of Facebook and renewable energy would hardly generate a new model of accelerated growth. As to the BRICs, export led growths slowed down in the midst of a global recession and a 'hard landing' for China has now been forecast. 'A thoroughly triangulated global recession' (Davis 2011: 14) now loomed with the US, Europe and the BRICs all involved in a 'perfect storm' scenario that even Karl Marx could not have imagined.

The impact of the crisis on workers and migrant workers in particular was massive and unfolded very rapidly. Globalisation had created an economically, socially and spatially much more integrated world. Labour diasporas have formed dense social networks intimately integrated into the spatial expansion of capitalism. It is through these networks, as David Harvey puts it, that 'we now see the effects of the financial crash spreading into almost every nook and cranny of rural Africa and peasant India' (Harvey 2010: 147). In the OECD countries the role of unemployment is climbing rapidly with systemic failover bound to multiply. When the young *indignados* gather in the plazas of Spain their life chances are not so qualitatively different from that of their counterparts in North Africa. This was not the case in 1968: the social distance between a Berkeley student and a Vietnamese peasant was unbridgeable. As to global migration the picture is quite unclear. We have certainly not seen the end of migration. More likely we will see a transformation of the migration regimes with new countries emerging as sending and receiving units as well as real 'churning' of existing flows.

The responses to the global crisis of capitalism have not been coherent and have not followed a clear plan of action, Marxist or otherwise inspired. Historical parallels with revolutionary waves in 1848, 1968 or 1989 are probably not all that helpful. The Arab political revolutions of 2011 will no doubt open up a new global scenario. But so also will the warring tendencies of a shaken imperialism putting other countries in its sights. Whether the likes of Turkey or Brazil will be able to articulate regional leadership roles will also be critical. This complex geo-political scenario is far removed from the current left focus on 'horizontal' leaderless a-political organising in a bid to recreate '1968'. The failure of the World Social Forum – not least because it would not be distracted by wars – should be a warning to those who do not wish to engage in the long 'war of position' needed to articulate an alternative hegemony. The stakes are certainly high. As Polanyi warned 'The discarding of the market utopia brings us face to face with the reality of society...The fascist answer to the recognition of the reality of society is the rejection of the postulate of freedom....The discovery of society is thus either the end or the rebirth of freedom' (Polanyi 2001: 267-8).

We might start by recognising that all successful revolutions have been national-popular in nature. Mao, Tito and Castro all had as their reference point the nation and the construction of a people. Political Islam in North Africa has also been successful precisely because of its ability to articulate the national-popular dimension. The small autonomist currents – with their refusal of ‘politics’ – will be no match for these forces once the heady days of public space occupations are over. In a heterogeneous world – created by uneven and combined development – any political action to be successful needs to go beyond the sectoral domain to construct a broader popular will. At a time when xenophobia and national protectionism are bound to come to the fore it is even more necessary to remember the vital role of the nation in an era still characterised by imperialism of the most brutal and direct nature. The national-popular cannot be so readily dismissed as ‘populist’ as the Northern critics of Latin American leaders such Chávez, Kirchner et al try to do.

While some analysts portray the subaltern masses as a ‘multitude’ they do not offer an alternative hegemonic strategy. Towards the very end of Empire, Hardt and Negri gesture towards the need for a political programme for the global multitude but do not go beyond a few platitudes. However they come up with little other than some issues – such as the right to ‘global citizenship’ – couched in the traditional language of rights and demands. How this might be achieved and though what political mechanisms is not explained. Struggles are not seen as connected horizontally, they all challenge Empire vertically and directly. This thoroughly a-political vision might resonate with ‘autonomist’ currents but it is not capable of articulating the various, very disparate struggles against the dominant order now under way. As Laclau puts it ‘any “multitude” is constructed through political action – which presupposes antagonism and hegemony’ (Laclau 2011: 133). Spontaneous aggregation of disparate struggles cannot occur without the necessary political articulations and the establishment of a logic of equivalence between them.

Within the trade union movement – and even more within the international NGO’s (incorrectly called ‘global civil society’ by some) – there has been a tendency to answer the crisis from a rights-based perspective. A prime example is the Decent Work Campaign (DWC) promoted by the ILO, the international trade union movement and the European Commission. It is a concept and programme ‘based on the understanding that work is a source of personal dignity, family stability, peace in the community, democracies that deliver for people and economic growth that expands opportunities for productive jobs and enterprise development’ (ILO 2013). Its core objective is ‘to obtain recognition and respect for the rights of workers’ (ILO 2013). I will return to the limitations of the decent work campaign or agenda as a labour strategy shortly, but for now I want to raise the limitations of a rights-based strategy more generally. While this is not the place to assess the broader issue of whether the international human rights movement is more part of the problem than the solution we should note that the human rights regime reflects the ethics and politics of a particular period in Western Europe. It is also probably true that it promises more than it can possibly deliver. It has undoubtedly served at times to legitimate repression and bad governance. The only point I want to make here however, following Kennedy is that: ‘human rights has so dominated the imaginative space of emancipation that alternatives can now only be thought... as negations of what human rights asserts – passion to its reason, local to its global, etc.’ (Kennedy 2001: 108). In brief, a human rights optic might hinder the development of a rounded politics of transformation for the current

era. As Kennedy reminds us ‘speaking rights to politics is not the same as speaking truth to power’ (Kennedy 2001: 121)

The 19th Century struggle over the abolition of slavery provides some contemporary lessons, I would argue, in relation to the struggles for basic freedoms in the context of a global crisis of capitalism. The dominant narrative of abolitionism and emancipation focused on the British and North American cases and prioritised liberal campaigns and the discourse of human rights. The seemingly peaceful achievement of abolition in relation to the Atlantic slave trade has been portrayed as normative. However, this narrative and its elevation of human rights (‘Am I not a brother?’) omits much of the complex story of struggle which resulted in the original abolition of slavery. As Robin Blackburn forcefully reminds us, the Haitian Revolution disrupts this liberal narrative, and more generally that ‘the African captives resisted enslavement at every point in their translation to the New World’ (Blackburn 2011a: 358) and that this resistance became a significant force during times of crisis, not least through its impact on the abolitionists. Furthermore, anti-slavery is inseparable from the influence of feminist emancipationism and the egalitarianism of the labour movement which, on the whole, strenuously opposed forced labour of any kind.

I am not suggesting that the struggle to abolish slavery can serve as a model to abolish contemporary wage slavery and the degradation of work. What I am arguing is that the struggle of workers – through trade unions and other bodies – is not a separate sphere from the broader struggle for social transformation. Nor for that matter is labour migration a separate sphere as Stephen Castles (2010) has recently pointed out but, rather, part of the overall process of social transformation. So, for example, the struggles for workers’ rights in Egypt cannot be separated from the momentous social, political and cultural transformations currently underway in that country. A European ‘industrial relations’ paradigm has very little purchase indeed in most parts of the world. A United Nations or NGO ‘human rights’ perspective has even less relevance beyond the rhetorical domain. The world of workers which we now turn to, has always known the value of politics, of direct action, of mass struggles and an understanding that social transformation is based on struggle.

Workers

The working class – Marx’s proletariat – came into being with the emergence of capitalism as a mode of production characterised by ‘free’ wage labour. Extra-economic coercion gave way to the dull compulsion of market forces. The international dimension – and the role of migrant workers in particular – was crucial in this early making of the working class (cf. Linden 2003). Free migration across national borders was considered normal and xenophobia was not always present; internationalism in the economic sense was thus not forced but natural. But this early internationalist phase was short-lived as state formation began to lead to the national integration of the European working classes in particular, culminating in the first inter-imperialist war of 1914-18. Trade unions were ‘nationalised’ as it were, becoming an integral element of social and political cohesion within the boundaries of a given nation–state. The formation of trade unions in the so-called developing world, following the second inter-imperialist war of 1938-45 also took a strongly national character with the workers and their organisations playing a key role in many national liberation struggles.

Both Karl Marx and Karl Polanyi understood that capitalism would not realize its full potential until it was globalised. For Marx and Engels, 'The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations' (Marx and Engels 1970). Polanyi, for a different historical period was to write that, 'The true implications of economic liberalism can now be taken in at a glance. Nothing less than a self-regulating market on a world scale could ensure the functioning of this stupendous mechanism' (Polanyi 2001: 145). Globalisation – as it unfolded from the 1980's onwards – utterly transformed the world of work. There was, in first place, a massive increase in proletarianisation as millions more were brought under the sway of capital. National development regimes were soon to be superseded along with the state socialist system. This led to a shift from the 'formal' to the 'real' subsumption of labour. However, in second place we need to stress that this global proletarianisation took place under the aegis of imperialism and was thus marked by a racist template.

Labour in the global era is characterised, above all, by increased mobility, within and between nation-states. In 1970 there were 82 million people living outside their country of birth; by 2000 this figure had risen to 175 million. But it is good to remember that the internal migrants in China and India are probably double that number and we should always take migration in the round from a development perspective. Migrant workers represent a return to colonial-era forced labour patterns as the export of cheap labour (or its transfer within country) becomes a viable and legitimate path to development. Hardt and Negri may sound apocalyptic but there is a ring of truth to their proclamation that, 'A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of migration' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 213). The problem is translating this complex new reality into a politics of transformation that goes beyond an extolling of flight as a response to oppression. The migrant is in a liminal position betwixt and between borders or the rural/urban divide, partly mobile, partly settled. They represent a challenge to the organised (settled) workers movement as we have argued, but also for the managers of globalization and will be a less case in determining whether sustainable global development is achievable.

The other key feature of the labour condition in the era of globalisation is that of flexibility, which became the *leitmotif* of the neoliberal restructuring of labour. For globalizing capital the flexibilisation of labour was a key imperative: this entailed functional flexibility, wage flexibility and numerical flexibility. This drive was global in nature even though it took different national forms according to the degree and type of labour market embeddedness and the strength of the labour movement. The latter responded with a call for a 'social clause' to be included in multilateral trade agreements to prevent 'social dumping' across borders. At the end of the day there was little to show for this campaign beyond a few showcase European firms agreements on paper. The old labour strategies were bound to fail when the terrain set by capital had changed so dramatically. Flexibilisation was but a part of a concerted strategy by capital to weaken labour through de-regulation across the board and a so-called 'informalization' of the relations of production.

Perhaps the most salient mutations of the global political economy of labour can be encapsulated with the term Brazilianization, first deployed by German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2000). For Beck, 'The unintended consequence of the neoliberal free-market utopia is a Brazilianization of the West... the spread of temporary and insecure employment, discontinuity

and loose informality into Western societies that have hitherto been the bastions of full employment' (Beck 2001: 1). Precarious, insecure or informal relations of production accounted for maybe one tenth of employees in 1960's Germany, but that figure is now around 40 percent and rising. There is a problem in the way Beck assumes the West is the norm and we may also question whether the 'golden era' of capitalism was really that secure for workers in the West in the 1950's. Nevertheless, it is a useful way of bringing home the changes wrought by globalisation and the impact of neoliberalism on the relations of production and the lives of working people.

What Brazilianization might mean is a reversal of Marx's famous dictum that, 'The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed the image of its own future'. Unregulated and informal relations of production and income generation are not 'marginal' to capitalist development or simply the dubious privilege of under-development. The World Bank was simply wrong in theory and in practice when it stated that 'the informal sector shrinks with development' (World Bank 1995: 35). Indeed, we can now posit the emergence of a new global informal working class which, following Davis, 'is about one billion strong, making it the fastest-growing, and most unprecedented, social class on earth' (Davis 2007: 178). The great expansion of the informal sector across the global South since the 1980's was accompanied by its emergence in the North as 'a stealth workforce for the formal economy' (Davis 2007: 178) with the likes of Wal-Mart and other multinationals creating commodity chains reaching deep into the informal sector across the South. What we see today is a pattern beyond the old formal-informal (or North-South) divide, with a continuum of casualization as the global recession continues to impact on the world of work.

An emerging social paradigm we might finally consider is that of the 'precariat', constructed as a hybrid term describing a proletariat subject to precarious working conditions. It is designed to capture the new norm of insecure work and fragile/fragmented life conditions (Hall-Jones 2009). Precariousness is now the norm in terms of tenure, working conditions, labour rights and, indeed, life itself for increasing numbers of the world's workers. Temporary contract workers, undocumented migrant workers but also some of the new 'teleworkers' (IT) form part of this new global precariat. Divisions between working people deepen as national, ethnic and gender differences are rearticulated. The feeling of precariousness extends to the once secure core of protected 'standard' employment. As Mario Candeais puts it, 'precarisation is a general process to dismantle and polarise the levels of social rights and standards of living' which creates 'a massive insecurity and weakening of individual agency and self-confidence' (Candeais 2010: 4).

The term precariat undoubtedly has led to a flourishing of critical social thinking around the contemporary labour condition. It is drawing on existing paradigms of labour and development and has decisively broken with some Eurocentric conceits about its exceptionalism. However there is still an overwhelming focus on the 'new' precariat of the North on the fringes of the IT economy and less on the conditions of the workers in the majority world. I would also be wary of statements such as, 'The precariat was not part of the "working class" or the "proletariat"' (Standing 2011: 6). This seems to imply an essentialist understanding of the proletariat quite alien to the classical Marxist paradigm. It is the European image of the full time permanent male worker which seems to lurk behind this distancing operation. It is well to remember the theoretical and political problems associated with the thoroughly problematic

Marxist category of *lumpen-proletariat* that served in another era to categorise difficult to place workers, but at the cost of theoretical incoherence in terms of the role of workers within the capitalist relations of production.

The long period of neoliberal globalisation, and its current unwinding under the weight of its own contradictions, has undoubtedly accentuated the insecurity associated with capitalist development. These fissiparous tendencies are now clearly present in the once secure capitalist heartlands of the West when once they were assumed to be an innate 'Third World' condition where 'marginality' rather than incorporation prevailed. Yet there is still something profoundly Eurocentric in a category that sees the old proletariat as the norm and now seeks to equate the flexi-time European IT professional with the conditions of the 'wretched of the earth' in the South's mega-cities. There is still a qualitative difference in terms of life chances between those living in the periphery and those in the core capitalist countries, albeit in crisis and with degraded welfare states. In brief, while tendencies towards 'precarisation' are undoubtedly global we are a long way off the creation of a new global precariat.

Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1963) who early on articulated a theory of 'précarité', Loiq Wacquant has referred to, 'The very difficulty of naming the fragments, scoria, and splinters of the dualized market society that collect in the dispossessed zones of the metropolis as the basis for the term "precariat" – if one may name thus the insecure fringes of the new proletariat' (Wacquant 2007: 73). This, however, is precisely the dilemma faced by Latin American social scientists in the 1970's in seeking to explain the internal migrant informal settlements outside the industrializing cities. For some this was a 'marginal mass' which did not fulfil its classic Marxist function of a 'reserve army of labour'. The marginal were seen as a new revolutionary vanguard by some with nothing to lose. Others understood better the uneven and combined nature of capitalist development as 'normal'. For similar reasons I would be wary of positing the precariat as inherently 'new', not 'functional' or a potential new vanguard (see Munck 2013).

Having examined the recent mutations of capitalism – as an eminently historical mode of production – and its impact on the world of work, the next section turns to the complexity of labour's reaction. Capitalism does not unfold neatly and logically according to the schemas of the Marxist-Leninist manuals. Workers, peasants and migrants – and hybrids of all three – have a degree of agency difficult to comprehend from a purely analytical perspective. International political economy – even in its radical visions – has tended to assume a workerless globe. Social movement theory – in the autonomist variant – sees amorphous multitudes but writes off the organised workers' movement. Both currents seem oblivious to the political domain as though war, revolution, religion and geo-politics have little impact on society. In the next section we will foreground politics in seeking to develop a complex political economy of labour for the transitional era we are living.

Complexity

Globalization, if it did nothing else, brought to the fore complexity as a fundamental concept for critical social theory. For a while the global was more or less taken for granted, as a nebula 'out there' somehow impacting on what we did 'down there'. It was seen as a *deus-ex-machina*, something like the weather providing us with sunny skies (the sales pitch) or, more

likely, the dark clouds of jobs migrating elsewhere. Rather than conceive of globalization as a unified, unambiguous entity, the complexity approach directs us towards the relationship between structure and process or between a system and its environment. (Urry 2003). In relation to the fluid movement of people we call migration, the complexity approach conceives of it as ‘a series of turbulent waves, with a hierarchy of eddies and vortices, with globalism a virus that stimulates resistance, and the migration system a cascade moving away from any state of equilibrium’ (Papastergiadis, cited by Urry 2003: 62). In terms of the workers movement a complexity approach would direct us towards the uneven and combined nature of capitalist development and the need for a multi-scalar labour strategy.

The main institutional response to the precarisation of work on a global scale has been the Decent Work Campaign of the ILO (International Labour Organisation) founded in 1919 to promote labour standards designed for varying national systems of production. These were designed to assist in regulating the national labour markets and offer protection for employees assumed to be in stable full-time employment and comprised predominantly of male workers. There was also an assumption made that the Western European model of ‘social partnership’ was universal. This was a labour policy for the Keynesian era based on built in full employment and the efficacy of macro-economic policy management. In the very different global order of the 1990’s – after the collapse of Keynesianism, the death of full employment and the crisis of ‘competitiveness’ – the ILO launched the Decent Work Campaign as a response to the global labour predicament. It was a step back from the historic labour directives and posed a vague aspiration to ‘humanize’ globalisation through a non-ideological set of aspirations.

However the world today is not the world of 1919 or even that of 1969 when the ILO received the Nobel Peace Prize. As Guy Standing puts it, ‘the ILO was set up as a means of legitimizing labourism, a system of employer-employee relations based on the standard employment relationship, and a means of taking labour out of international trade’ (Standing 2008: 380). Tripartite labour relations are hardly the dominant model today, the ‘standard’ employment relationship survives only in small pockets, and labour is treated very clearly as a commodity on the global labour market. It seems utopian to posit a capital-state-labour tripartite alliance in today’s crisis to create ‘decent work’ for all. It would appear to be more part of the recent move by international financial institutions to create a so-called Post Washington Consensus designed to overcome the contradictions of the raw neoliberal model. For the international trade unions to invest energy in this campaign might seem futile from a worker perspective, although it may well form part of the system of political alliances which the union leadership needs to forge.

Critical social thinking – cognisant of complexity – might direct us elsewhere to develop a workers’ strategy and revert the currently subaltern states of labour. A useful starting point might be the so-called law of uneven and combined development first developed by Trotsky in the context of the Russian Revolution. Following Lenin’s understanding that capitalism always developed unevenly across space, he added the proviso that it was also ‘combined’ in one world system. Imperialism, for Trotsky, ‘links up incomparably more rapidly and more deeply the individual national and continental units into a single entity’ (Trotsky 1970: 20). Thus a country like Russia at the start of the 20th century could present an amalgam of archaic production systems alongside the most contemporary forms. It also meant that the Russian proletariat could ‘skip stages’ and begin the construction of socialism without having to go through the

development of capitalism. In one stroke Trotsky surpassed the dominant evolutionary perspective of both Second and Third International Marxism, which also of course underpinned mainstream modernization theory in the 1950's.

More recently critical social theory has added a much needed spatial dimension to its analysis of the political economy of labour. The notion of 'scales' emerged in the 1990's to challenge the traditional understandings of political and social processes. Globalisation had not produced a flat world and the local, national and regional scales of human activity were vital. The labour movement clearly operates at a local, national, sub-regional, regional, sub-global and global levels through different organisational forms ranging from the international trade union confederations to local union branches. These scales are not to be seen as a hierarchy and many false debates around 'think global' or 'act local' have now superseded (see Herod 2001). What is clear is that workers organisations need to 'make connections' across the scales. All trade unionists, for example, now agree that the global context is crucial whatever national or nationalist orientation they might have. Also, and vital for strategy, the same way countries can 'skip stages' workers are now able to 'skip scales', thus for example moving from a local struggle straight to the global level.

In this complex capitalist world, not reducible to unilinear evolution, trade unions also evolved through a variable geometry taking different shapes across time and space. Trade unions emerged as collective organisations representing the economic (or workplace) interests of workers. Perry Anderson once wrote that 'trade unions are essentially a *de facto* representation of the working class at its workplace' (Anderson 1973: 335) reflecting the capitalist division of labour as a given. The development of political unionism reflected the rise of the socialist and communist parties seeking to harness workers for their political projects. Later, political unionism reflected the nationalist politics of the anti-imperialist movements. Workers would seek advancement through influencing the national state. More recently – in the context of an industrializing periphery – we have seen the emergence of a social unionism. Trade unions, from that perspective, needed to engage with workers' lives outside the workplace and in the context of a state which was not permeable. Thus trade unions might articulate wider community demands and forge close links with community organisations of various types. The uneven and combined development of the working class across time and space has brought economic, political and social unionism to the fore in varying combinations. It is this variable geometry that needs to be examined concretely and not taken for granted.

South Africa provides a rich experience in terms of the repertoires of trade union activity. Both political and social unionisms were deployed in the development of independent black unions in the 1980's. Epithets flew back and forth about 'economism' (the 'workerist' tendency to emphasize the workplace issues), 'populism' (against those who prioritised the wider anti-apartheid movement) and social unionism found its role through community boycotts of workplaces in struggles and through the so-called 'stayaways' (see Webster and Lambert 1998). Post-apartheid, since 1994 the powerful COSATU union umbrella body has found itself torn between its political role as a partner in the ANC government alliance and its role representing its members' economic interests (see Pillay 2012). The divide between production politics and state politics at times seems acute. Another divide is that between the organised working class and the growing precarious migrant workforce. Here we have only seen the odd glimmer – or to be

precise conference declaration – of the 1980's social unionism which played a vital role in forging a national - popular collective will against apartheid.

In Latin America – at a similar time and context – social unionism developed as a response to authoritarian military regimes and 'savage capitalist' development. In Brazil this was most notable with the new unionism of the 1980's forging links with church and community groups and then going on to form the Workers' Party. Neoliberal restructuring weakened these and other labour formation in the 1990's. Since then, however, there has been a marked resurgence of labour with both vertical (from national to regional to city levels) and horizontal (across sectors and wider social struggles) links becoming a feature at least in Brazil and the Southern Cone countries (see Fernandez 2007). Another political current to emerge in this period was that based on 'autonomism' represented most visibly by the Zapatistas in Mexico and to a lesser extent, the *piqueteros* of Argentina. In the Nietzschean belief in a 'multitude' beyond politics this current has ultimately marginalised itself. Elsewhere in the Andean countries (Bolivia and Ecuador), trade unions and indigenous movements have built political articulations with a revitalized left to seize state power and begin a serious process of social transformation.

Meanwhile, in the heartlands of advanced capitalism the impact of neoliberalism – with both the 'export' of jobs and the 'import' of foreign workers – led to the emergence, of a new or perhaps, re-invented 'community unionism'. In the US the mainstream AFL-CL went through a leadership transformation between 2003 and 2005 which took it beyond the 'business unionism' it was once characterised by and previously unthinkable alliances with Latin American workers ensued. Up and down the country local and national unions forged alliances with migrant workers' organisations giving rise to the workers centres (see Fine 2005). There was an older US tradition of rank and file activity to call upon, also evident for example in relation to the campaign for 'union cities'. In the U.K a strongly labourist trade union movement began to sporadically explore alliances with migrant worker associations and the often faith based movements which supported these (see McBride and Greenwood 2009). There also 'community unionism' was the term which came to the fore to describe what was basically the social unionism we opened to above, building on (not necessarily superseding) the 'bread and butter' economic unionism and the political unionism in support of the Labour Party.

This is not the place to draw facile conclusions: clearly the whole tenor of my argument is to present issues for debate. In many social and political arenas these and similar debates are being played out in practice. Their outcome is necessarily uncertain. In terms of the challenges posed at the start I think we have sketched out a possible answer based on real social struggles and an open critical theory. Existing labour strategies, based on old models and a moribund Eurocentrism, will almost certainly fail to deliver in their objectives. The current global turmoil is throwing up an existential crisis for global capitalism as we know it but also a serious challenge for the subaltern classes and nations. The precarisation of labour is but one strand of a complex mutation of capitalism now underway. Thus trade unions need to engage with the political economy of labour migration as we have argued, but also with a much wider range of dramatic events including war and revolution.

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