

Book Review

Verity Burgmann (2018) *Globalization and Labour in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Routledge.
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Reviewed by
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In a context of heightened capital offensive and right-wing political expressions, this book looks optimistically to the possibilities of workers' and labour movements' action in the current era and is thus a very welcome contribution to debates on the state of global labour and its future role. The book supports this view by looking at evidence of labour revitalisation and organisation in eight areas associated with the growth of neo-liberal globalisation that have represented challenges for workers but also new arenas for their struggles: changes in production and the labour process associated with post-Fordism; unions' decline and the attempts to organise online; shifts in the international division of labour with production going to low-wage economies and the consequences of de-industrialisation in the former industrialised countries; the establishment of global unions and the revitalisation of labour transnationalism as a way to counter capital global mobility; the use of gender and racial discrimination to further divide and fragment the working class; precarity and unemployment; privatisation and commodification of public goods and services; the politics of austerity in the context of liberalisation of financial capital and increased indebtedness.

These issues, in the same order presented here, are treated in eight chapters representing the bulk of the empirical contribution of the book. However, we find a clear description of the content of the book only at page 29, at the end of the theoretical chapter. I think readers would have benefitted if a more detailed explanation of the book's empirical/theoretical focus had appeared right at the beginning of the introduction.

The evidence of existing currents of workers' reaction to the challenges posed by the globalisation and financialisation of capital is inserted theoretically in an anti-determinist Marxism. This Marxism builds on Sartre's distinction between alienated series (collectives with no interior bonds) and fused groups (collectives with a common identity and consciousness), on E.P. Thompson's vision of the working class as a formation that is contextually based rather than structurally determined and, most importantly, on the autonomist Marxist conceptualisation of the power of labour agency in structuring capitalist social relations and in viewing class as a social relation in a constant process of composition, decomposition and recomposition. I did not find the work of Sartre, apart from its anti-determinism, particularly illuminating in understanding issues of collective behaviour. On this I think there is more useful and empirically abundant material in Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory, or Fantasia's (1988) cultures of solidarity, or in Tarrow's (1994) and Tilly's (1978) social movement studies, just to give a few examples. E.P. Thompson's understanding of working-class formation as a contextually based "in the making" process is clearly relevant to an anti-determinist and agency-based perspective. I am less convinced that Thompson's method can be "instructive for charting the beginning of the making

of a global working class” (p. 18). However, as with Sartre, the author does not really engage with these theorists in the rest of the book. On the contrary, an intense dialogue with autonomist thinkers and with the work of Negri in particular can be found in various parts of the book supporting empirical evidence – for instance: on post-Fordism (p. 35); on class fragmentation (p. 107); on labour and social movements (pp. 140–143); on mercantilisation of life and the social factory (pp. 180–183); on a post-capitalist future (p. 241). I am particularly sympathetic with the idea of using autonomist thinking as a theoretical weapon to stress the primacy of workers’ agency. However, it is also a theoretical framework that has been highly criticised and its shortcomings – particularly the over-reliance on technology in composing a supposedly new knowledge-based “multitude” (Caffentzis, 2013) – should have been at least mentioned, given their importance in understanding the collective (potentially revolutionary) subject.

On the issue of the collective subject, I have found the book at times very ambiguous and contradictory. For instance, at page 8 it is stated that “in using the terminology of the labour movement this book is concerned primarily with the impact of globalization on the industrial wing of labour movements and how these workers’ organizations at the point of production have responded”. What this industrial wing of the labour movement is today (manufacturing, service, mining industry) and why is it more important than other parts of the working class are questions left unexplained. In other parts, on the contrary, the emphasis seems to be on a broader understanding of class and labour movements (community and social movement unionism, for instance) and on the need to develop strength not just at the point of production (labour transnationalism and global unions, use of the web, anti-austerity alliances). Similarly, I think there is ambiguity in implicitly considering the trade union form as synonymous with workers’ organisation. These contradictions emerge from the reading of the empirical chapters which present highly detailed and informative case studies about forms, strategies and organisations of working-class action (intended in broader terms), and this is good if one aims to inspire enthusiasm and optimism. But I think the lack of a deeper engagement with debates concerning what is work (productive? reproductive? formal? informal?), what is class, and the relevance of the union form today leave us with the question: what are the lessons we can learn from the empirical evidence provided? The book indicates various possible directions both in terms of strategy and forms of organisations but it does this in a very erratic way. At times it tends to leave certain assumptions unexplained (for instance, why workers’ control should be considered “a pattern of defiance that might become increasingly significant” [p. 239]) or to become almost apologetic (“the planetary working class in the making is challenging its fragmentation by globalizing capital” [p. 239]).

Overall, I think the book makes an important contribution in overcoming that sense of defeat that the disappearance of the twentieth-century industrial working class and of the parliamentary left that supported it have generated in the last decades in the Global North. The examples of struggles presented in the book are clear testimony of the ever-present possibilities of working-class action and resistance. However, to avoid partial explanations and unjustified conclusions, in my view these empirical realities need to be inserted into a more coherent and articulated theoretical framework interrogating the current validity of previously accepted conceptualisations about the nature of work and the form of political and organisational composition of the twenty-first-century working class in the dispersed geographies of the world economy.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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