

Global Issues

From Critical Sociology to Combat Sport?

A Response to Michael Burawoy's 'From Polanyi to Pollyanna: The False Optimism of Global Labour Studies' (GLJ 1.2)

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The (re)discovery of Karl Polanyi's notion of the 'double movement' in the late nineties as a rationale for the anti-globalisation movement marked an important step in the development of a new Global Labour Studies (GLS). It was Michael Burawoy who was amongst the first to see in Polanyi's notion of a social counter movement an incipient theory of counter hegemonic globalisation (Burawoy 2003). Indeed, his 'false optimism' led him to see in the anti-World Trade Organisation (WTO) protests in Seattle in 1999 the beginnings of a global counter hegemonic movement!

Well, that was the 'young' Burawoy; we now have an older Burawoy who dismisses his 'Pollyanna' phase. What this new school of GLS needs, he now believes, is a strong dose of 'uncompromising pessimism' to overcome their 'fanciful' ideas of a new labour internationalism. [See 'From Polanyi to Pollyanna: The False Optimism of Global Labour Studies, *GLJ* 1(2): 301 - 313.]

A key feature of GLS is its focus on agency, on labour as an active maker of 'spatial fixes', rather than simply a passive victim of the logic of capital. Only time will tell whether this privileging of agency and the experiments in new forms of labour activism and organisation that GLS describe, is over optimistic.

Optimism is an emotive word. Whether it is false or cautious depends not only on what the author thinks is possible, but also what is desirable. My short term goals for labour are quite modest: assisting working people in their struggle for an organisational 'voice' in the workplace and in society. *Grounding Globalisation: Labour in the Age of Insecurity* (GG) is a cautious case for incremental reform in the short term with a long-term radical vision of a participatory democracy. I call it *radical reform*.

GROUNDING GLOBALISATION

GG is an analysis of the response of workers and their households to the unregulated market. 'We do not, in this book', we argue, 'provide blueprints of how a counter-movement could be constructed. Instead, we begin the first step in such a project by grounding our analysis in the everyday lives of workers, their households and their communities in three places: Ezekheni (in South Africa), Changwon (in South Korea), and Orange (in Australia)' (p.17). We show how the global restructuring of white goods corporations is creating a profound experience of insecurity amongst workers, their families, and their communities.

GG is divided into three parts; in Part One we show how a high degree of concentration of capital in the white goods industry is the outcome of a process of capital accumulation driven by intense competition between private corporations, where 'one capitalist always strikes down many others' (Marx's *Capital*, Volume 1, quoted in GG, p. 38). So, for example, in 1982 there were 350 corporations producing white goods in Europe. By the mid-nineties, a mere fifteen companies controlled 80% of the European market (GG, p.38). Hyper-competition is leading, we demonstrate, to a return to 'market despotism' in all three workplaces we analyse.

In Part Two we go beyond the workplace to examine what we call the hidden abode of reproduction, the household and the communities within which they are embedded. Where we found similarity in the workplace; in the household and the community we found difference. We found resignation in the face of downsizing, cushioned by welfare in Australia; consent to capitalism in South Korea, leading to work intensification; and retreat into the household in South Africa in order to engage in various survivalist strategies in the informal economy. To understand labour in the global economy, we argue, it is necessary to examine workers as a totality, workers in society and in their historical context. 'Through following workers into their homes and communities', we suggest, 'the real differences in the working lives of those in Ezekheni, Orange and Changwon emerged' (GG: xi).

In all three sites the overwhelming response to rapid marketisation has been adaptation, with few exceptions, the most innovative being an unsuccessful experiment in globalising the struggle of Electrolux workers in Orange. These modest responses (summarized in Table 10.1, GG: 215) do not, by any stretch of the imagination, amount to a global counter movement.

THE DIALECTIC OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMAGINATION

Our approach to these largely adaptive responses to marketisation was to go beyond C Wright Mills' notion of the sociological imagination to embrace a political imagination. As a result, in Part Three we draw out the implications of the different experiments, institutional innovations and global connections identified in Part Two in order to imagine 'an alternative developmental path ... (which) would require a social floor of minimum income and social security benefits' (GG: 219).

This attempt at 'imagining' an alternative developmental path, is not some way-out revolutionary adventure, tilting at windmills as it were. Instead we swim very much with the current by grounding our political imagination in contemporary innovations in social policy in countries such as Brazil, India and South Africa. For Burawoy to describe these ideas as 'flights of fancy', (Burawoy, p. 305) 'ascending into heaven' (Burawoy, p. 305), or, most revealingly, allowing our 'political desires' to overwhelm us (Burawoy, p. 304), suggests a narrow understanding of GLS. Instead of trying to identify the potential for a counter movement, he believes we should have returned to a theoretical engagement with Polanyi. Indeed, he suggestively outlines a programme that involves no less than a Marxist reconstruction of Polanyi.

What made us develop a 'political imagination', rather than the more

conventional academic path of revisiting Polanyi? In researching and writing GG we were struck by the parallel between the left pessimism of seventies South Africa and the current period of left disillusionment. In memory of the late Richard Turner, whose attempt at 'utopian thinking' and active involvement in labour at the height of apartheid inspired a generation of activist intellectuals, we titled the last chapter 'The Necessity of Utopian Thinking'.

Burawoy's uneasiness with our attempt at linking our sociological analysis to a political imagination surprised me as he recently criticized C. Wright Mills for failing to do this. He argued that a 'sociological imagination is no guarantee of social transformation, the turning of personal troubles into public issues, as Mills implies, but this requires in addition a political imagination, forged through collective and collaborative practices with groups, organisations, movements beyond the academy. The expansion of Southern sociology depends on the dialectic of political and social imagination' (Burawoy 2010; 2). Which is it Michael; should sociologists exercise their political imaginations, or not?

BURAWOY'S FALSE DICHOTOMY

Dichotomies can illuminate but they can also caricature. Burawoy's use of dichotomies in framing the local versus global is a case in point. Should unions, Burawoy asks rhetorically, build ties with unions in other countries, or create broader solidarities with informal sector workers in their own countries (Burawoy: 6)? By posing the local and the global as alternatives – either you go global or you organise locally – Burawoy is presenting the reader with a false dichotomy. We go to some length to show how the global is often in the local and that it is no longer possible to see trade union organisation as a purely local activity. We draw on Tarrow's concept of 'rooted cosmopolitanism' to stress the importance of international activities being anchored in local organisation (Tarrow, cited in GG, p. 206).

WEAVING NARRATIVE WITH THEORY

Burawoy identifies a tension between a Marxian focus on exploitation and a Polanyian focus on commodification. We see these two theories as complimentary. We weave them into our narrative, showing how workers' responses are often a combination of both workplace struggles (exploitation) and community protest (commodification). We are in a period of transition not unlike early nineteenth century England when working people experimented with a variety of responses to the dislocating impact of industrialization such as Ludditism, Chartism, co-operatives and trade unions (Thompson 1963). It was only the trade union that was to endure as a permanent voice of employees in the workplace. Today the experiments are in organizing informal workers and the varieties of networks linking workers globally.

Our central concern in GG is to understand these responses, rather than trying to reconstruct theory. But it is precisely this kind of theoretical challenge that made Burawoy such an inspiration to generations of critical sociologists. It would be a matter of great sadness to me if, under the constraints we all find ourselves, he abandons this

role for the more comfortable academic past time of what Pierre Bourdeiu called ‘combat sport’.

REFERENCES

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