

## *Global Issues*

### *Unionism in One Country is no Longer an Option*

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

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Little wonder Burawoy concludes his analysis of Global Labour Studies (GLS) on a note of profound pessimism, for in arguing labour internationalism is no more than a 'flight of fancy ... a Marxian dream' where analysts 'clutch at straws', he is left with an assessment of local movements only, thus paying scant attention to the logic of accumulation and the implications of the new geometries of global corporate power (Burawoy 2010: 305). This restricted focus underlies his critique of *Grounding Globalization* (GG) where he asserts we present a New Labor Internationalism (NLI) disconnected from the experiences of workers in the three researched sites, where persons are 'trapped in localism'. Consequently, the book confirms the Marxian dream of internationalism is doomed, 'dashed' as it is 'on the rocks of localism' (306). He then states his own position: priority should be the creation of broader solidarities with informal workers at the local level rather than building such relations with unions in other countries. Indeed, the latter may undermine these local projects, which have a greater chance of success.

#### **NEW LABOR INTERNATIONALISM NOT IRREVOCABLY DISCONNECTED FROM LOCAL**

Far from viewing themselves as restructuring objects 'trapped' in private orbits, beset by private troubles (Mills 1959 [1970]: 10) a minority of Orange workers, who regarded the company's plans as unjust, challenged Electrolux. Crucially supported by the *Australian Manufacturing Workers Union* (AMWU), which is affiliated to SIGTUR, they strove to forge a new method of resistance, which took cognizance of the spatial scale of the corporation. A global network was formed and an Electrolux trans-national leadership structure created, which organized a global workshop in Sydney to plan counters to globally driven localized restructuring. This initiative was undermined when the Swedish metal union, bound as they are by partnership politics, opposed the strategy.

Nevertheless this failed experiment demonstrates choices to globalize the local are available. In capturing this, GG highlights a salient movement contradiction: restructuring creates feelings inimical to a social and political commitment, namely, insecurity, fear, anxiety, retreat into the self, fatalism. Yet certain of those who suffer thus still retain an inner resistance potential, provided a movement connects and channels their anger. GG provides evidence of this contradiction. This is no false optimism but a recognition of the contradictions of social being, crystalized by Harvey (2000, 117) who contends the 'transformative and creative capacities' of persons can 'never be erased ....'.

Even when treated as a commodity, persons still have the capacity to ‘contemplate alternative possibilities’ because of an innate sense of human dignity (2000, 199). These contradictions are embedded in the local and offer an opportunity to widen resistance to the global, understood as *local to local* spatial connectivity. Similar projects are multiplying from many different centres, as Bronfenbrenner (2007) shows.

For Burawoy these concrete struggles dissolve into ‘Marxian dreams’, implying an existence only in individual imagination. Rather than simplistic dismissal, the task of social science is to critically engage these NLI struggles, exposing their limitations and suggesting resolutions to moments of impasse. The eventual failure of the Orange experiment can contribute to such reflection for movements evolve out of reviews of failures as much as those relatively successful instances such as the global campaign against Rio Tinto (Sadler et.al. 2004, Lambert and Gillan 2010).

### NO REFERENCE TO LITERATURE ON THE NLI

Arguing thus, brings into focus theoretical issues central to sociology: the power of human agency, the critique of determinism and consequent inaction because of the ‘laws of history’ where Burawoy introduces the concept of ‘concrete fantasy’ and the power of imagination ‘in galvanizing a collective will’ with reference to Gramsci (Burawoy 2003, 203). This is what GG tries to achieve through uncovering a shaft of light in the gloom of the seemingly inevitable logic of capital. Were this a solitary instance of NLI emerging from the local, GG would indeed be ‘clutching at straws’. However evidence demonstrates the beginnings of a tectonic shift from national to global unionism (Bronfenbrenner 2007, Sadler and Fagan 2004, Herod 2001, Harrod and O’Brien 2002, Lambert and Gillan 2010 ).

Burawoy’s dismissal of labour internationalism is an assertion without reference to or engagement with the literature. Outright rejection produces an ‘uncompromising pessimism’ which implies corporate power is untouchable. This moment of crises of global capitalism is no time for Burawoy’s disillusioned theorizing but rather a moment for renewed public engagement by intellectuals who together with movement intellectuals, build from the lived contradictory experience of imposed change searching for new resistance pathways. Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2010, 17) recognize this when they conclude their assessment of European trade unionism: ‘Politically informed trade unionism in one country is no longer an option, if it ever was. In an era of globalization, the practical meaning of the slogan labour internationalism has also to be rethought’.

By failing to engage the NLI literature Burawoy also misses the significance of a new conception of globalizing the local, namely, its construction through a networked linkage *between local places* across geographic space in a struggle to build counter power through spatial scale. The presentation of this as a choice between unions building ties with workers in other countries *or* creating broader solidarities with informal workers within their own nation is a false dichotomy. One does not preclude the other. As the experience of SIGTUR reveals, horizontal solidarity within civil society is fertile ground to network globally.

## THE GLOBAL IS EMBEDDED IN THE LOCAL

Burawoy's argument takes no cognizance of theoretical developments in labour geography with regard to place, space and power.<sup>1</sup> For Massey (2005, 101) local places are criss-crossings in the wider power geometries that constitute both themselves and the global. Places are located within these spatial relations through the reach of global corporations and they are being adversely transformed, socially and often environmentally, by accumulation. For Raymond Williams, local places are sites of the internalization of external spatial forces producing feelings of domination *and* points of resistance (Harvey 2001, 163). Corporations represent the geographic logic of their power as inevitable hence the local has no option but to adapt reluctantly. Restructuring is advanced as a moral virtue and resistance seems unrealistic. Labour geography's theoretical response to this predicament is to emphasize agency reconfiguring relations between place, space and power with potential to transform places of adaptation to those of resistance.

Burawoy ignores these theoretical insights. His notion that internationalism is a diversion from *real* action at the local and should therefore be jettisoned fails to recognize how corporate construction of spatial relations *exists as a reality* structuring the local in ways which need to be responded to either by passive adaptation, which currently dominates landscapes, or through resistance at many locals networked and coordinated globally.<sup>2</sup>

## BURAWOY'S CONTRADICTIONARY APPROACH TO THE GLOBAL

To conclude, NLI should not be viewed in isolation from debates over the construction of a counter-movement. Contradicting his preceding arguments Burawoy contends (p. 311) such a movement would have to be *global* if human survival is to be secured. He states, '... the counter-movement to the third wave must *begin at the global level for it is only at that level* that it is possible to contest the destruction of nature, let alone tackle the machinations of finance capital' (p. 311, my emphasis). This conclusion to his paper is at odds with the logic of his preceding argument and it begs the question, how is such a movement to arise on the global stage, with the capacity to challenge the citadels of power in the absence of crafting such a movement from the ground up, connecting local places across the global, fighting the critical issues of work and economic insecurity, hyper-speculative and crisis prone finance capital and global warming, the crisis before all others?

Given the magnitude of these crises and recognizing how easy the slide into pessimism and inaction is, the struggle to construct a counter movement and refine new forms of power requires the activation of citizens in every place and country. On climate change it is a race against time. Burawoy's intervention concludes with this sense of urgency, but he is 'uncompromisingly pessimistic' of the prospects of such a venture. This dark conclusion, which if taken seriously, will stop every movement in its tracks, for it is only optimism of the will, a vision of a realizable utopia, a sense commitment to enduring social and human values, which drives human agency giving rise to social movements.

Agency may appear to be undermined by commodification, but as argued at the outset this fiction, this negation of basic humanity charges moral outrage, which can,

under certain conditions, produce movements. In missing this contradiction Burawoy is left only with a deadening pessimism. In contrast to this corrosive spirit, Harvey in his latest book *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (2010, 260) concludes, 'The Accumulation of capital will never cease. It will have to be stopped ... To do what has to be done will take tenacity and determination, patience and cunning, along with fierce political commitment born of moral outrage ... Political mobilizations sufficient to such a task have occurred in the past. They can and will surely come again. We are, I think, past due'.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For an excellent summary of the evolution of this theorization see McGrath-Champ, Herod and Rainnie (2010), 1-16.

<sup>2</sup>I refer to this process from below as 'working space' which analyses how unions and other civil society actors struggle to actively create new spatial structures to empower *the local*. See Lambert and Gillan (2010: 399).

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