

Book Review

Ronaldo Munck (2018) *Rethinking Global Labour after Neoliberalism*. Newcastle: Agenda Publishing.

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Reviewed by

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In *Rethinking Global Labour*, Ronaldo Munck has produced an important contribution to ongoing analyses of the potential role of global labour in shaping the global political economy and resisting capitalist exploitation. In this review, while appreciating Munck's empirical insights, I will nonetheless be rather critical of the underlying conceptual assumptions, which ultimately limit the impact of his findings.

Instead of submitting to doom and gloom when it comes to the implications of global restructuring for labour, Munck puts forward the bold claim that globalisation has provided labour with new opportunities for resistance. Not only capital has become integrated across borders because of globalisation. The "uneven nature of workers' resistance is also combined, and now we can talk realistically of the 'workers of the world' as a unified social presence facing the same problems and looking for similar outcomes" (p. 3). Throughout the volume, Munck invokes the emerging global working class, based especially on the global precariat supported by migrant labour, as the new, powerful subject able to rein in capitalist exploitation.

In his analysis, Munck makes a number of important contributions to our understanding of the potential future role of labour. First, he consciously appreciates the different struggles and experiences of labour in the Global South. Rather than regarding it as less developed than labour in the Global North and, therefore, in need of assistance by Northern trade unions, he sees the potential in Southern labour's strategies for the global working class as a whole. "If in the golden era it seemed that the workers of the North were the undisputed pioneers of organization methods and ideological innovation, in the era of globalization this role has in many ways passed to the workers of the South" (p. 130).

Second, he re-assesses the role of the global precariat not by understanding it as a separate class, but by recognising that it has increasingly become the dominant form of labour, not only in the Global South but increasingly also in the Global North. "By bringing precarity to the North, what globalization has done is to bring the workers North and workers South into a global working class" (p. 140).

Third, this is combined with a labour perspective of migration, so often overlooked by labour studies experts. While recognising migration as a problem for capital, Munck understands it as a potential positive impetus for labour and trade unions. "Certainly, labour is in movement in many diverse ways and its management is seemingly beyond even the most stringent border controls of most capitalist states" (p. 159). In short, Munck generates a positive image of the possibilities for an emerging global working class. "I would argue for the concept of a global precariat (encompassing migrants) as a current manifestation of the working class that is moving towards a

global working class” (p. 148).

As I see it, however, Munck’s reflections are based on two fundamental theoretical problems. First, he relies on Polanyi’s notion of “double movement”, envisaging that the emergence of an unfettered market around processes of global restructuring will (almost inevitably) lead to a counter-movement led by trade unions to re-embed market relations in a broader social set-up. “On the face of it, the global unions are a formidable social force, and, I would argue, a clear example of the Polanyian counter-movement, whereby social forces react against the destructive impact of the unregulated market” (p. 73).

In his analysis of transformations, as Adam David Morton (2018: 961) points out, Polanyi succumbs to a theoretical dualism “between an ‘economy’ embedded in social relations or social relations embedded in the ‘economy’”. Hence, Polanyi is unable to acknowledge the historical specificity of capitalism and the fact that it is the organisation of capitalist production around wage labour and the private ownership or control of the means of production, which produces this separate appearance of economy and social relations in the first place.

Unsurprisingly, Polanyi himself could only envisage a re-embedding of the capitalist economy within bourgeois social relations, a kind of capitalism with a human face. By drawing on Polanyi, Munck falls into the same trap and condemns his assessment of potential for change to reformist considerations. The fact that Munck does reflect on overcoming capitalism in the Conclusion of his book only indicates a misunderstanding of his own theoretical assumptions.

Second, Munck expresses an unwarranted optimism when assessing the potential role of his “emerging global working class”. This is not, however, due to his reliance on Polanyi, as is the case of many others inspired by this notion of double movement, labelled Pollyanna by Michael Burawoy (2010). Rather, the problem here is Munck’s autonomist Marxist approach, which one-sidedly celebrates labour’s agency without acknowledging the structuring conditions of capitalism.

Thus, Munck puts the capital–labour relationship at the heart of his understanding of historical development. “Capitalisms have always responded to strong labour movements through technological innovation, or through the shift of production to other locations” (p. 220). He thereby overlooks that capital does not only respond to labour militancy, but equally to inter-capitalist competition, itself the result of the way capitalist production is organised around the private ownership or control of the means of production and wage labour. As Marx pointed out, “under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him” (Marx, 1990 [1867]: 381). It is especially this inter-capitalist competition which drives capitalism’s relentless outward expansion in search for higher profits.

Hence, the task cannot be to paint an unwarranted, optimistic picture of an apparently emerging global working class. Instead, we need to assess soberly the current situation of labour through a historical materialist approach, which is able to conceptualise the key role of labour, broadly defined, in class struggle, while at the same time acknowledging the structuring conditions of capitalism constraining the range of strategies available to labour (Bieler and Morton, 2018: 36–50).

A brief overview of labour’s current situation suffices to caution against Munck’s optimistic picture. In Europe, since the defeat of Syriza in Greece in 2015, the left has been almost invisible at the European level. Gone are the days, when a multitude of groups and tens of thousands of activists gathered in European Social Forums claiming that “Another Europe is possible!” Many forces of labour such as in Scandinavia have refocused their attention on the national level, often without much success, as the recent electoral defeat of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom attests. In fact, it is the far right with its xenophobic, racist rhetoric which has become significantly

stronger in almost every national context.

Elsewhere, the picture is not much more promising either. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), South Africa's largest labour federation, has split and is deeply damaged through its decades-long alliance with the governing African National Congress and involvement in rolling out neo-liberal restructuring. The Brazilian Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), too, another hopeful, strong trade union in the past, is in crisis mode after the coup against the Labour Party's Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the election of the far-right Jair Bolsonaro as President in 2018. The so-called Pink Tide across Latin America in the early 2000s has been increasingly challenged by the right for some time, despite Nicolás Maduro hanging on in Venezuela and the recent elections of López Obrador as President of Mexico in 2018 and of a centre-left government in Argentina in 2019.

Of course, there is always resistance by labour. Large strikes have contested exploitation in Brazil, South Africa and India (Nowak, 2015, 2019) as well as China (Bieler and Lee, 2017), for example. Across the European Union, people have continued to resist the cutbacks of public education and health services or challenged the shortage of affordable housing (Bailey et al., 2017). Again, however, this does not warrant the notion of an emerging global working class, able to dictate its conditions to capital.

To be fair, when it comes to concrete empirical evidence, Munck is actually much more measured than his bold claims suggest. For example, he acknowledges that "our conclusion can only be a cautious one. Some notable 'success stories' have been mentioned, when trade unions responded imaginatively to the forces unleashed by globalization. This picture must be tempered, though, with an acknowledgement of the fundamental social weakening of labour during this period" (p. 135). Again, he seems to be completely unaware about the implications of his own conceptual assumptions.

Undoubtedly, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of labour's potential role in the global political economy. Munck's panoramic overview of current labour struggles in the Global South and North make it a stimulating and interesting read. In sum, despite the clear theoretical shortcomings, I recommend this book for reading.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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