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Global Issues

From Pollyanna to the Pollyanna Principle

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

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In Burawoy's 'From Polayni to Pollyanna; The False Optimism of Global Studies' in *Global Labour Journal*, [GLJ 1(2): 301-313] he critiques Evans, Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, among others for providing 'renderings that appeal to and search for laborist counter-movements to market fundamentalism', by drawing on 'optimistic renderings of Polayni', most particularly the Polaynian concepts of the 'so called double-movement, the countermovement to market expansion'. Burawoy argues these accounts are 'not clear in what way these movements are counter-hegemonic', asserting that they ultimately remain those of local (national) struggles generating local (national) not international effects, particularly negating their claim that they 'effectively build international solidarity' and hence challenge the hegemony of globalization (aka capitalism).

Burawoy (as always) provides food for thought especially when asking *which* is the most salient experience in our world today – exploitation or commodification? He argues for the latter and then proceeds to 'reconstruct Polayni' to illustrate that because it is the commodification of labour, money and nature (in today's 3rd wave marketization), 'thinking that the industrial sector' will remain the most effective site of resistance, is problematic. Burawoy thus cautions that '[O]ptimism today has to be countered by an uncompromising pessimism'. Instead, we need 'a careful and detailed analysis of the way capitalism *combines* the commodification of nature, money and labor, and thereby destroys the very ground upon which a 'counter-movement' can be built' (p. 311-312, my italics).

That is, it is 'Commodification, Stupid!: Of Nature, Money and Labour *Combined*'[1] (not exploitation) that is THE obstacle to the counter-movement and counter-hegemony. Burawoy asks: 'what possibilities are there for the counter-movement to third-wave marketization?' (p. 311) or whither the War of Position to nourish the War of Movement? Faced with scarcity of natural resources that through capitalism has attained (fictitiously) commodity status, will humanity resort to every 'man' or 'nation' acting for itself to secure their needs, even if it is at others' want?

This is a critique that challenges the 'life work' of Evans et al, but also innumerable others both known and less well-known who have struggled to live public sociology and remain optimistic that an alternative counter-hegemony (to capitalism) *is* possible. Re-engaging with J.K. Gibson-Graham (Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson), who wrote *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* (1996) is instructive in responding to Burawoy.[2]

It has most recently been claimed that *The End of Capitalism* has attained the status of a 'classic' in human geography (see Lee, Leyshon and Gibson-Graham 2010). In it, Gibson-Grahamn challenge the taken-for-granted nature of capitalism and seek to cultivate an anti-

capitalist imaginary, attempting to locate its discursive roots to illustrate its fragility and contingency. It is in their chapter 'Querying Globalization' in which the process of capitalist expansion is viewed through the lens of a rape script, that they offer a valuable insight. They state:

> For the left, the question is, *how* might we challenge the dominant script of globalization and the victim role it ascribes to workers and communities in both the 'first' and 'third' worlds? For, as Marcus[3] suggests, to accept this script as a reality is to *severely circumscribe* the sorts of defensive and offensive actions that might be taken to realize economic development goals (p. 126, my italics).

Gibson-Graham urge *difference* as their response: that is of 'supplanting the discourse of capitalist hegemony with a plurality and heterogeneity of economic forms' (p. 11) through which non-capitalist activities of household operating at a local sphere become visible and viable in the economic terrain; and then provide *recognition*, 'of the noncapitalist household economy (that) can be seen as potentially destabilizing to capitalist's hegemony' (p. 12) because it becomes populated with 'friendly monsters' (p. 21) who seek 'improvement', 'liberation', and 'equality' *on the basis of this difference* (p. 19, my italics). In sum, Gibson-Graham urge a 'resubjectivation' through which subjects take on novel economic identities, and subsequently re-claim a power that can potentially destabilize capitalism's hegemony.

While the world has moved on since the first edition, Gibson-Graham's arguments still resonate (Lee, Leyshon and Gibson-Graham 2010). Witness Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout's *Grounding Globalization*! Knowingly or unknowingly, Parts 1 and 2 illustrate how thinking 'difference' unearths acts of resistance that can destabilize capitalist's hegemony. Burawoy identifies two examples (p. 304-05): the alliance of labour and farmers in Orange to support an independent political candidate, and the linking of land and labour struggles in Ezakheni. However, given the urging for 'detailed and careful analysis', Burawoy argues that the authors have failed to show how their account of labour internationalism in Part 3 links to these accounts in Parts 1 and 2. Were workers members of the labour internationalism project SIGTUR described by Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout? How did this labour internationalism redress their continued exploitation? Given the authors' silence about these connections, Burawoy argues that this analysis remains grounded in the local (or national) level, with little potential to foster counter-hegemony.

Yet in describing how they cultivate an anti-capitalist imaginary, Gibson-Graham list *Strategy 1: Constructing the Straw Man*. They argue that most economic discourse is 'capitalocentric', meaning that other forms of economic and noneconomic social life are often understood primarily in reference to capitalism – (the same/deficient/complementary, etc.) (p. 6-11). Capitalism is represented as unified (rather than a set of practices), singular (in the sense of having no peer or equivalent) and characterized by totality. Concomitantly, effective transformative relations against capitalism can thus *only* be globally arrayed: 'It's the Global Stupid! (That Counts)'.

Burawoy's analysis appears to privilege a straw man of capitalism that is unified, singular, characterized by totality – and dominant. Furthermore, by relegating renderings of counter-movements by Evans et al to the local (or national) sphere and querying not just their internationalism but their potential to foster a counter-hegemony, Burawoy (as Gibson-Graham

argue) appears to privilege the global as the space for transformative action, and in so doing circumscribe the 'defensive and offensive' actions (that is, local actions) that may be taken to challenge the hegemony of capitalism. Sadly, workers and communities can only assume victim-status within this analytical frame.

Yet there now exists an array of analyses illustrating how *difference* makes a difference in activating agency for social change: that is, activism does not have only one hue (Swan and Fox (2010: 572). Thus, drawing on Duggan (2003), Swan and Fox elaborate that activism does not have to be left-wing, and quoting Cooper (1995), not all activists have to share the same politics (2010: 572). Drawing on Thomas and Davies (2005), Swan and Fox make two key observations: firstly, that the politics of resistance is not straightforward, it is not just oppositional, radical or progressive. Thus, as Burawoy observes, resistance can equate to consent (1979). Secondly however, and in reference to Gibson-Graham's concept of 'resubjectivation', Swan and Fox similarly observe that resistance practices are not just performed behaviourally but also discursively: that is, in addition to formal, collective practices of resistance, we need to interrogate how individuals intervene in meanings and subjectivities to 'create, appropriate and transform discourse' (as per Thomas and Davies, p. 576).

Thus, from this perspective binaries (such as exploitation or commodification) are not necessarily helpful in unravelling the repertoires of agency and strategies of resistance that workers and communities use to respond and redress the effects of neo-liberal capitalism, but re-thinking agency using this perspective may be. Consider the 2010 Australian Federal Election. The electorate used the (democratic) ballot box to deny the major (bureaucratic) political parties the ability to form government *by themselves,* forcing them to negotiate a compromise with two Australian Greens Party representatives, and three Independent candidates. The politics of this 'resistance' was not straightforward; activists did not share the same politics, but they have stimulated social change by re-shaping the meaning of what policies 'count' to 'win' an election. The issues negotiated in reaching a resolution illustrate this. Rather than the economy, they were: getting a price on carbon, allowing same-sex marriage, ending offshore processing of asylum seekers, Aboriginal land rights, abolishing junk-food advertising during children's TV viewing hours, and improving employment opportunities for Aboriginal workers (*The Australian* 2010, September 4-5, p.1).

Exploitation or commodification? Remaining local or having international ramifications? While only 'careful and detailed' analysis will unravel answers to these questions, three observations emerge: that capitalism has been unable to 'destroy the very ground upon which a "counter-movement" could be built (in Australia)' (Burawoy 2010: 312); the power of the local (as per the Australian proletariat) to foster a counter-hegemony against capitalism lives on; and, importantly, re-thinking agency differently may assist. The conclusion: From Pollyanna to the Pollyanna Principle? The Unconscious Bias Toward the Positive in Global Labour Studies (Long May it Flourish).

NOTES

[1]The title of Gibson-Graham's chapter 5 is 'The Economy, Stupid! Industrial Policy Discourse and the Body Economic'.

[2]It is ironic to return to Gibson-Graham in responding to Burawoy, noting their own observation that they have been 'cast, yet again, as the Pollyannas of (their) profession' (2002).

[3]Marcus, S. (1992).

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