

## *Global Issues*

### *Beyond Polanyi and Pollyanna – Oscar Wilde?*

*Peter Waterman, Global Labour Charter Project*

*A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.*

- Oscar Wilde

*The future is no longer what it used to be.*

- Buenos Aires grafito (cited in Sousa Santos, 1995: 479)

Given that *Grounding Globalisation* (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout 2010, henceforth GG) represented a positive statement of a case relating to global labour studies, it is a matter of regret that we have moved, within the *Global Labour Journal* into an exchange largely in attack/defence mode (see GLJ, Global Issues section, 1.2, 1.3).

I am also not too happy with the hypothetical claim for – or the hypothetical reduction of ‘Global Labour Studies’ to what has so far appeared or been mentioned in *Global Labour Journal* (GLJ). There are other cases, other theories, other strategies, other resources relating to this area. I am not saying there is no value in GG, GLJ and the present exchange. On the contrary, I have found much of it original, serious, informative and thought-provoking. But there does exist a broader universe of international labour theory, analysis and activity that finds little or no reflection in the debate so far.

By the time this note is published my own review of GG (Waterman 2011) should also be available. I consider GG a major and original work and one likely to become a significant resource for teaching on international labour as well as an important stimulant to major debate. The second point is already evidenced within GLS.

My regret, however, is that – denials or qualifications notwithstanding – GG is a work of labour imprisoned within liberal-democratic capitalism and its incrementalist discourses, and GG’s proposed strategies reproduce the twentieth century social-democratic tradition. I say ‘twentieth century’ because there was an emancipatory nineteenth century one; and there is also developing a twenty-first century social-democratic tradition – one that is opening itself to the dramatically transformed nature of global capitalism and to the newest global social movements contesting this (consider only Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay 2008, Bieler and Lindberg 2011).

It follows that the most GG can hope for is that in their three seriously untypical Southern cases (Australia, South Korea, South Africa) industrial unions and left political parties will bring about radical reforms within repentant national-capitalist polities (state-defined

nations). In 2011 and despite what the global justice and solidarity movement (GJ&SM) is now calling the 'crisis of capitalist civilisation', evidence of such repentance and such movements is still regrettably lacking. (I myself thought that a neo-keynesian world order would come out of the crisis. I was evidently mistaken).

The utopia which the GG authors are promoting must, therefore, be seen as one of the past. Sweden of the 1970s or 80s? On a world scale!? Or one designed in Geneva by the International Labour Organisation (in which unions have been self-subordinated with a 25% vote for almost 100 years)!!?! And such a utopia is proposed despite the fact that it is union identification with this utopia that continues to disarm 1) the unions of the North in the face of a new capitalism – red in tooth and claw, excavator and unmanned missile – but also 2) most of the unions of the South, for which the Northcentric welfare-capitalist utopia has become the only imaginable one!

Unfortunately, the overkill of Michael Burawoy does not even suggest a possible alternative to this, dismissing its GG's authors (along with Global Labour Studies in general!) as over-optimistic, and as hopelessly and falsely so. He sees the necessity today for not so much a class-based as a species(?) -based movement but concludes even here that

Some sort of global counter-movement may be necessary for human survival, but there is no historical necessity for it to appear...A counter-movement to prevent ecological disaster can only be imposed by authoritarian rule...There may be small counter-movements...but palliative care might forestall *any* collective commitment to contain capitalism's rapacious tendencies. (Burawoy 2010: 311)

Given the evidence for growing global protest against climate change, deforestation, genetically-engineered crops and animals, violence against women and gays, Frankenstein foods, pan(ic)demics, extractivism, I would be inclined to suggest that this is a 'false pessimism' and one that – as several of his respondents suggest (GLJ 1.3, Global Issues section) – is also one that cannot but discourage struggle.

I have to ask myself whether the combination in this exchange of an unrealistic optimism and an unqualified pessimism may not be due to 1) the heavy dependence on, or reference of both parties to Karls no. 1 and no. 2 (Marx and Polanyi), two major critical theorists of industrial capitalist society, labour discontent and emancipatory movement and 2) their further heavy reference to, if not dependence on, the distinction or opposition between the exploitation theory of the first and the commodification theory of the second.

I do not intend to enter this debate. It is my feeling that whatever theoretical, methodological, analytical or strategic insights or inspirations they might provide for global labour studies today, they are not – either singly or in combination – adequate for an emancipatory movement under our radically different capitalist conditions. Actually, the two Karls seem to have been not adequate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries either: neither the class-based strategies drawn from Marx nor the Society+State-based ones following (at least implicitly) from Polanyi, was crowned with more than temporary, partial – and tragically reversible – success.

I would suggest we therefore need to look at or for 1) new labour-related social movements and resources, 2) new theories of labour and social movement and 3) at least one major additional concept.

Let the last be the first. It is *alienation*, which I would like to understand in a much broader sense than the Marxist one (which reduces it to the capital:labour relationship in one stage of human development) as the taking away from humans of past powers (e.g. by hierarchy, enclosure, deskilling, centralisation/concentration, cultural destruction, racism, sexism, statification) and the denial to humanity of new powers (for useful production, self-government, for ecologically-friendly, sexually-diverse, tolerant, cooperative and solidary action). This understanding encapsulates or overlaps with both exploitation and co modification whilst being broader than both (compare Lefebvre 2002). Without denying the profound Marxist insight on the alienation of labour under capitalism, it seems to me that the experience of past (including pre-capitalist), present or future loss-as-theft is a growing cross-class and cross-community experience. It could thus deepen labour struggles whilst linking them with the rest of a humanity living under increasingly precarious conditions.

Secondly, then, new labour-related theorising/strategising. For example, that of Hardt and Negri 2005, Holloway 2010, Miller 2004, van der Linden 2008, Standing 2010, Bieler and Lindberg 2011, Huws (see <http://www.asah09.dsl.pipex.com/>), Carlsson 2008, and Hookes 2006. Let me only state here that these tend to see 'labour' in newer or broader terms than this debate has so far suggested. Such reconceptualisations/provocations might enable us to break out of the iron (or plastic, or cyberspatial) cage of capitalism in which workers and unions are still overwhelmingly trapped.

Finally (if firstly above), the new labour-related social movements. Let me mention here only the peasants/farmers, street-traders, migrants/immigrants, women workers/housewives/homeworkers – labour's others (see Waterman, 2010a). Or the Greater Toronto Workers Assembly (see Waterman 2010b). Or the Conference of the Democratic Left (see Satgar 2011) in South Africa. Or the labour presence at the US 2010 Social Forum in Detroit (see Fantasia 2010). A number of my citations above refer to another world of international labour movement activity that neither GG, Michael Burawoy nor his respondents show awareness of – in cyberspace. Most of these references are to an international labour cyberspace of an open, horizontal, dialogical and unmoderated kind. It is called UnionBook (<http://www.unionbook.org/>) and represents an experiment at creating an alternative kind of FaceBook focussed on the international labour movement.

Here's hoping that all so far involved in the present exchange will take a look at UnionBook, sign up for it, and stimulate discussion where 3,000 (and counting) labour movement activists might have access and be able to respond to it.

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