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Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History

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Marcel van der Linden's book '*Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*' is an encyclopaedic, thought provoking, tour de force on the field of labour relations that scholars from different disciplines should read (and possibly internalise). Written by a labour historian with the purpose of contributing to a global labour history freed from Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism, the book, by getting inspiration and using examples from, and establishing linkages with, adjacent disciplines and perspectives (from industrial relations to sociology, from development to political economic theories), goes beyond the field of labour history, contributing to a much needed reformulation of work and work relations within capitalism. Indeed, from the perspective of the reviewer and potentially of all those without a specialist historical background, the major contribution of the book has been to establish, with the use of illuminating empirical studies from different epochs and from different regions of the world, a set of theoretical departure points for the study of labour and labour relations that by their nature apply to different disciplines.

In this perspective, three sets of questions, particularly, are central to the book (p.9):

- What is the nature of the world working class? How can we define and demarcate that class, and which factors determine its composition?
- Which forms of collective action did this working class develop in the course of time, and what is the logic in that development?
- What can we learn from adjacent disciplines? Which insights from anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists are useful in the development of global labour history?

In order to answer these questions, the book is divided into four sections dealing with (in the author's own words): conceptualisations; varieties of mutualism; forms of resistance; and insights from adjacent disciplines. Although this structure fits well with the overall aims of the book to contribute with new concepts to a global labour history, in the following paragraphs I will consider specific issues treated in the book in the light of their applicability and value to contemporary studies that put labour and labour relations at the centre of their analysis. Centrality of labour means here both uncovering the mechanism through which the wealth produced within capitalism is contemporaneously created and hidden to workers, and envisaging strategies for their collective emancipation.

In the first part of the book, Van der Linden proposes a new broader conceptualization of the world working class *less oriented to the exclusion than the inclusion of various dependent or marginalised groups of workers*. (p.10). Departing from the idea, emphasised in Marx's work, that 'free' wage labour would be the only form of labour commodification within capitalism, Van der Linden, by looking at the historical dynamics and patterns of capital accumulation, argues that work has been organised in different ways, giving space to a variety of forms of labour exploitation. While the wage workers of the industrial proletariat of the 20th century have, in their number and central position, certainly epitomised the idea of class and workers' emancipation, in reality it is possible to identify, both in historical and current perspective, the co-existence of a variety of intermediate positions, of 'grey areas', between wage labour and other forms of work exploitation. In this sense, Van der Linden distinguishes between four different possible types of labour commodification depending on the combination of the following conditions: a) the carrier of labour power is the possessor of it (autonomous commodification) b) the carrier of labour power is not the possessor (heteronomous commodification), c) the carrier sells his or her own labour power, d) the carrier does not sell his or her own labour power. Further variations can then be identified by looking at the degree of autonomy/dependency workers have in respect to their employers for what concern: a) labour capacity, b) means of labour, c) labour product, d) work of the other household members, e) relationship with the employer outside production, f) relationship with fellow workers in the labour process.

Of all these variations and forms, the 'coerced commodification of labour power' (p. 34), would be the common denominator for the identification of a class of 'subaltern workers'.

This brief summary cannot give more than an overview of Van der Linden's contribution and missed are all the subtleties, connections, implications and empirical examples abundantly used by the author all along the first chapters of the book, where the call for a broader conceptualization of the working class is powerfully argued and clearly laid out. While the analysis is overall convincing, historically solid, and provides useful classifications for the study of workers worldwide in the global era, a number of questions are raised by this 'enlarged' (as compared to the 'narrow nineteenth-century concept of the proletariat we find in Marx' (p. 18)) reconstruction.

Is the diversity of work relations within capitalism something new? To what extent is the emphasis on varieties of labour commodification helping to identify a class based strategy for collective action? What's the link between a new way of defining the working class and forms of collective action? Is classification per se enough and how this does help in framing processes of working class formation?

Many Marxists would argue that heterogeneity of jobs, work relations and forms of labour commodification, has always characterised capitalism. Marx himself, while emphasising the potentially emancipatory role of the industrial working class because of the central position this had in the production of wealth, was aware and commented on various occasions about the many different forms in which human labour could be coerced and this in the sphere of both production, circulation and reproduction.(1) Thus, far from ignoring existing differences, there was in Marx a clear hierarchy and preference for the industrial working class, not just because this represented, for its relations with capital in the sphere of production, a class in itself, but potentially as a revolutionary subject.(2) This double aspect of class, linking theoretical categorisation related to the type of work relations with issues of action, identification and organisation, epitomised in the class in itself/class for itself formula, remains crucial to the analysis of class within current capitalism.(3) In

other words and independently of formal class identification, is there today a new revolutionary subject that for its role within the structure of capitalism may substitute and/or integrate the 'old' free wage labourers?

We may all agree that, today at a greater speed than in the past, the expansive character of capitalism is producing *a permanent fluidity of labor relations in all continents* (p. 363), characterised by a 'transcontinental' precariousness and flexibility of work, marginalisation of workers, increase of informality, all well represented by processes of de-localisation and outsourcing of manufacturing and services through the global commodity chains. This changed reality might well justify attempts to enlarge the working class concept as convincingly as Van der Linden does introducing useful distinctions between occupations and work and offering, in this way, a less Eurocentric reconstruction. However, I believe it also imposes us to think about the possibilities, in a context where a new international division of labour is emerging (4), of collective identification between different groups of workers and of their collective articulation and resistance to the dominant system. Coming back to the question formulated above, what is then the link between a new way of defining the working class and forms of collective action?

This concern seems to be also the *leit-motif* of much of the analysis presented in the central part of the book that dedicates seven chapters to detailed studies of different forms of collective response to capital domination, including both traditional forms and organisations of workers' resistance (strike, trade unions) and associational practices for self-help and production (mutualism, cooperativism). Despite their historiographic relevance, I do not think these chapters help to link the theoretical sophistication of the enlarged concept of subaltern workers proposed by Van der Linden with current realities. While it is true that Marx's identification of the industrial working class as revolutionary subject has to be revised, in the light of changes in the global society, the emphasis on trade unions and strikes, which epitomise the limits and possibilities of the 'restricted' vision, is somehow contradictory. This contradiction is also reinforced by the institutional approach of the chapters. After opening the chapter on strikes (chapter nine) with reference to the many forms in which subaltern workers can defend their interests ('sometimes openly and sometimes secretly, sometimes individually and sometimes collectively' (p. 173)) and a large empirical exposition of this, the rest of the chapter and chapter eleven on trade unions, which is logically linked, turn then on a very meticulous but extremely rational, pre-defined view of collective action in workplaces, which does not account for the spontaneity on which subaltern workers' resistance is often built (as the author says at different points in the book, eg. p. 213). There is an underlining tendency, especially among industrial relations scholars, to reduce all forms of collective action to the formula- trade unions-leaders-strikes-collective bargaining, what I call elsewhere (5) 'institutionalised collective action', that I think represents a major problem in formulating alternative organisational strategies for workers. I am sure Van der Linden does not underestimate this, but a chapter collecting the insights coming from the experiences of spontaneous workplace resistance and organisation (building on chapter eight on producers cooperatives and including workers' councils and factory occupations) may have spread light on alternative forms of work organization and resistance available to subaltern workers, and especially to those whose level of autonomy from capital is reduced.

Considering again the linkages between definition of working class and collective action, the second set of questions identified in the book, I am not convinced the part on 'varieties of mutualism' adds to the argument. While it is true that mutualism may implies the development of solidarity linkages and collective identification, these associations, whether temporary or permanent, remain forms of self-help and defence of working class people that are based more on the role of workers as consumers in society than on their productive function. Consumer protests, consumer and service cooperatives and other forms of mutualism may all be valid attempts to defend workers from the vagaries of the market but do not contest the logic of the system on which exploitation and domination are based. By the contrary, workers' collective decision to establish producers' cooperatives, eliminating capitalists from the sphere of production, might be seen as forms of collective action that for their nature have a strong emancipatory potential.(6)

Overall, how far does the book go towards a global labour history? Are linkages between the enlarged working class concepts and strategies for workers' collective action established? What kind of insights for future, interdisciplinary research?

In a previous review of the same book, Peter Waterman was pointing to the fact that 'There is here only one chapter which ends with at least some "speculations about the future" (p. 280) and that is chapter 12 on labour internationalism and this within a book that could be read as if it were an archaeological study of a vanished or vanishing species'.(7) I basically agree with the spirit of Waterman's observation (and the new title he proposed for the book, *Workers of the World: Unite!*), which is moreover reflected in the same chapter 12 where, again, the emphasis is on formal institutions rather than on the perspectives for 'real life' workers' alliances and coalitions (something recently developed, for instance, by Bieler et al (8)). But, this notwithstanding, I think in the last chapter some important predictionss are made about the future and suggestions are offered for the development of new research lines that may help to establish interconnections (teleconnections) between the diversity of global labour relations and subaltern workers' collective actions.

As van der Linden says in the conclusions of his book, 'the rebuilding of the ship of labour history is in progress and … we still lack a lot of timber' (pp. 359–60). Hopefully this review will contribute to this collective effort and help generate the knowledge to strengthen working class organizations.

Notes

1. For example see N. Iñigo Carrera, 'El concepto de clase obrera', in *Labour Again Debates: Reconceptualising the Working Class* (2003) < http://www.iisg.nl/labouragain/documents/inigocarrera.pdf [2]> [accessed 4 March 2010] or E. De la Garza, '*Comentarios al artículo del profesor Marcel Van der Linden [3]*', in *Labour Again Debates: Reconceptualising the Working Class* (003) http://www.iisg.nl/labouragain/documents/delagarza.pdf [3] [accessed 4 March 2010].Back to (1)
2. B. Fine and A. Saad Filho, *Marx's Capital* (London, 2004), p. 167-170.Back to (2)
3. R. Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley, 1988); R. Hyman, 'Marxist thought and the analysis of work', in *Social Theory at Work*, ed. M. Korczynsky, R. Hodson and P. Edwards (2006).Back to (3)
4. M. Taylor, *Global Economy Contested: Power and Conflict Across the International Division of Labour* (London, 2008).Back to (4)
5. M. Atzeni, *Workplace Conflict: Mobilization and Solidarity in a Developing Country* (Basingstoke, 2010).Back to (5)
6. D. Egan, 'Toward a Marxist theory of labor-managed firms: breaking the degeneration thesis', *Review of Radical Political Economics* 22(4), 1990, 67–86.Back to (6)
7. P. Waterman, 'Review of *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labour History* by Marcel van? der Linden', *Development and Change*, 2009, 40 (4) 809–10.Back to (7)
8. A. Bieler, I. Lindberg, I. and D. Pillay, *Labour and the Challenges of Globalization: What Prospects for Transnational Solidarity?* (London, 2008).Back to (8)

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