

Chapter 1

Re-engaging with Agency in Labour Geography

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The erosion of the Keynesian welfare state and the intensification of neoliberal economic globalization have inevitably brought issues concerning the welfare and working conditions of labour to the forefront both in the global north and the global south. The era of expanded reproduction, which was characterized by the protection of infant industries producing for an internal mass market and the inclusion of trade unions as important bargaining partners has, since the crisis of the 1970s, been supplanted by a search for profits through accumulating by dispossessing the masses of public goods and benefits (Harvey 2003), and a quest for gains in productivity and for increases in the rate of exploitation to stave off the crisis of Fordism (Lipietz 1982). The new accumulation regime went hand in hand with the rise to hegemony of the neoliberal ideology preaching supply-side policies and competitiveness. States should not protect industries unable to compete in the international market, but rather roll back its interventions in the economy. The emphasis put on exports and attracting foreign direct investments led to efforts to boost the competitiveness of localities, thus triggering a race to the bottom in labour legislation and wages (Chan and Ross 2003, Silver 2003). By dispossessing workers of their legal protection, but also of jobs through relocation, workers become, according to Harvey (2003), the equivalent of a reserve army. Trade unions can thus be held in check, paving the way for the needed rise in the rate of exploitation. This new accumulation regime has provided a common experience for workers worldwide through, for instance, attempts at disbanding unions by casting them as scapegoats for economic recession.

It is against this backdrop we understand the growing interest for labour issues in Human Geography in general, together with a growing concern with the agency and resistance of labour in the global south (Kelly 2001, Hale and Wills 2005, Cumbers et al. 2008, Lier 2007, Webster et al. 2008, Ferus-Comelo 2009). In the current economic climate of recession and faltering recovery, it is the aim of this book to develop a better and fuller appreciation of labour market processes and regulation in developed and developing countries alike. We seek to start a discussion as to how theoretical perspectives on both labour in general, and the organizations of the labour movement in particular, can be refined and redefined. Hence, a major objective is to investigate, systematize and further develop significant insights gained by geographers engaging with labour over the last couple of decades. In so

doing, several of the contributions explore how theoretical developments can be made by revisiting classical texts on labour and cross-fertilizing them with recent debates in geography.

As the title of this book implies, the contributors have made an attempt to further the work started by Andrew Herod, who in two seminal articles from 1995 and 1997 introduced the concept of Labour Geography. His point of departure was a critique of both the neoclassical Economic Geography of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Marxist Economic Geography of the 1980s for a deficient attention to labour. In his view, neoclassical Economic Geography is ‘fundamentally descriptive of labor, and it examines the geography of economic activity from the explicit perspective of capital’ (Herod 1997: 7). Likewise, he argues that the priority given to capital in Marxist geography renders labour a reactive agent only able to resist, at best, and not to take the initiative in struggles. Herod thus points to the need for conceiving of labour as a (pro)active agent in the production of economic geographies and not merely a passive victim of the dictates of capital. Hence, labour ought to be examined as an agent that can make significant changes for its own sake, and workers are seen as capable of shaping the economic geographies of capitalism based on their self-reproduction on a daily and generational basis. Important in this regard is that the agency of labour may not necessarily be expressed only through their collective organization, a supposition which means that we also need to pay attention to the agency of unorganized labour (Kelly 2002, Rogaly 2009). Moreover, Herod (1995) argues that neglecting the agency of workers has grave implications since it is not a far cry from implying that their actions are inconsequential, an assumption which may lead to political resignation. However, Herod does agree with Marxists that there are limits to the agency of labour, although adding that the same applies to capital.

In sum, Herod argues that this warrants a new approach to labour that he refers to as Labour Geography, which contrasts the more passive approach that the conception of geography of labour entails and that the term depicts. However, despite allegiances to Labour Geography as a source of inspiration it varies to what extent and in what ways labour is given analytical primacy. Jonas (1996, 2009), for instance, is more concerned with the ‘structures and constraints under which wage labor exists “despite itself”’ than ‘labor as an economic and political agent “for itself”’ (Jonas 2009: 62). Similarly, being concerned with labour regulation at the macro-scale, Peck (1996) can be said to apply a political economy approach inspired by the regulation school.

Labour Geography contributes to both the discipline of Economic Geography and the field of labour studies in two important ways. First, as already seen, the emphasis on the agency and interests of labour is an important corrective to the one-sided focus in Economic Geography on understanding and representing the interests of capital. Second, Labour Geography provides an approach to place, space and scale that not only underlabours explanations of the plight of workers but also opens for contestation and analyses of strategies of resistance (Herod 1995, 1997, 2001). Hence, space is regarded as a source of power and is thus not

only conceived of as an arena or reflection of society, but also as fundamental to the constitution and functioning of society, as seen for instance in Harvey's (1982) concept of 'spatial fix'. Herein lies a source of potential struggle since the geographies produced by capital attenuate the internal contradictions of capitalism, paving the way for increased profits, and may thus be contrary to the geographical visions of labour (Herod 1997). Such understandings have been a source of inspiration also for researchers in the wider realm of labour studies, especially the understandings 'of how markets, governance and social responses are embedded in place': that processes and events at the local scale should be linked with processes and events at the global scale, that labour is not only local and capital not only global, and of 'spatial fixes' as a solution to the problems of capital accumulation (Webster et al. 2008: 14).

According to Wills (2009), Labour Geography has matured over the years and has gradually widened its thematic approach to encompass most of the significant debates within the wider field of Human Geography and has thus become more mainstream. Among the themes are public policies that affect labour, work and identity, class and identity, the place of labour in multi-scalar civil society and global justice. In the same vein, Castree (2007) argues that Labour Geography as a field has few analytical boundaries. On the other hand, theoretically he characterizes the armoury of Labour Geography as heavily influenced by Marxian, feminist, anti-racist and institutionalist approaches. As a corollary, Labour Geographers are more often than not on the left side of politics with a continuing commitment to critical theory. In his view, Labour Geographers need to ask systematic questions about the content and aims of Labour Geography, and to meet analytical challenges pertaining to transnational scales of organizing, connections between trade unions and new social movements, the micro-geography of employment, how employers, as well as workers, use geography in struggles, labour migrants and to questions arising in the global south. More specifically, Castree (2007) argues that there are seven areas in which Labour Geography is still quite undeveloped: agency is still under-theorized and under-specified, migration is not given due attention as a topic of analysis, the state is weakly thematized and theorized, geographical concepts are not synthesized, wider questions of how people live and seek to live are not addressed properly, moral geographies are taken for granted and Labour Geographers need to address the normative side of Labour Geography which is weak in areas such as evaluation and policy. Lier (2007) adds to these the necessity of including attention to often-neglected groups, voices and places, such as for instance workers in the informal economy, and more research on issues pertaining to labour in the global south. Furthermore, he also criticizes the overemphasis on studies of labour in the manufacturing sector.

The aim of this book is to contribute to the on-going discussion of what issues need to be dealt with in future research. The emphasis of the book is on labour, which is theorized as an active agent able to mobilize and become a social force resisting the strategies of states and companies. However, we argue that this requires a more systematic theorization of the agencies of the state and capital as

well, since agency is understood as relational. In relation to the above calls made by Castree (2007) and Lier (2007), we want to engage in the debate on agency, discussing the collective and individual agency of labour.

Agency is thus a recurrent theme in this volume and we would like to provide some introductory remarks on our standpoint. In line with Jary and Jary (2000: 9), we understand agency as human action that makes a difference to social outcomes, and as 'the power of actors to operate independently of the determining constraints of social structure'. In other words, social structures do not determine how agents must think and act, although they do define certain situational logics (Creaven 2000). Hence, agents and agency are not structurally determined even though they are structurally conditioned. Furthermore, agents may exert influence on the existing structures either through reproducing or changing them. The interplay between agents and structures can be understood as a never-ending series of cycles consisting of structural conditions, social interaction and structural development.

Furthermore, we have with this book contributed to an expansion of Labour Geography's study area, geographically to the global south, and analytically to encompass the challenges of organizing workers in the informal economy as well as temp workers. Agency might thus be linked to geography, and North America and Europe have for quite some time represented the empirical 'heartland' of research in Labour Geography. While the agency of workers have, as we have seen, been emphasized, this pertains largely to workers in the global north, while early Labour Geographers tended to regard workers in the global south as passive victims of imperialist capital (Herod 1997). Moreover, our case studies comprise both the manufacturing and the service sectors. Some of the contributions to this book also demonstrate the merit of the concept of labour regimes, primarily the analytical value when explaining working conditions, but also to some extent regarding the lives of workers more holistically.

As Labour Geographers, we discuss the concepts of space and spatial fix in relation to the agency of labour and address issues of union renewal. We agree with Herod (2003) that scale should not solely, or even primarily, be conceived of as a hierarchical ladder ranging from the local to the global, but rather as a network consisting of horizontal relations as well as vertical. Consequently, horizontal relations between workers and their organizations in two or more places represent a form of upscaling and may be considered a starting point of a global response despite being based on local-local linkages (Webster et al. 2008). This becomes all the more important if we heed Webster et al.'s (2008) argument that capital needs to be confronted at multiple scales simultaneously, and that it is not necessary for labour to conquer local, regional, national and global scales in a sequential manner.

The book derives from the conference *Theoretical Approaches in Labour Geographies* arranged by the Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo 14–15 May 2008 in collaboration with the IGU Commission on the Dynamics of Economic Spaces. However, in a fast-growing field of research, a single volume of seventeen thematic chapters cannot provide an exhaustive account or offer full justice to all of the above issues. Hence, keeping to the analogy

of missing links, we have attempted to assume the role of a goldsmith linking contributions that in different ways highlight the various issues, complement each other at the thematic level and at the same time explicitly or implicitly link to other contributions across the thematic divide rather than a welder seeking to produce a solid and uniform cast. This breadth of approach serves to underscore the complexities of the issues which Labour Geographers deal with. The group of authors comprises internationally renowned researchers in Labour Geography, established researchers with an interest in labour research and young researchers.

Plan of the Book

Part I of this book, 'Linking Approaches in Labour Geography', sets the agenda by discussing where Labour Geography stands today and by identifying its challenges with an emphasis on the agency and spatiality of labour.

In Chapter 2, Herod maps the genealogy of Labour Geography and points to some of its lacunas. Concurring with Castree (2007), Herod argues that despite the emphasis on workers' agency being a main contribution, it is also one of the areas which requires attention in the future. Labour Geography started out as an attempt to qualify the crude argument that while capital is capable of commanding space, workers are passively trapped in place. First, Herod argues that neither of the two agents are monoliths. Different segments of capital have 'different degrees of place fixedness', while some workers are more geographically mobile than others. Such differences also mean that workers have to negotiate spatial interest and class interest. Second, he re-emphasizes his earlier argument that workers are active geographic agents striving to create their own spatial fixes, although they cannot do so under conditions of their own choosing. Consequently, space is not simply a container or an expression of social processes, but is actively produced, i.e. there is a politics to space (above). In Herod's view, agency is usually employed in a not very nuanced manner, and he proposes to differentiate it along Aristotelian lines. Aristotle differentiated causality into material, formal, efficient and final. This means that causal powers derive from components (material cause), conceptions, triggering events, and overall purpose (telos) respectively. Furthermore, Herod challenges fellow Labour Geographers to expand their empirical basis geographically and historically to encompass other social formations than those of the industrial capitalist societies and socially to include non-work spaces and non-unionized workers.

In Chapter 3, Coe and Jordhus-Lier search for an understanding of the agency of labour in the context of neoliberalization. Their major argument is that the contemporary fragmentation of labour agency as a political project necessitates theoretical antidotes to the conceptual fragmentation of labour agency. They recommend Labour Geographers not to let go of the insights established in Labour Geography over time; that all workers are embedded in structures of capital, state and community, and that labour agency is a relational concept. Unpacking

agency along the dimensions of geography, capital is discussed in terms of global production networks and the state is analysed in terms of its different roles as regulator, container of labour practices, provider of basic services, political apparatus, employer, and boss. In their discussion of community, they advocate a holistic understanding of the worker. Workers are embedded in local communities, which they rely upon when the workplace is put at risk. Communities also represent opportunities for mobilization along many lines. They are sites of recruitment and organization around new scales where identification of alternative targets for action is undertaken. The approach advocated by Coe and Jordhus-Lier serves to highlight that workers' room for manoeuvre, and thus labour agency, varies immensely in time and space, and that our understanding of it necessitates multiple theoretical tools.

Early Labour Geography did not differentiate between workers as individual agents and workers as collective agents. Differentiation between union leadership and its rank-and-file membership also came later. Hence, Part II of this volume focuses on the collective agency of labour and indicates a growing interest in research on the relevance of traditional unions and their changing strategies in the present national and global economic contexts.

In Chapter 4, Andrew Cumbers and Paul Routledge explore how trade unions attempt at meeting the challenges of globalization of capital and new networks of production by forming global union federations (GUFs). They introduce the concept of 'entangled geographies' to denote the complexities revealed when strategies and practices of GUFs are studied. The authors find that global connections of unions open up possibilities for trans-national labour solidarity, but that different subject positions of place-based, though not bounded, social actors infuse union operations. They show how broad visions of solidarity collide with local and national interests. This reflects the spatial and organizational logics of the union movement, the weaknesses of top-down models of solidarity where national and international levels dominate. The authors therefore advocate more locally based and grassroots forms of union action.

In Chapter 5, Ryland delves into the issue of international solidarity by examining how trade union agendas that aim to promote labour internationalism are perceived by union members. She argues that Labour Geography has failed to look beyond workers as economic beings and that it has not really managed to grasp the agency of workers. With the theoretical point of departure that workers should be studied as social beings who possess a number of different identities, she concludes that union membership is not automatically conducive to altruistic solidarity with global partners. Her findings corroborate Hyman (1999) that labour solidarity requires construction by political communication and education. While executives in the union that she studied supported internationalism, grassroots members were more sceptical and perceived it as a top-down process. However, when commonalities with workers abroad were identified in discussions on internationalism, grassroots members also became more supportive. This way she

has also identified different collective agencies within one union and reasons why it occurs.

Theoretically Chapter 5 draws on the notion that workers are social beings with multiple identities. In Chapter 6, Bergene elaborates this in the discussion of how to navigate the chaotic consciousness of the trade union movement. Bergene revisits the long-standing debate on labour consciousness and she argues that much of the debate is marked by an overly structural determinism. By letting the philosophy of critical realism underlabour a revised framework, these theories are refined by the introduction of the term *chaotic consciousness*. The chapter argues that what has been termed trade union consciousness is not really a particular consciousness as such, but rather an expression of a chaotic consciousness derived from structural positionings, ideology and other concrete, and in some instances contingent, factors pertaining to the individuals working in the union bureaucracy. Finally, the author provides some reflections on how unions may navigate this chaotic consciousness, drawing on Gramsci's discussion of democratic centralism in political parties and Freire's Dialogical Method. Chapter 6 thus cross-fertilizes theories on trade unions with perspectives from both studies of political parties and pedagogy.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 deal with different aspects of trade union renewal at the national scale. This ranges from new ways of organizing and campaigning that are characteristic of Schumpeterian unionism, to recruitment of temporary workers and merger between organizations in the formal and informal economy.

In Chapter 7, Tufts challenges the binary conception of business unions and social movement unions based on a study of the Canadian branch of UNITE-HERE. This is a union formed through a merger of textile (UNITE) and hotel (HERE) workers in 2004. By careful comparison between the specific union practices of UNITEHERE and the ideal-type of defensive Atlantic unionism and the ideal-type social movement unionism, he has developed an analytical framework to examine and explain labour union renewal, what strategies are applied and the effectiveness of these to hold the line against neoliberalism. Among the parameters looked into are intra-institutional organizing in terms of recruitment and servicing and collective bargaining, extra-institutional organizing with emphasis on coalition building, international solidarity and mergers, and what are the central labour bodies in this. In addition, the analytical framework includes labour-management relations, such as cooperation and training, and labour-state relations in the areas of economic development and labour market regulation. The UNITEHERE is then conceptualized as a Schumpeterian union. Tuft's work on Schumpeterian unions continues Jessop's (1993) theorizing of the Schumpeterian workfare state.

Contemporary trade unions face a dual challenge of reduced membership and increase in the number of casual workers that is difficult to organize at industrial sites. They need to develop strategies to kill these two birds with one stone, i.e. organizing temporary workers and thus get new members. In Chapter 8, Meyer and Fuchs apply the concept of dynamic capabilities, which was originally developed

to understand learning processes within large organizations, to understand this learning process. The concept guides the investigation of how unions adapt to changes in socio-economic framework conditions. Meyer and Fuchs exemplify how dynamic capabilities may develop, how they vary regionally and at multiple scales, and discuss the relative merits of structural, organizational and person-oriented perspectives in explaining their findings. Their contribution demonstrates the merits of being theoretically eclectic; searching for fruitful perspectives within organizational sciences and Economic Geography.

Another attempt at trade union renewal is addressed by Andrae and Beckman in Chapter 9. The recent efforts of the Nigerian textile workers union (NUTGTWN) to negotiate a merger with an association of local tailors have inspired the authors to discuss the potential of organizing across the formal-informal divide. With the industrial collapse in Nigeria unions are losing members and it is a big challenge to protect the rights and welfare provisions that the workers have attained. At the same time, the informal economy suffers difficult working conditions and limited social welfare. Social policy is important to the welfare of both workers and the unemployed as well as the credibility of unions. Hence, the authors argue that a merger with associations in the informal economy could focus on welfare services such as water, health and education. These are arenas in which the state has proved incompetent. The function of the merger will thus be to voice demand and to discipline state institutions through pressure from below. The contribution is hypothetical in its approach, but contributes to a most important, but unfortunately rather under-researched subject area, in Labour Geography.

In Part III on the politics of labour, relations between agencies of collective labour, agencies of the state and agencies of capital are played out. Chapters 10 and 11 pay particular attention to contextual conditions and draw on Gramsci's notion of an historic bloc in this endeavour. While contextual conditions are important in Chapter 12 and 13 as well, the main focus is on labour regimes. While Chapter 12 highlights the importance of paying attention to welfare regimes and political regimes in explanations of changing labour regimes, Chapter 13 discusses links between the national scale and the local scales in labour regulation and how this affects local labour control regimes. It also discusses how and why different types of capital influence local labour control regimes at the workplace level.

More concretely, in Chapter 10 Jauch and Bergene provide an analysis of the contextual embeddedness of trade unions and how the involvement of trade unions in struggles for independence, or national-popular struggles as Gramsci terms them, impacts upon their subsequent development. Drawing on lessons from Namibia, the authors argue that trade union politics and strategies must be analysed in relation to the socio-political context since trade unions do not make independent decisions formulated in a vacuum. Merely emphasizing the agency of workers and unions is thus not sufficient, since the way this agency is exerted depends to a large extent on contextual conditioning.

Taking Harvey's concept of spatial fix as a point of departure, Doucette argues in Chapter 11 that attempts at understanding the agency of labour need to

delve more deeply into the political processes external, though related, to capital accumulation. In order to undertake this task, Doucette proposes a framework combining the insights gained through theories within the field of political economy on spatial fixes with a Gramscian perspective on hegemony and civil society. Most importantly, Doucette calls for abandoning abstract analyses of class relations in which capital and labour are reduced to economic agents in favour of analyses of the multiple sets of power relations in concrete social formations. As such, the agency of labour cannot be regarded as confined to the tension between wages and profit, but rather rendering labour both an economic and a political agent. In Doucette's view, Herod's attempt to further develop Harvey's concept of spatial fix to include the agency of labour has strengthened our understanding of the relation between capital accumulation and the wider socio-political expanse in which it is embedded. His analytical framework is employed in a case study of labour relations in South Korea, which addresses the transition from an authoritarian regime exerting labour control through a coercive apparatus to a more democratic regime. For instance, by establishing bodies for social cooperation, civil society organizations such as unions are directed by the state through consent.

In Chapter 12, Knutsen and Hansson explain labour activism in transition economies with reference to both the micro-politics of the workplace and the macro-politics of the state, commonly referred to as labour regimes. It is argued that in studying the power relations between state, capital and labour, their spatial embeddedness must be addressed. Providing empirical examples from the transition economies China and Vietnam, the chapter argues that processes of commodification and decommodification of labour and welfare are of particular importance when trying to understand the dynamics of labour regimes and labour activism. Studying transition economies provides the authors with a unique vantage point, since the negotiation between commodification of labour after state socialism and processes of decommodification through regulation are of pivotal importance for labour's vulnerability and thus leverage. In the same vein, it demonstrates the complexities of power relations between labour, capital and the state.

In Chapter 13 Magnusson, Knutsen and Endresen address how and why different workplace regimes develop in the same industrial sector in one local society. The chapter demonstrates how Gramsci's theory of hegemony and historic bloc can be applied as a theoretical tool in analysing national labour relations and its links to the local scale, and to analyse relationships between capital and labour at the workplace. However, in order to explain differences in local workplace regimes it is necessary to pay attention to the competitive strategies of the firms in question and the nature of their embeddedness in local society. This way the chapter also contributes to theorization of the agency of capital.

A political economy of labour approach binds the three contributions of Part IV on labour and the strategies of capital together. At the same time, one may argue that all of the three chapters address the need of unpacking capital and discussing it in relation to the agency of labour, although to a varying degree. Based on cases in the global north and global south respectively, Chapters 14 and 15 address

how international competition and industrial restructuring affect the relationship between capital and labour. Chapter 16 adds directly to the agency debate by exploring how theories of alienation explain the relationship between capital and labour and the increasing reliance on labour hire companies for employment.

In Chapter 14 Taylor and Bryson explain the phenomenon of 'erosion from below' in the manufacturing industry of the UK. Their point of departure is that the UK management and the UK government since the Thatcher period have been selling off national assets. This has pushed UK engineering firms down the value chain where prices are squeezed. Hence, training of labour is left to the government whose training programs are poor and disconnected from the real world of work. The result is dependence on old workers and difficulties in recruiting young workers with necessary competence and skills. From an agency point of view, this case demonstrates how the strategies of capital and government together result in a price squeeze that not only affect labour negatively, but also affect capital and local economic development negatively in the longer run by eroding the sustainability of local manufacturing.

While early segmentation theories were preoccupied with processes at the national scale, Beerepot, in Chapter 15, addresses the outcome of contemporary globalization on segmentation of labour in the Philippines. This is a context in which workers experience limited formal protection and representation, and they are highly vulnerable to international shifts in production. Beerepot draws on Peck (1996) that processes of segmentation take place at different geographical scales and that these have different outcomes in particular sites. Thus, workers are at the same time part of labour markets that are segmented at the international, national and local level. The new international division of labour (NIDL)-thesis and newer literature on the second global shift inform critical questions regarding what types of jobs are vulnerable to international outsourcing and consequences of this to workers in the countries that the jobs are shifted to. His empirical work focuses on the decline of the import-intensive export sector and the concomitant growth of jobs resulting from off-shoring of service sector activities, more precisely the sub-sector of call centres. A new labour segment is created nationally for young people who may earn a high income, but the bulk of the jobs are low-skill customer-care jobs that are uncertain in a longer term perspective. Hence, the author argues that workers who lose their job due to the decline in manufacturing industry have limited access to new jobs and resort to the informal economy.

In Chapter 16 Endresen theorizes labour hire agencies. Taking a remark made by an informant as a point of departure, she explains why labour hire agencies exist and thrive in contemporary capitalism, what perspectives on social reality they necessitate, and how the phenomenon affects social existence. By employing classical theories on reification and alienation, Endresen argues that the increased use of labour hire agencies bears witness to a purification of the commodity form of labour, a process which rests on reification and furthers alienation among capitalists and workers alike. Under such conditions, labour power is treated as a commodity like any other. Its sentient nature, and thus its pseudo-commodity

character, is suppressed by the understanding of labour power as embedded in bodies irrelevant to the task at hand. By digging deeply into such abstract theories, Endresen helps develop a wholly new perspective on the phenomenon of labour hire.

In Chapter 17 which is the concluding chapter of the book we discuss what we think is still missing in Labour Geography. We relate this to the above suggestions made by Castree (2007) and Lier (2007) and Coe and Jordhus-Lier in Chapter 3, as well as the lacunas in Labour Geography that Herod identifies in Chapter 2.

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