

‘Globalising the Working-Class Concept’: A Comment

Ronaldo Munck*
(University of Liverpool)

Marcel van der Linden has made a most useful contribution to the task of reconceptualising the working class from a comparative historical perspective. He traces the genealogy of the concept ‘working class’ back to 19th Century Europe and carries out a sharp if sympathetic critique of Marx’s limitations in this regard. A new concept of the working class is offered that is far less restrictive than the original definition based on the industrial proletariat. The fuzzy borders between free and unfree labour are explored from abroad historical and geographical perspective. The new category of ‘subaltern workers’ is understood in its full complexity with the household brought full square into focus. A refined typology is then proposed based on incorporating traditional concerns with labour power and the means of production, but also including relationships with/within the household, relationships with the employer outside the immediate production process, and relationships between the employee and other employees. This model would then be used to determine the class position of the individual employee.

Most of the above analysis is within what we might call the ‘classificatory’ tradition of class analysis, albeit breaking with the most crass forms of Eurocentrism. In the very last paragraph van der Linden shows an awareness of the limitations of this tradition. Following C.Wright Mills we are enjoined to resist the temptations of an empirically empty Grand Theory. Following Sydney Mintz, further, we are warned that ‘ a purely definitional approach leaves much to be desired’. Yet, essentially these are the parameters of Globalising the Working-Class Concept. The appeal to the empirical world is perhaps justified in an arena where abstract typologies prevail, but it can hardly substitute for analytical and methodological clarity in my view. There are references to a vast literature in this article but inevitably it is partial, not least in the terms of language coverage. It is mainly historical and, while not Eurocentric in orientation, it is still patchy in its coverage of the ‘world working class’. Yet this is probably inevitable and the problem might lie in the implicit belief that theoretical practice can only follow from empirical investigation.

While accepting, indeed welcoming, most of van der Linden’s interventions and clarifications I would like to develop an alternative approach to conceptualising the ‘world working class’ along three main axes: an anti-essentialist reconceptualising of class; a focus on labour in the era of globalisation; and an understanding that we live in a new era of global complexity.

Theorizing class in terms of the categorization of individuals inevitably generates a distinctive and partial form of knowledge. To develop a non-essentialist conception of class we would need to take much more seriously the post-structuralist critique of structuralist reason. If we shift from a definition of class as a social *grouping* and define class as a social *process* then some of the classificatory dilemmas faced by van der Linden become easier to resolve. Instead of seeking to develop a taxonomy of ‘class structure’ as a coherent unity centred on

* The author is Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Liverpool having previously worked in Latin America, Ireland and Southern Africa. He is author of various works on labour such as *Argentina: From Anarchism to Peronism* (1988) and *The New International Labour Studies* (1987) and on social theory such as *Marxism and Nationalism: The Difficult Dialogue* (1986) and *Marx @ 2000* (2000). He is currently researching aspects of the global counter- globalisation movement.

capitalist relations we can, rather, take class to be a complex and uneven process that is decentred and fragmented. Class struggle does not necessarily then occur between social groupings whose social and political identities have been defined by 'objective' economic processes. As Gibson-Graham puts it: 'In the discursive space of diverse class processes....individuals may participate in a variety of processes at one moment and over time. Their class identities are therefore potentially multiple and shifting' (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 19). We need not discard class analysis in favour of identity politics but we do need to transcend the structuralist/ modernist limitations of classical and contemporary readings of class I believe.

The second optic I wish to bring to bear on van der Linden's problematic centres around the position of labour in the era of globalisation. I take the economic, social, political and cultural processes described by the shorthand of 'globalisation' to be the inexorable context of the world working class formation, restructuring and activation today. I have elsewhere analysed at some length (see Munck 2002) the new 'Great Transformation' currently under way within global capitalism and the effects this is having on the world's workers and their organizations. We can now seriously consider that there is a global labour force emerging as globalisation restructures and extends capitalist relations world-wide. This is not necessarily a global labour market insofar as workers are not as mobile as capital and we cannot really refer to a 'global working class' in any meaningful sense. However, labour is (re)emerging as global social movements after the defeats inflicted by neoliberalism in the 1990's. Workers are suffering the impact of 'deterritorialisation' (decline of the nation-state) and of 'Brazilianization' (rise of the informal sector) but they are more interlinked and communications are more fluid than they were 25 years ago when the last flourish of labour internationalism occurred. This remaking of the working class in the shadow of Polanyi (counter movements to the rule of self regulating disembedded markets) and much as that of Marx (proletarianisation leading to organisation) should be at the centre of any contemporary engagement with the problematic of 'world working class' I would argue.

The third set of parameters I would like to introduce is centres around the notion of global complexity. Social theory can no longer assume that its object of analysis is the bounded nation-state. Globalization is increasing the interconnections between social processes across the world through the compression of time-space relations. What the complexity perspective emphasizes is the diversity of and networked nature of time-space paths and the unpredictability of social and political systems in the current era. The properties and patterns of the emerging world system are far from equilibrium. In the era of chaos and complexity we cannot really retreat to the world of structures where individuals are categorised neatly and classes are conceived as layers of a cake. The focus should be on processes, networks and fluidity of all social relations. This has obvious implications for any reconceptualising of the global working class, the task set for us by van der Linden. Following John Urry, we could argue rather bluntly that 'since the global is like nothing else, the social sciences have to start more or less from scratch. Existing theories such as that of class domination will not work when converted to the global level' (Urry, 2003: 95-6). This means that the emerging counter movement contesting neoliberal globalisation will, necessarily, need to develop new epistemologies and forms of knowledge not least from a more global that is to say 'majority world' perspective.

In conclusion, then, I am grateful to Marcel van der Linden for (re)opening the debate on the world working class, its formation, analysis and prospects for transformative social action. I have introduced some further areas for debate that I believe should be more central. One

can only hope that there will be a genuine open debate informed by different political, geographical and social perspectives.

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