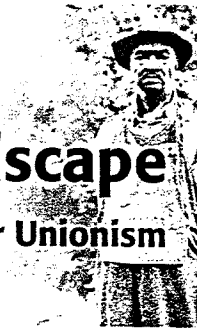


# Organizing the Landscape

Geographical Perspectives on Labor Unionism



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## Foreword

Richard A. Walker

It is a propitious time for a revival of labor studies, now that there are signs of life in the labor movement after twenty or more years of steady decline. It has been a long, cold winter for workers in Europe and the Americas, after the triumphs of Thatcher, Reagan, and the neoliberals. Unionization has declined, real wages have fallen, overwork has increased, and benefits have been taken away. The poor and marginal workers have felt the sharp blade of welfare reform and government cuts on their necks, all the better to discipline the employed and the young to the necessity of wage labor under any and all circumstances. Now, at least, there is a changing of the guard at the head of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) accompanied by a recommitment to organizing workers instead of the same internal politics of office holding and providing basic services in the face of dwindling numbers of aging members. In France, the public-sector workers pulled off an immensely successful general strike in 1995 in the face of austerity measures being implemented by the Chirac administration, and brought about the eventual fall of the prime minister. In Britain, the Tories were finally ushered out in disgrace and New Labour was given an overwhelming mandate in 1997. The ice has broken, at least, but whether Tony Blair is the sun who brings a new spring or, like Bill Clinton, the one who puts a happy face on the dark star of neoliberalism remains to be seen.

All the same, we are witnessing a revival of interest among academics in questions of labor and unionization, making this collection of essays by young geographers most timely. Some of the best minds of the generation just making its reputation are represented in the new labor geography. This group includes several of the authors in this book, among them Andrew Herod, Jane Wills, Brian Page, and Don Mitchell, as well as others such as Jamie Peck, Matt Sparke, and Melissa Wright. It bears watching what impact the new generation of labor-friendly scholars will have on labor studies generally, and on geography in particular, but they are moving things in the right direction. I would like to paint in

broad strokes what I think ought to be the challenge for labor studies, and for political economy generally.

Twenty years ago, in the wake of the political upheavals and labor struggles of the 1960s, two of the hottest topics on the academic agenda were labor process studies in the vein of Harry Braverman's monumental *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (one thinks of the work of Michael Burawoy, Harley Shaiken, or I. I. Luw Beynon) and working-class history of the kind pioneered by E. P. Thompson in his *Making of the English Working Class* (in the United States it was Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery who led the charge of the New Left labor historians). By the late 1970s, a great volume of works had appeared on everything from the de-skilling of office workers to the traditions of working-class solidarity in New England mill towns. Both streams of research flowed from the great wellspring of Marxian thought then enjoying tremendous popularity in the English-speaking countries, but they represented separate currents separated by hidden shoals in the ideological bedrock of political economy. Labor process studies took to its logical extreme the classical laborist belief in the "point of production" as the key to all questions of work, exploitation, and organization. This was in stark opposition to Thompson's distanced stance to the mechanics of capitalist industry and close attention to the lived experience of the working class as a whole, and with proletarianization as a cultural construction as much as an iron law of capital accumulation. In more ways than one, Thompson was the English godfather to postmodernism and poststructuralism—whatever Parisian parentage they might claim.

Both lines of labor studies fell into disfavor during the 1980s. The initial cause was the disruption of everything solidly believed in by the Left for most of the twentieth century. The irony was that this occurred well *before* the collapse of communism in the Soviet bloc. Capitalism suddenly and unceremoniously revolutionized the whole landscape of industrial production, rendering obsolete any number of articles of faith about the course of mechanization, de-skilling, corporate concentration, and the nature of work, not to mention the location of industry. British industry, the English working class, and the Labour Party all collapsed together, to be fallen upon by the Thatcherite wolves. The manufacturing belt of the United States and the greatest corporate names in American industry were hollowed out, along with the old CIO unions and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party; in walked the terror squads of Reaganism to dispense with the old rules and regulations, standards of living, and ways of life in labor's strongholds.

Following this, studies of industry suddenly shifted out of the workplace and into the landscape. The spatial analysis of industry and work became all the

rage. This was not the old calculus of optimal locations fostered by neoclassical economics and the writings of Alfred Weber, but a revived program of research into the development of major industrial sectors (especially high tech) and the fate of regions (both growing and collapsing), following the lead of Doreen Massey and Richard Meehan in England and Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone in the United States. The New Economic Geography was born, and a bright and eager generation of young scholars, many of them fired by Marxist ideas, leaped into the fray. They (I mean "we," for this was my cohort) were fired with the radical idea that capitalism was not so orderly and predictable as it had seemed in the postwar (or high Fordist) era, and that it had shed its old skin for a new one of many colors: flexible specialization, just-in-time production, new industrial spaces, and the like. The tired fields of industrial location and regional development were wholly made over by the end of the decade, with geographers marching arm in arm with political scientists, sociologists, and a few odd economists.

The New Economic Geography went down three tracks. The central one was rethinking the logic of organizational and technical change, with the recognition that there is a greater variety of forms or pathways than had previously been deemed possible. There was no single labor process to be mechanized and de-skilled, but complex bundles of work and work sites to be orchestrated in the immense social division of labor. Nor was there a single pattern of corporate concentration and spatial decentralization in the manner of product cycle theory, a legacy of late Fordism contradicted by the vibrancy of new industrial districts from central Italy to California and Japan. The key authors of this altered geography of industrialization were people such as Allen Scott, Michael Storper, Annalee Saxenian, Richard Florida, and Andrew Sayer (with a little help from yours truly). Their research gave new life to the idea of uneven development, and a lay of the land far less flattened than that generated by product cycle or less cost location models.

A second track pursued by economic geographers was the study of finance and capital. David Harvey's *Limits to Capital* set the tone for the decade, but it was left to younger researchers who experienced the financial explosion of the 1980s to try to get their arms around its ferocious dynamism and reconfigured landscapes of international money flows. Geographers such as Barney Warf, Nigel Thrift, Andrew Leyshon, Susan Roberts, and Ron Martin laid out the new currents of finance, excesses of speculative fever, and global capital flows for all to see. Plunging even deeper beneath the froth of globalization were the studies of profit rates, investment cycles, and uneven development by Michael Webber, David Rigby, and Meric Gertler. Although it might seem that the circuits of money would reveal the purest form of capitalism and make for a uniformitarian landscape of glob-

alization—as many were predicting—it did nothing of the kind. Finance proved to have its own geography and its own (il)logic that was not only *not* the highest form of industrial capital but often at odds with it. Here again, uneven development and the variable topography of capitalism were revealed in a new light.

Third, economic geographers took up the question of business culture, or the resocialization of economics. Although many students think the idea of embeddedness sprang full-blown from the brow of sociologist Mark Granovetter, the social economy of capitalism is as plain as day in the operations of industrial districts regulated by local social conventions, international joint ventures in high tech requiring the stabilizing power of mutual trust, and the national economic institutions of Japan, the United States, or Germany. It even shows up in the oddities of financial operations in the City of London, consumer culture in Los Angeles, or managerial behavior in American boardrooms. Capitalism comes clad in a patchwork quilt of possible worlds, the understanding of which has been pursued by geographers such as Linda McDowell, Jane Jacobs, Susan Christopherson, and Erica Schoenberger, among others. Here, more than anywhere, rather than the mechanical unfolding of time in a uniform global economy, it is the peculiarities of place in a heterogeneous capitalism that are starkly revealed.

This last dimension of the New Economic Geography begins to shade off into cultural studies and social anthropology more than political economy in the traditional sense. But if economics no longer makes sense, whether neoclassical or Marxian, and if capitalism is not a thing but a heteroglossy, then what is left for economic geographers to do? And if all the attention is to be given to the brilliant organizational strategies of the new capitalism, the competitive advantage of the Japanese, or the financial wizardry of Wall Street (and hardly a crumb to labor studies or labor geography), then what is left of a Left in economics or geography? The sad answer is, not much. Even though the arenas of research just indicated carry on to this day, with some absolutely stunning intellectual achievements, the Young Turks who once entered the field are now middle-aged and the sense of discovery and adventure is gone. Meanwhile, insurgents in the discipline have moved on to greener pastures. In the 1990s, they moved out of political economy and into cultural studies in droves, both within geography and throughout the social sciences. (True, a good many of the best minds in geography and elsewhere went into environmental studies and political ecology, as well, but I do not believe that this undermined political economy, which suffered chiefly from its own internal contradictions.)

Culture studies quite simply stole the thunder from the Left and captured the young and rebellious because it spoke to the hot-button topics of difference, repression, power, and social change, while the economic geographers appeared

to be in bed with business for the sake of a few good interviews and in chairs with the universities for a few secure jobs. Now, I do not say that the young are always fair in their judgment of their elders or aware of their own history, but they did have a point. The fire had gone out of economic geography and, along with it, Marxist theory. There really was not anything obviously radical—however insightful—about most of the work on industrial organization or finance capital, and the standard Marxist tropes did not seem to work very well in light of all that had been discovered about the discontinuities of capitalism.

In the meantime, the torch of radicalism passed to the radical feminists (who broke with the grand old men of the Left), the poststructuralists (followers of Michel Foucault and the bodily geometries of the oppressed), the postmodernists (adherents of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and the purveyors of discourse theory), and the postcolonialists (in the manner of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and other critics of Eurocentric histories of the world). I have to admit that I have not been a great advocate of this form of inquiry, no doubt because of a certain pique incurred by youthful critics who blithely set up Marxist straw men (and I mean men) to shoot at instead of aiming to the Right; they have often seemed as absentminded about history as the rest of Americans (including the history of modern revolts preceding their own). But I am also disinclined to return the favor by selecting out the worst of PoMo foolishness for derision, in the manner of Alan Sokal's 1996 send-up of *Social Text*. Of course, it is absurd to act as if discourse were the nub of human action and power, and to strike heroic literary postures instead of actually doing something oppositional inside or outside the academy. But there is nothing wrong, and a great deal right, about shining some much overdue light on the dark domains of patriarchy, racism, homophobia, Eurocentrism, and the lot. That is the point, regardless of how it is dressed up in fancy neologisms.

Nevertheless, post-Marxist thinking, in its various guises, is also in many ways *less* radical than it seems because it establishes so tenuous a link to economic realities and the immense range of power granted to economic ruling classes. Class and political economy still matter more than any other single dimension of social power, in my view. This is not to say, with the fashionable critics of “political correctness” of the Right and the Left, that the one true line of oppression runs through class and all the rest is a diversion. This is patently wrong. This argument rests on an antiquated notion of the genuine working class or the honest poor, which is a labor romanticism at best and patronizing in the extreme. Moreover, it is blind to the makeup of the working class today. The workers of the world are now overwhelmingly women, people of color, and Third Worlders—even in the heartlands of Europe and North America.

Here is where the new wave of labor studies enters the scene, in geography and throughout the social sciences. It must begin from the standpoint of the new global working class, which in its great variety of peoples and backgrounds overturns many conventional suppositions from the outset. Equally must it build on the intellectual advances made in the study of capitalism over the past two decades. But it must get back to being political economy; that is, it must take the logic of capitalist economies and the force of class as essential premises. This does not abolish issues of difference, consciousness, or institutions—quite the contrary. Race, gender, nationality, and other social divides must be figured into the mix of how power is exercised and how classes are constituted—from the bottom up. But it does ground questions of difference in how the vectors of power bear on employment, work, and industry. The presumption still remains that for the great mass of the world's people work is the central fact of existence, and that the largest and most transformative system of working is that which is knit together by markets and operates under the rules of capitalism. We have not seen the “end of work” or the “end of capitalism” by a long shot. Nonetheless, if we are to steal back the thunder of the postmodernists and multicultural social critics, it is not enough to shout them down with slogans to the effect that “economics matters” but to show how the politics of power in all its facets matters to economics—to explain organization forms, capital-labor struggles, corporate success and failure, and the rise and fall of places.

What we need, in particular, is a political economy of place. Such a geographically informed study of labor and work would go beyond business organization, beyond business culture, and beyond strikes and unions. It would mean the study of the social relations of production in the classic sense of the exercise of control by the owning class and the extraction of surplus labor from the working class. But close attention would have to be paid to the influence of space and place: that economics and social relations exist in real locations bordered by other locales, but also tied to distant places by immensely complex lines of trade, ownership, investment, migration, and the rest. Thus, geographic inquiry must be telescopic, able to move up and down the scale of places—looking now at the small arena of the local and then at the scale of nations and continents, and finally at the global economy as a whole. There is no simple answer to the question of which scale is most important, whether in thought or in action. Globalism is as real as the persistence of localism, but when and where and how it matters is for us to puzzle out, not assume.

Political economy must never lose its connection to labor at the point of production, but it should also take in the larger systems of production at work today, extensive divisions of labor that embrace many workplaces, often many different

firms linked up in coordinated networks, and many different sites often scattered across national borders and around the globe. It must recognize the divergent histories and trajectories of cities, regions, and countries, which cannot be reduced to a single logic of capital (even though that logic is at work as part of their historical development). This diversity of capitalisms across the earth has been noted by many scholars, but too often is reduced to a set of analytical boxes (as in Michael Porter) or some measure of associational life (as in Robert Putnam) in which a place either has the right stuff for competitiveness and further development or it does not. This is thin gruel indeed.

What is wanted, rather, is the study of the political history of production and economy, or the struggles, losses, and victories by which a ruling class gains power, holds on to it, and applies it for economic purposes, and the ways in which labor (and peasants, families, and so forth) have responded, survived, fought back, been divided to be conquered, or gained a measure of strength and autonomy. A term for this might be “political culture of place,” but in a way that goes beyond a political scientist's notion of formal politics to the political economist's and geographer's sense of social and cultural context—and always with the question in mind, How, at the end of the day, were the conditions of labor and industry altered by events, and what did this mean for further capitalist investment, innovation, extraction of surplus, and growth?

The writers collected in this volume demonstrate the kind of serious attention to the geography of labor that is needed today and, along with it, an awareness of the historic impact of workers' actions on the course of capitalist development across a wide range of places. With this book, and others to follow, one can hope for a revived radical geography and political economy of place. And that just might help make a difference in the struggles of working people for a better life in a hard world of hard work.