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The Global Turn

Lessons From Southern Labor Scholars and Their Labor Movements

Michael Burawoy
University of California–Berkeley

For too long U.S. labor sociology has been reluctant to explore the world. By taking a global turn, we have much to learn from labor scholars and labor movements in the Global South—much to learn about our own peculiarities, about the possibilities and obstacles to building links across national boundaries, and about the implications of "globalization" for both labor organizing and labor studies. In particular, the public turn taken by scholars in the Global South toward their own labor movements holds lessons for a collaboration that is always fraught from both sides. These are just some of the issues raised by the essays in this issue that examine the history of labor sociologies and labor movements in Brazil, China, India, South Africa, and South Korea.

Keywords: *labor; sociology; organizing; globalization*

U.S. labor sociology is waking up from a deep slumber. As it opens its eyes to the world beyond, it dissolves many Americo-centric fallacies and fantasies—"America" as *the* planet or the center of the planet, "America" as the benchmark of progress, "America" as the model that every civilized country yearns to follow, "America" as the end of ideology, and "America" as the end of history. Even if illusions of universality linger on and even as new ones are created, the renaissance of comparative and global labor studies is casting off parochial visions, restoring a sense of realism, and even assuming a certain humility.

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At the same time that U.S. labor sociology has taken a "global turn" on the international front, it has also taken a "public turn" on the domestic front. Coming out of academic seclusion, it has begun to brave the stormy seas of the labor movement itself (Burawoy, 2008). The essays collected here, all from the Global South, have much to tell us about both the global turn and the public turn. They stimulate broad comparative questions on both fronts: How can we foster, rather than hinder, the development of respectful and reciprocal engagements across both communities and geographies and transnational collaborations that involve both labor scholars and labor movements? Indeed, how possible are such collaborations and engagements?

International Comparisons, Transnational Connections

A preliminary to any disquisition on the "public turn" and the "global turn" must be a deeper understanding of the national histories and terrains in which different labor movements and labor scholars have been forged or unforged. This special issue of *Work and Occupations* is intended to begin such a discussion. It brings together contributions from five countries: Brazil, China, India, South Africa, and South Korea. The countries were chosen for their histories of militant labor struggles and/or their economic importance in the global economy. They represent the so-called industrializing states, what are now called emerging economies, or what Immanuel Wallerstein used to call the semiperiphery—very different from the host of small and poor countries with hardly a sociology or a labor movement to boast of. The contributors have all had a long-standing engagement with labor issues in their own countries; they are embedded in the working class, and thus partake in what we can call a public sociology of labor. They offer us not just comparative accounts but also crucial historical analyses of the ebb and flow of national labor movements and their relations to labor scholars.

Their experiences are instructive in many ways. First, these labor sociologists have developed manifold practices and perspectives that are eminently suited to their own situations. We need to understand those situations before we can begin to adapt and adopt their practices, even as our worlds converge to an astonishing degree. Thus, for example, we have much to learn from the rise and fall of social movement unionism in South Africa. As Sakhela Buhlungu explains, the concept was initially coined in the 1980s by South African sociologists as labor struggles spilled over into the community, showing that the limitations of the then widely held distinction between class struggles and nationalist struggles. Gay Seidman (1994) brought the idea to a U.S. audience

in her analysis of the convergence of Brazilian and South African labor militancy. As the following essays emphasize, even if there were world historical reasons for the rise of social movement unionism in the 1980s—and here we should include South Korea as well as Brazil and South Africa—they took place under very different circumstances. Contrast, for example, the decisive role of the military dictatorship and the reaction to the communist party that fired social movements in Brazil with the importance of the successive occupations of South Korea by Japan and the United States in stimulating a radical student–labor coalition. Very different are the cases of China and India, which, despite their divergent political regimes, share the distinction of having a small and fragmented autonomous labor movement. Instead of social movement unionism with the participation of intellectuals, in both China and India labor scholars and labor movements have kept each other or have been kept at arm's length.

Comparisons are important but they too often presume cases are autonomous from each other. In an interconnected world we have also to learn how each country, each national labor movement, each national sociology is not an island unto itself. As social scientists, we learn about others not just to know ourselves better but to explore new types of transnational relations and relations of domination as well as collaboration. On the one hand, as we discover from Soon Kyoung Cho's discussion of South Korea, much damage has been inflicted by hierarchies in the field of global knowledge production. Yet, on the other hand, Lee and Shen point to the way U.S. sociologists can support organizational openings, even in a country such as China, where both labor and their intellectuals are radically confined by an authoritarian party state.

International comparisons and transnational connections are all very good, but before we can learn from them we need to examine the supranational forces that provide the context and set limits on national trajectories and global linkages. Before returning to the vexed question of the relation between labor scholars and labor movements toward the end of this introductory essay, I would like to point to the global pressures on both labor movements and labor scholars—global pressures that, as we shall see, strengthen rather than threaten or bypass national interests and projects.

How National Terrains Mediate and Even Promote Global Pressures

If there is one supranational force that all these labor movements have faced, it is the experience of neoliberalism, or what I have called third-wave

marketization (Burawoy, 2008), a tsunami that has left no corner of the world untouched. But the responses to that tsunami have diverged. Sharit Bhowmik talks of the rise of informalization and the shrinking formal sector in India; Sakhela Buhlungu describes the dilemmas of the postapartheid democratic transition swept up in the gales of market fundamentalism; for Brazil, Marco Santana and Ruy Braga write of the eclipse of a militant labor movement trapped in corporatist practices; and Soon Kyoung Cho describes a parallel decline of labor militance in South Korea, especially during and after the financial crisis of 1997-1998. On the other hand, Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen's analysis of party sponsored marketization in China highlights the escalation of new forms of protest in the streets, the law courts, and petition offices, appealing to the central state as leverage on local government.

This third-wave marketization is not a force from nowhere. It had its epicenter in the United States. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the turn to a market economy led to the decimation of national industries and its labor movement as U.S. industrial capital fled to greener pastures. As Beverly Silver (2003), among others, has written, this fleeing of capital to countries such as Brazil, South Korea, and South Africa brought with it a militant labor movement, parallel to the one in the United States, during the Depression years. In each of these countries, we had a rare joining together of labor and civil struggles, the joining of hands of industry and community against authoritarian states. But then these countries themselves subsequently succumbed to marketization, leaving behind a depleted labor movement squeezed by capital as it moved on to yet greener pastures, especially those of China and India, transplanting labor struggles as well as transforming the very meaning of work. So we see how divergences in labor movements may be linked not just to different national responses to marketization but also to the rhythm of the wave itself, which invades one shore as it recedes from another.

The fate of labor movements is only one side of the labor–sociology connection. In the trajectory of labor sociology, national context is again all important. In those countries with a history of colonialism, namely South Korea and India, the legacies of metropolitan sociology are still powerfully present. South Africa had to wrestle with its own breed of colonialism—internal colonialism—but nevertheless managed to forge its own subaltern sociology, and Brazil with its vast army of academics has been less affected by, or at least less concerned with, metropolitan domination. For China, where sociology has only reappeared in the last 25 years, alongside the economic reforms, there has been wholesale importation of the U.S. model, with not only its strong professionalized research programs but also with its insurgent critical and public sociologies, especially a critical sociology of labor.

National specificities mediate global pressures toward the professionalization of academic life that can be found in most countries—tendencies toward the deployment of national rating systems of faculty that hitch them to "international," that is, U.S. and European "standards." Inevitably, this orients sociologists to "international" journals published and edited in metropolitan countries. It turns academics away from writing in local languages, from addressing local issues, and from building relations with local publics. With the exception of Brazil, which has managed to hold on to an internal rating system that includes publications in its own Portuguese-language journals, scholars in all these countries face pressures toward professionalization, making them accountable to international peers rather than domestic publics. These accrediting systems have largely been initiated by nation states, especially those with an elaborated system of higher education—those seeking a place in a global pecking order—but social scientists have been willing accomplices in nurturing this competitive mania that attenuates connections to their own societies. The problem is not so much professionalization per se, which is a sine qua for any meaningful social science, but *formal* professionalization, the ritualized pursuit of extraneous standards at the cost of *substantive* professionalization that deepens relevant research programs.

Alongside professionalism, universities have developed armies of administrators to oversee the new audit culture and to subject faculty to a financial squeeze. As marketization deepened, universities were also subject to budgetary logics, their output had not only to be measurable in professional terms but also in policy terms. What we witness all over the world is a move toward the financialization of the university, turning it into a profit center. Close linkages with corporations—in South Korea universities are now owned by corporations—is one way to offset the fiscal squeeze. Plummeting faculty incomes is another, which in turn leads to the search for second and third jobs, for contract work, for consulting. In this competitive order, students are acutely aware of the symbolic and material rewards attached to the prestige of universities (the apex being the elite universities of the United States and Europe) and particular subjects of study (in which sociology is low on the totem pole). As a result, as Cho and Buhlungu note, the appeal of a public sociology of labor has been attenuating, both for students and faculty. Contrary to tendencies in the United States, sociologists, no less than other academics in the semiperiphery, are subject to an intensified professionalism and a narrow policy agenda that conspire to separate them from local and even national audiences, undermining their commitment to public engagement.

The Fraught Relations Between Labor Movement and Labor Scholars

Even if third-wave marketization and its coeval processes of professionalism and managerialism have engendered a mutual retreat of labor movement and labor scholar, still the public vocation is not extinguished. Thus, even in the most unpropitious circumstances, Chinese sociologists partake in the development of labor nongovernmental organizations and worker centers as described by Lee and Shen. Similarly, Buhlungu's pessimistic account of the decline of public engagement among South African academics recognizes ongoing dialogue with labor sustained by internationally renowned centers, such as the Sociology of Work Program at the University of Witwatersrand under the inspired leadership of Eddie Webster. In Brazil, the rule of the Workers' Party has led to a powerful shift in the policy direction. The Ministry of Labor has been taken over by the labor federation, CUT, but still the public and critical moments have not disappeared. In South Korea, defying the disintegration of the close collaboration between workers and intellectuals, Cho celebrates possibilities of collective public sociology organized through the Internet, binding together large numbers of people employed in contingent and informal work. Only in India, which never had a strong tradition of labor sociology owing to a colonial legacy that gave pride and place to anthropology, do we hear little of a public engagement with labor.

When scholars and labor do link hands, as Buhlungu so powerfully reminds us, we must be wary of romantic temptations—the morality play of the virtuous worker—as well as its opposite, defensive dismissals of either side. As Robert Lynd (1951) told us long ago, the relation between labor and intellectuals is always fraught with suspicion and resentment, each side jealous of its own autonomy. It is not a marriage made in heaven, even at the best of times, but a delicate power relation overdetermined by the political and academic fields through which it is constituted. Thus, Chinese sociologists are channeled into professional and policy research, and the few who dare to engage workers directly risk the heavy hand of the party state.

Indeed, the China story is reminiscent of the early years of labor organizing in South Africa after the 1974 Durban strikes in which White academics and students took a leading hand. As the South African movement grew it developed its own intellectual wing, its own research institutes, and became ever more suspicious of academics who found themselves spurned or muzzled. Similarly, in South Korea, the student movement had played a critical role in fostering struggles against the authoritarian regime, especially in the 1980s after the

Gwangju massacre. But this could not be sustained after the late 1990s, the era of economic crisis and structural adjustment.

Braga and Santana sum up the relation between scholars and unions as swinging a pendulum of engagement and withdrawal. They show how the intellectual activism of the Brazilian Communist Party led to reaction and then retreat to a more insular professionalism, followed by a resurgent collaboration in the struggles against the dictatorship and market, only now to be absorbed once again into policy research as the Workers' Party assumed power. It may slow down or speed up, but the pendulum does not stop swinging.

Global Dialogues

In dark times, academics have played an important role in linking segments, building cells, and feeding visions of the labor movement, as we know most spectacularly from the origins of the Polish Solidarity movement of 1980-1981. We can help sustain a holding pattern against oppressive forces until the pendulum swings back. And the pendulum is swinging back. We now see how the era of third-wave marketization, of deregulation and privatization, has been its own grave digger; how state regulation and collectivism is returning with a vengeance, even to the point of being implemented by its ideological enemies; and how the reassertion of a politics of distribution, especially in the context of economic crisis, creates political opportunities for new collaborations across the university–community divide.

Just as nation states the world over competed for inclusion in third-wave marketization, the countermovement will also have a global dimension. Here too intellectuals, sociologists among them, have an interpretive and connective role. There are already examples to follow. We need look no further than the Labour Movements Research Committee (RC44) of the International Sociological Association that has attracted a committed and energetic band of labor sociologists from across the world, dedicated to forging understandings of the global context of labor solidarities. Its President Rob Lambert, for example, has played an important part in the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) that has forged relations among union movements in 20 countries from the Global South (Lambert, 2009). Just as the South Africans and Brazilians learn from each about the limits and possibilities of social movement unionism and of engaging purportedly "labor-friendly" states, so now the Chinese are consulting with the South Africans about labor research centers and with U.S. labor sociologists about setting up worker centers.

In our enthusiasm for the "global turn," we should be careful, however, not to substitute one fantasy for another, one morality play for another. We should be wary of any battle cry to "counter-hegemonic globalization" that embraces a mythical working class unity, one that magically transcends national terrains. Challenging any such sociological optimism are recent studies that underline the strength of the nation state and its civil society in defining and confining labor struggles. This is the message of Jennifer Chun's (2009) comparison of the symbolic politics of labor in South Korea and the United States, Robyn Rodriguez's (2009) account of the Philippine state's grip on its global armies of labor, or Jeff Sallaz's (2009) analysis of production regimes in the leisure industries of South Africa and the United States. Despite, or because of their earlier labor militancy, these labor movements are locked into national spaces.

Even studies that directly explore transnational solidarities, such as Gay Seidman's (2007) analysis of attempts to defend "labor standards" in South Africa, Guatemala, and India, and Eddie Webster, Rob Lambert, and Andries Bezuidenhout's (2008) study of precarious labor in South Korea, Australia, and South Africa come to very pessimistic conclusions. In each case labor movements are driven by national imperatives and, with few exceptions, that is true even when labor movements extend themselves beyond national boundaries. Donna Baines (2008) writes that one of the loudest silences in the new labor sociology is the imperial character of U.S. unions. Canada is her case. Having set up branches across the country, U.S. "internationals" used every means to resist the breakaway movement to found independent Canadian unions. One of the fiercest struggles involved the SEIU's (Service Employees International Union) attempted suppression of Canada's innovative public sector "social unionism." In the name of a presumptive set of shared interests, or "international working class solidarity," powerful U.S. unions risk subjugating others to their own expansionist interests. Even, Kate Bronfenbrenner's (2007) more optimistic outlook on "global unions" shows how rare and difficult cross-national labor organizing can be, and on the occasions when it is successful how it is rooted in nationally defined projects.

Equally, in the realm of labor scholarship national imperatives are all important even as they propel social scientists into a fundamentally unequal international arena. Nation states are the driving force behind the adoption of international rating systems, research assessment exercises, and the whole gamut of audit cultures that put them at the mercy of an elite academic establishment. Recognizing this reality, academics in the metropolitan heartlands do have a critical role to play. By publishing their work, a prestigious journal such as *Work and Occupations* can give voice to labor scholars from the South and increase their academic credibility in

their home countries, even as they address local and national issues or dissect global processes through their own distinctive analytical lenses. Rather than forcing Southern academics into the narrow confines of our own homegrown theoretical frameworks, we can endow Southern perspectives with an "international" legitimacy, hitherto denied to them. In this way we can, perhaps, foster not only a more equal North–South dialogue but also a South–South dialogue. We will learn how heterogeneous is the Global South, and even dispense with the concept as being too broad. Understanding what others are up to is the royal road to learning more about ourselves, about the constraints under which we operate, about the space for possibilities within those constraints, and even about how we may challenge those constraints. Finally, by widening our horizons, by taking the "global turn," we produce a sociology more vital, more pertinent, and more truthful.

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Michael Burawoy teaches sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He is deep in imaginary conversations with Pierre Bourdieu.