

Trade Unions, the World Social Forum, Turbulent Priests, and the Global Justice Movement

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Introduction

At the age of 73 it is something of an adventure for me to be hosted – for the first time in my life - by a Catholic labor studies center. I come from another labor tradition:

“Communism...was one and indivisible, an international fellowship of faith... Internationalism was not an option but a necessity of our political being, a touchstone of honour and worth. It dominated Party work in the trade union and labour movement...Communism was a world outlook or it was nothing. It owed its existence to the Soviet Union, but as an international solidarity it extended to the furthest corners of the earth [...] Internationality also framed our notions of social justice...It was...a source of inspiration in struggle [...] Marxism, or what we called Marxism, reinforced this cosmic sense. It dealt in absolutes and totalities, ultimates and finalities, universals and organic wholes. It also claimed jurisdiction over every dimension of experience, every department of social life.” (Samuel 1985)

Change a few words here and there and we could also be speaking about Catholicism, Rome, a global community of faith, and jurisdiction over departments of not only social but also domestic and sexual life.

With respect to Catholic social doctrine I am afraid I am in the position of the Catholic in the story about a religious *disencounter*:

“A Jew sitting quietly in a tram in Dublin is assaulted by a Catholic passenger. ‘What did you do that for?’ he enquires out of his bleeding mouth. ‘You Jews killed Christ!’ comes the instant reply. ‘But that was 2,000 years ago!’ says the Jew. ‘Yes,’ says the Catholic, ‘But I only found out yesterday!’.”

Thus it is with my knowledge of Catholic social doctrine – give or take a week or two. On the other hand, as a third-generation atheist Jew, hailing from an England that has been pagan for centuries, and myself claiming today to be ‘a Liberation Marxist’, I would like to hope that I have no more kneejerk response to Catholicism than to Marxism.

Let’s find out...

1. The union form as we know it is in epochal crisis and in need of fundamental re-invention

The traditional union has a shape determined by that against which it was posed – an ‘Industrial, National, Competitive and (Anti-)Colonial Capitalism’. Yet this has been largely transformed into a ‘Globalised, Transnationalised, Networked, Financial and Services Capitalism. The flexibility and mobility is also increasingly true of most manufacturing industry. We are talking of ‘footloose labor’, ‘footloose jobs’ and ‘fractured jobs’. (Huws 2009), with a further threat to the level of wages in countries like the US. Computerization also leads to the proletarianization of formerly ‘middle-class’ jobs everywhere. Under this assault, union membership has dropped dramatically and union power has decreased worldwide. This is symbolized by ‘concession bargaining’ – negotiated retreat. This parable illustrates the problem confronting the traditional trade unions:

“The national trade union soccer team, kitted out and carrying its footballs, runs onto the field only to find that this has turned into an ice rink and that the national capitalist team is practicing ice hockey. The captain of the unions remonstrates with his opposite number, who replies, ‘We like this game better, it gets more viewers and makes more money. If you don’t like it, go play with someone else’. The unions turn to the referee, who replies, ‘Sorry, guys, but if I don’t let them play their game according to their rules, they will simply move it to another country.’”

The parable is, regrettably, outdated. What the capitalists are actually playing is a computer game in cyberspace.

Some unions are fighting back or reaching out, even entering cyberspace themselves, but this does not address the problem of the pyramidal form, whether in the corporation, the industry, the nation-state or internationally. Pyramids last for ever, long after their architects and builders are dead. But they do not move very fast. Nor are they particularly flexible.

We do today see dramatic new ‘worker-community alliances’, ‘social movement unions’, ‘poor workers unions’ or ‘social justice’ movements – even in these dis-United States (Fine 2005, Tait 2006, Petras 2006, Fletcher and Gapasin 2008). They tend to be both networked and autonomous – and thus possible harbingers of the ‘virtual trade union of the future’ (Hyman 1999:112). The traditional trade unions have much to learn from them.

2. The World Social Forum provides a global (regional, national and local) space in which discussion on a re-invention of the labor movement *could* take place but still has to witness the significant presence of a 21st century labor movement

The largely Southern-based World Social Forums (WSF) have been taking place internationally for almost a decade. They were provoked by neo-liberal globalization and by Margaret Thatcher’s triumphalist war cry, ‘There is no alternative!’. The global WSF has spawned regional, national and local fora – not least in the United States. Inspired by the ‘New Social Movements’ of the later-20th century, energized by the global development of ‘civil society’, they have a principle of, on the one hand, autonomy from states and political parties and, on the other, openness to all civil social actors opposed to neo-liberal globalization.

The traditional inter/national unions have a growing presence here, are attracted by this new and friendly agora, but have a largely instrumental attitude toward the WSF. They use it to promote their own institutions and policies, notably a ‘Decent Work’ project (see Resources, Vosko 2002). This is, regrettably, a ‘back to the future’ campaign developed not by the labor movement but an inter-state body, the United Nations’ International Labor Organization (ILO). Their utopia seems to be Sweden in 1980. And their illusion is that such a model can be promoted globally, thus instating a global accord between capital, state and labor (though this has broken down – even in Sweden).

Whilst sitting in the WSF’s organizing instances, moreover, union officers still tend to see

themselves as traditional representatives of their traditional unions at a conference than as activists co-responsible for organizing a WSF – a massive and complex operation requiring effort, flexibility and the breaking of old patterns of thought and action. The ‘alternative’ Labor and Globalization Network (*see Resources*), initiated by Left labor and WSF activists from Italy, implicitly sees itself as a *pressure-group* within the inter/national unions. It attracts some interesting autonomous unions, other labor groups and thinkers/activists. But it implicitly treats the world of unions as the parameter of its thought and action. This is hardly adequate in a neo-liberalized and globalized world, in which the unionized/unionizable workers are not more than 20 percent of the world’s labor force.

If the labor presence and voice within the WSF is problematic, so is the WSF as a space within which could be reinvented a labor movement relevant to a 21st century capitalism. Criticism of crisis or stagnation within the WSF can be heard within its International Committee, within Forum events, and from various tendencies and individuals who have been involved with and committed to the Forum (Rousset 2009, Santos 2008, Bello 2008).

Here are some shortcomings of the WSF that spring to mind:

- Condemning capitalism in its Charter but actually being sponsored by and hosting a myriad of organizations, NGOs and movements that themselves seek only a ‘kinder, gentler’ capitalism.
- Being so far incapable (along, admittedly, with the world Left more generally!) of responding effectively to the world capitalist crisis.
- Of still consisting to 70 percent plus of university-educated participants, who are overwhelmingly concerned with only two issues – human rights and ecology (IBASE 2009). Nothing wrong with either these participants or those issues, but the WSF intends to represent a ‘globalization from below’, not the middle. And to represent a holistic alternative in which, for example, women’s, peace, indigenous and labor (not just union) issues should have equal weight and be given equal importance. [1]
- In the epoch of a ‘communications internationalism’, the WSF is still having trouble of itself communicating effectively, internally or externally. [2] While, in the early 2000s the WSF made a dramatic impact, with its slogan, ‘Another World is Possible!’, the slogan has lost its shock effect and a new one with similar bite has not yet appeared.
- A Black feminist collective in the US says, ‘The Revolution Will Not be Funded!’ (INCITE 2007). But the WSF is still dependent on the patronage of major Northern ‘development funding’ agencies or foundations. And these are themselves often dependent on a few Northern states or corporations.

So, the WSF is not a paradise and the trade unions are not the leading emancipatory social force they were once thought to be. Or claimed to be. But if global social emancipation today does not imply an insurrectionary blood bath, neither is it a rose garden. And we will have to turn, as elsewhere, to the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci:

“Skepticism of the intellect; optimism of the will!”

3. A New Global Solidarity and Justice Movement can draw on old religious ethical, humanistic, enlightenment and labor/socialist traditions but depends *primarily* on new ‘radical-democratic’, ‘holistic’ or ‘emancipatory’ ones (feminist, anarchist/libertarian, ecological, indigenous, etc)

Fortunately, the WSF is just the most visible and institutionalized part of what has been called the

'Global Justice and Solidarity Movement' (GJ&SM). This is, admittedly, a somewhat nebulous term (as nebulous as 'the people', 'the proletariat', 'the citizenry', 'the precariat', 'global sisterhood', 'the multitude'?). It is, like the bracketed terms, an appeal to think and act in certain hopefully universalist and emancipatory ways. I will offer my contribution to an understanding of one aspect only of this – global solidarity.

Solidarity has a place in traditional religious, humanist, enlightenment liberal and labor/socialist tradition. But it tends to be or have been a 'particularistic universalism', meaning one that generalizes from a particular ideological, socio-geographic, socio-economic or socio-cultural position. Usually this is a position of privilege, assumed wisdom, self-righteousness. Thus, during the French Revolution, it appeared as 'Fraternity', with this being a literal (male) brotherhood, and that brotherhood being primarily of nationals.

We need a doctrine of solidarity fit for 'a world where many other worlds also fit' as the Zapatistas (Resources) say, and that enhances relations of respect for, and equality with, distant strangers. I would be inclined to argue that solidarity is the primary ethical principle for a world in which we are increasingly faced by global threats, in which we increasingly share a global fate, and where, therefore, a recognition of these commonalities is increasingly required.

The ISCRAR Model, borrowed, extended and applied to the global (Waterman 2001), suggests that no one understanding of solidarity is sufficient, that it has multiple parts, but that each of these can be counter-productive in the absence of the whole. (For those of a Leninist bent, it might help to recall that the name of his first newspaper was *Iskra*. And post-Leninists might be happy to note that ISCRAR is not only spelled differently but has an added R). The aspects are:

- *Identity* (Workers of the world unite! You have nothing but your chains to lose! You have a world to win!).
- *Substitution* (Standing in for the Other; Charity; Development Cooperation).
- *Complementarity* (We have lots of A, you have lots of B and we both need both).
- *Reciprocity* (You act for us today, we act for you tomorrow).
- *Affinity* (We share mutual attitudes, ideologies, likes or aversions).
- *Restitution* (Solidarity with the past, the recognition of and compensation for historical harm or debts).

A holistic understanding of solidarity is necessary in so far as each of these elements by itself may contain contradictions or imply exclusions. With respect to the Identity case I have given, what about the non-workers? In the case of Substitution, this is a one-way, top-down, relationship and can disguise patron-client relations (from an emancipatory viewpoint, this is not healthy for either side in the relationship).

Without going into this matter in more detail, I would argue that such an understanding can be fruitfully applied by and to

- the Local, the National, the Regional, the Global,
- to Labor, 'Development', Indigenes, Women, Nature (though I have never tried to think this through),

- and *between* such spheres, levels, collectivities, movements

Developing the GJ&SM from a latent possibility into a demonstrable reality, requires a dialogue not only around this understanding of Solidarity but also around the other terms in the concept: the *Global, Justice, Movement*. And lively discussion around such matters is occurring within and around the WSF. [3]

4. Catholic labor doctrine and activity has proven deeply ambiguous. On the one hand there is the elite, patriarchal or hegemonic fear of disorder, of class conflict, the destruction of privilege and private property; on the other is the identification of labor as a, or the, defining human characteristic, the laborer as the source of social wealth and human development, the recognition of the need for solidarity of and with workers and the poor.

As I may have suggested in the Introduction, I am only familiar with Marxist doctrine and dogma. But it does seem to me that the second element in Catholicism mentioned above could contribute to the dialogue and dialectic of a 21st century labor movement as part of the GJ&SM. A superficial read of two crucial encyclicals, one century apart, does, however, suggest profound ambiguities in Catholic social doctrine. [4]

'Rerum Novarum' (1891) explicitly addressed the rise of labour as a major, new social movement threatening social order, was clearly anti-socialist and, therefore, inevitably pro-capitalist - if favouring social reform. It stimulated the rise of a sectarian Catholic trade union movement, nationally and internationally.

'Laborem Exercens' (1981) - interestingly - extends the understanding of the social question from Labour to the Third World. It criticises both 'liberalism' and 'collectivism' as ideologies and systems, and is opposed to 'extreme' forms of capitalism. But it comes over finally as arguing for labour and social reforms within a private property system.

I prefer to take my text from the 'Catholic of the Year' (Stevens-Arroyo 2009), Michael Moore, who in 'Capitalism: A Love Story' (*Resources*) excoriates capitalism in image and word, and gives this word also to two Catholic clerics who seem to consider capitalism a hate story. In a neo-liberal spoof of an old Hollywood Jesus (raising Lazarus from the dead?), Saint Michael of Flint has Jesus say 'I can't treat him, he has a pre-existing condition'. Against those who think capitalism can be moderated, Moore says 'Capitalism is evil and you can't regulate evil'. And, over the credits at the end of his movie, he plays two songs, one from Woody Guthrie about the Jesus of the Poor (*Resources*), and the other Billy Bragg's 'new social movement' version of the old revolutionary socialist song, 'The Internationale'! (*Resources*). Michael Moore takes popular religious belief seriously and clearly sees it as a source for human social emancipation. Seeing this movie in the Heart of Darkness (a commercial cinema in a USA that still does not have a national health service) was for me a moving - a spiritual? - experience.

So people will understand that I prefer to take my historical exemplar of Catholic social action from James Connolly (1868 - 12 May 1916), an Irish Catholic, a Marxist, a union organizer and a leader of the Nationalist Easter Uprising of 1916, martyred by the British. And to recall more recent exemplars of Catholic social action from people I have worked with. Thomas Fenton and Mary Heffron (1989), documentalists, were, if memory does not fail me, co-founders of the Asia Monitor Resource Center/Asia Labor Monitor, Hong Kong (*Resources*) - still functioning after 30+ years. Or Marcos Arruda (1995), of the World Council of Churches, when he was active in the 'shopfloor internationalism' of the Transnationals Information Exchange, Amsterdam, in the 1980s. Or the academic, Rob Lambert, of a Catholic church and labor commission, active in the labor movement of Apartheid South Africa (*Resources*). And to remember the traditions - or moments - of the worker-

priest movement (*Resources*) in Europe, of Catholic 'base communities' organized widely in Latin America, and today sometimes involved in struggles against neo-liberalism (*Resources*). Such movements have customarily provoked high ecclesiastics to ask the old, if apocryphal, question, 'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?' (*Resources*).

Conclusion

If I now reconsider the five propositions above it appears to me that they are more about problems than solutions. Whether this is due to the state of the world or the state of my mind readers may decide. I also note that the propositions seem to get progressively longer. Perhaps this has to do with my movement from more familiar to less familiar (or less easily definable) territory.

Perhaps we also need to remember that the Chinese character for 'crisis' combines those for 'danger' and 'opportunity'. Does this mean that the greater the danger the greater the opportunity? I would not only like to think so. I think there is growing evidence of a remarkable attack of sanity amongst left, democratic and social forces internationally, with a growing preparedness to not only listen to but learn from each other. The propositions are meant seriously as an invitation to a dialogue.

Returning, finally, to the subject and place of this presentation - let me cite Paul Mishler (2009), a labor educator, an Indiana resident, himself apparently a socialist:

"Both religious...and labor traditions are grand metaphors or paradigms for understanding how the world works and the place of individuals within their social worlds. Because most of [my] students live within both traditions, it would be useful to both religious and nonreligious students to explore how these metaphors can talk to each other."

Let us, however, be clear about this: there are new metaphors or paradigms abroad in the world that both Marxists and Catholics will need to talk with.

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Footnotes

[1] The Belem Social Forum, 2009, was the first global one to highlight a specific theme, here, at the mouth of the Amazon, this being indigenous people and movements. I myself had the impression of a considerable indigenous and Amazonian indigenous presence. Indigenous participation turns out from the mentioned report, however, to have been two percent.

[2] Signs of change here are, however, suggested by the World Social Forum TV (*Resources*), and, more generally, by the ongoing efforts of the World Social Forum Communication Commission (*Resources*).

[3] Take, for example, a recent paper by Immanuel Wallerstein (2009), founder, a generation or more ago, of the somewhat structural-determinist neo-Marxist school of World System Theory. Wallerstein has, however, been engaged with and, I think, influenced by the World Social Forums. In this paper, in any case, he presents a rather interesting argument on the new global social movement and the challenges with which it is faced.

[4] For further resources on Catholic Labor doctrine, particularly in the USA, one could take recourse to the Higgins Center itself (*Resources*). I, for better or worse, confine myself to the two declarations mentioned.