

Re:Conceptualising the World Working Class: A Matter of What and Who? Or Why and Wherefore?

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And if the working class is as feminine as it is masculine, socialism will not be built only by the masculine part of the class. The class trade unions will not be those of men-only. The emancipation of mankind against form of oppression by capital – which as we know are central, decisive – are mixed with other forms of oppression. Apart from the class oppression given through the system of capital, gender oppression has a pre-capitalist existence, it continues under capitalism and will have post-capitalist life if this form of oppression is not totally eliminated from the relations of social beings, the relations between men and women. Emancipation from capital rule, just as emancipation of gender, are constitutive moments of emancipation of mankind from all kind of oppression and domination. The same as the [Black] rebellion against the white racism, or the struggle of immigrant workers against xen[...]ophobic nationalism, or that of the homosexual against sex discrimination and so many other factors that oppress social beings nowadays. I should say that if we want to think of the question of human emancipation and of the central struggle against capital, these elements are decisive. Therefore, emancipation battles are multiform.

(Antunes 2001)

The fact that under the category of proletariat we understand all those exploited by and subject to capitalist domination should not indicate that the proletariat is a homogeneous or undifferentiated unit - it is indeed cut through in various directions by differences and stratifications. Some labour is waged, some is not; some labour is limited to eight hours a day and forty hours a week, some expands to fill the entire time of life; some labour is accorded a minimal value, some is exalted to the pinnacle of the capitalist economy. We argue...that among the various figures of production active today the figure of immaterial labour-power (involved in communication, co-operation, and the production and reproduction of affects) occupies an increasingly central position in both the schema of capitalist production and the composition of the proletariat.

(Hardt and Negri 2003/1999)

Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.

(John Berger, cited Roy 1997)

It seems to me that left international labour specialists are confronted by something of a paradox. Whilst there is a growing wave of interest in international labour and labour internationalism, there appears little such interest in what used to be - ought to be? – the social subject under or behind this: ‘the international working class’. It is as if enquiries into this social category or theoretical concept are considered as not yielding relevant information or inspiration. We seem to witness proletarianisation (in the broadest sense), to have growing numbers of workers (ditto), to have new waves of labour protest, to have unions, union internationalism, and even *new forms of* labour internationalism – but without much recent consideration of the ‘working class’. An exception might be in the US, where the demonstration of working-class majorities (Rogers and Teixeira. 2001. Zweig 2001) could be considered itself an emancipatory – or at least subversive - act.

Marcel van der Linden’s essay on ‘conceptualising the world working class’ (2003a) is thus more than welcome. It is not only learned and original but also, surely, timely. It is timely because we are really in a period in which it is becoming necessary to reconceptualise emancipatory labour agency worldwide (Waterman 2001). It is timely, moreover, precisely because this seems to be also a moment of stasis in class theory, with socialist historians and sociologists settling for ‘hydra-headed monsters’ (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000), for a ‘multitude’ (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2003/1999), for an existential ‘scream’ (Holloway 2002), for a movement of attention from the worker to ‘work’ (Gorz 1999, Cleaver 2002). Otherwise we have to make do with assumptions of the continued centrality of Fordist autoworkers to emancipation and internationalism (Moody 1997); or with a defence of the received Marxist-Leninist analytical mode that nonetheless implicitly recognises the vanguard role of...the global justice movement (Harman 2002, commented Waterman 2003d)!¹ Or of sophisticated academic Marxist theorising that seems entirely uninterested in the *political* implications of either what it is criticising or what it is itself proposing

¹ Ricardo Antunes, an outstanding and prolific Brazilian labour specialist, himself believes in the centrality of (a broadened notion of the) proletariat to human emancipation. But, as the initial quote suggests, he clearly considers emancipation to require rather more than proletarian struggle.

(Resnick and Wolff 2003).

In looking at the problem of conceptualising the working class, I would consider it rather important to consider not so much - or not only - the political-economy of the concept 'working class' but why it ever got the centrality it once had, how it functioned in relation to emancipatory theory, how the concept might be reconsidered in the light of globalisation on the one hand, and the 'global justice and solidarity movement' (GJ&SM) on the other.²

Marcel van der Linden's is a fine piece of political-economic analysis, which is able to gracefully credit Marx and equally gracefully say adieu to his proletariat. Van der Linden leans toward a much wider definition, allowing for the inclusion of many categories or even classes, working for capital (those on-whose-work-contemporary-capitalism-is-dependent?). He comes up with this understanding:

Every carrier of labour power whose labour power is sold or hired out to another person under economic or non-economic compulsion belongs to the class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether the carrier of labour power is him- or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him- or herself owns means of production. In a sense, this brings us back to the pre-Marxian concept of the "labouring classes." All aspects of this provisional definition require further research. (Original stress).

This is interesting in so far as it introduces the (Gramscian?) concept of the subaltern,

² I am encouraged here by the work of Ezequiel Adamovsky (2003), in a simultaneously popular and innovative work on anti-capitalism, which has a central focus on emancipation. I suspect it is going to have a considerable impact internationally. Whilst recognising the general value of Marxist questions about class structure and alliances, he insists that

In reality, beyond the *dominant class*, distinctions between social classes may be misleading. Capitalism *is not a static system* characterised by class division, rather a *continuous daily process of the separation* of people into different classes.

The separation of people into *classes* is the business of capitalism: it is a machine for the creation of divisions between people and for the obstruction of their unification. Apart from the *minority* of the population that benefits *directly* from the oppression of others, it does not make much sense for *us* to trace distinctions between classes, as if they fixed compartments or separated entities as such...what matters is not finding the differences that *divide them in distinct classes*, rather it is that which they have in common and that can unite them. [Author's emphasis]. (Adamovsky 10-12).

and that it reconnects an industrial understanding of ‘working class’ with a pre-industrial understanding of ‘labouring classes’. In so far as the latter is also a *non*-industrial understanding, there is in van der Linden’s argument an implication that it might be relevant for our increasingly post-industrial capitalist era.

I do not, however, wish to further comment on this paper except to note that what van der Linden is writing about is less the ‘working class/es’ than the ‘proletariat/proletarianised’. We never quite seem to get to either the working class *für sich*, nor to our globalised world, nor to any strategic implications - or imprecations - for the working-class movement or trade-union organisations (c.f., however, van der Linden 2003b).

E.P.Thompson, said, famously, that the working class was present at its own birth (1970:1-15) and, less famously, that he feared that, in criticising political economy, Marx had created another political economy - within which he was himself possibly trapped? (Thompson 1978: 249).

I take both thoughts to suggest the necessity for an activist view of the working class – one which escapes the limits of political economy. If, furthermore, the working class – if working classes – are present at their own birth, then this is obviously a birth attended by particular histories, geographies, cultures, two genders and (today at least) a variety of sexual options (c.f. Peloso 2003)! Which is why Thompson was so careful to specify, in the title of his magnum opus, that he was only writing about the *English* working class.

I wish to here raise other questions, about the whys and wherefores in the conceptualisation of the working class(es). After all, it is not as if Marx and Engels *started* with political economy, *arrived* at the proletariat/working class and then *discovered*, by a process of induction or deduction that - *wunderbar!* - the latter was the privileged revolutionary and internationalist class. It was, surely, the other way round, or at least through a process of complex interaction between their emancipatory aspiration, utopia or teleology (Communism), sociological observations

(the formation of an industrial proletariat in Britain) and theoretical specifications (political-economic) that their thoughts about the working class were developed.³

That the Marxists get - and got - it wrong about the articulation Working-

³ In an email comment on an earlier version of this paper, Pablo Ghigliani makes two major points. One is about the need to differentiate, on the one, 'the conceptual purchase' of Marx' proletariat and, on the other, its 'political crystallisation in a concrete and particular, that is historical, kind of worker (never the vast majority and always quite mythically described)'. The second point simultaneously reinforces and qualifies my suggestion that the 'mythically described' proletariat preceded the sociological working class of Engels. It comes, Ghigliani reminds me, in Marx' critique of Hegel. This is worth quoting, in at least part, both for its rhetorical force and for its utopianism and apocalypticism. I say this with all due respect. Change a few words – Germany, Proletariat, Man – replace them with appropriate contemporary phraseology, remove the apocalyptic element, and one could produce a document the GJ&SM could endorse – or at least discuss. I am particularly enchanted by the notion of 'radical chains' and that of a reunification of social science (philosophy for Marx) with an emancipatory force (then the proletariat). It should go without saying that it is thanks to a globalised networked capitalism that I could find the passage on the web, without moving from my keyboard, and thus make it available to others. Karl Marx is evidently not some kind of archaic fossil, more like a *compañero* we could have a really good dialogue with.

Where, then, is the *positive* possibility of a German emancipation?

Answer: In the formulation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong, but wrong generally, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no historical, but only human, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat.

The proletariat is beginning to appear in Germany as a result of the rising industrial movement. For, it is not the naturally arising poor but the artificially impoverished, not the human masses mechanically oppressed by the gravity of society, but the masses resulting from the drastic dissolution of society, mainly of the middle estate, that form the proletariat, although, as is easily understood, the naturally arising poor and the Christian-Germanic serfs gradually join its ranks.

By heralding the dissolution of the hereto existing world order, the proletariat merely proclaims the secret of its own existence, for it is the factual dissolution of that world order. By demanding the negation of private property, the proletariat merely raises to the rank of a principle of society what society has raised to the rank of *its* principle, what is already incorporated in *it* as the negative result of society without its own participation. The proletarian then finds himself possessing the same right in regard to the world which is coming into being as the German king in regard to the world which has come into being when he calls the people *his* people, as he calls the horse *his* horse. By declaring the people his private property, the king merely proclaims that the private owner is king.

As philosophy finds its material weapon in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapon in philosophy. And once the lightning of thought has squarely struck this ingenuous soil of the people, the emancipation of the Germans into men will be accomplished. (Marx 1843)

Class? Revolution? Internationalism seriously qualifies but does not deny their contribution to either emancipatory thought or struggle. Seeking emancipatory and universalist capacity within an early-19th century world of unprecedented, dramatic and revolutionary capitalist industrialisation and trade, in which ‘all things solid melt into air’, it is hardly surprising that they invested all internationalist/emancipatory capacity in this chosen people. Any more than it is surprising that, whilst criticising ‘utopian socialism’, they reproduced it – if with a scientific veneer.

That the Marxists (later Leninists) *did* get it seriously wrong was revealed by them, themselves, when the working class failed to fulfil its assigned role. Marx, Engels, Lenin and others then borrowed or invented categories that explained (away) its non-revolutionary, nationalist or imperialist nature – the ‘labour aristocracy’, the ‘lumpen proletariat’ and the ‘semi-proletarianised peasantry’.

Whilst Marcel accords recognition to labour specialists on/from the South for undermining the simplistic Marxist understanding of ‘working class’, he forgets about the extent to which some of these also *depended on and promoted* these rationalisations. There was a lively empirical/theoretical debate about such matters, lasting a decade or so, amongst Africanists. My own contribution to such was to argue the non-theoretical nature of these authentically Marxist-Leninist terms, their varied and changing empirical address, and their erroneous predictive powers. This was in relation to ‘aristocrats’ and ‘plebeians’ in the Lagos cargo-handling industry of the 1970s (Waterman 1983a:1-19). Not that this stopped - or stops - Marxists rabbiting on about the ‘Labour Aristocracy’.⁴ But, then, who has ever been able to prevent Marxists rabbiting on about anything with traditional Marxist licence?

There is also the problem of the empirically revolutionary working class. The most successful case (but for how many decades, years, months?) is that of the Russian Revolution, or at least that of the key role of the working class within this. It

⁴ There are 11,000+ entries on Google for ‘labour+aristocracy+today’. This can be increased by searching for ‘labour+aristocracy’ (29,000+). And could, no doubt, be reduced by finding a way of restricting the search to positive mentions. The figure of 11,000 is nonetheless impressive for a concept the function of which is commonly to explain away shortcomings in a major theory.

could be argued that this success was due in part to the 30 percent growth of the industrial labour force 1910-14 and, therefore, to the combination of the experienced and unionised ‘labour aristocrats’ with the youthful and unruly ‘semi-proletarianised peasants’! Plus, of course, the phase of early industrialisation, the war, authoritarian government. One could continue with further specification of the unique historical circumstances (Waterman 1983b). Since then there have been a number of ‘working class’ revolutions and countless such parties, but typically based on peasants rather than proletarians.

Back to the contemporary, actually-existing – if still problematic – proletariat. We can pick up more evidence from Dan Gallin (1999, 2001), where the former international union leader considers ‘informality’. Gallin notes that the overwhelming majority of the world’s working class is in ‘a-typical’ employment. In the so-called developing countries it is the ‘typical’ worker who is a-typical. But the ‘a-typical’ are not only increasing here, they are becoming a considerable proportion of the working population in the industrialised countries – particularly in comparison with the declining proportion of the unionised. Moreover, he says, we are not here confronted with a split between ‘modern’ and ‘non-modern’ labour or production, since teleworking, sweatshops and the outsourcing of auto-parts are more ‘modern’ than steelworks. Gallin ends up with an understanding close to that of van der Linden: ‘At the end of the day, everyone who works in a dependent situation is a worker’. Gallin does not here concern himself with *conceptualising* the working class. What he is worried about is the problem this new (post-industrial?) working class creates for the trade-union movement. There remain in his account, it seems to me, two black holes. One is consideration of what we might call high-end a-typical workers (professional, managerial and technical workers, programmers, graphic designers and others in the computer industry, who are often outworkers or homeworkers, individualised yet highly dependent on the most modern branch of capitalist production)⁵. The other is whether any of the three types of worker I have just sketched have the consciousness,

⁵ In one of those ironies of history dear to the more dialectical Marxist, the internationalism of the pre-industrial journeyman may now be being re-invented by...the managerial, technical and professional workers! Union Network International now has a UNI Passport for such workers (m/f), announced, of course, on its website, and offering, of course, computerised services. The passport not only promises the support of host-country unions. It also admits to the weakness of unions vis-à-vis corporations, and invites the passport holder to take the opportunity of his/her employment abroad to advance unionism! http://www.union-network.org/UNISite/Groups/PMS/issues_passport.htm

desire and capacity to organise themselves, sectorally or collectively, in a form (the union) that Gallin does not really problematise. Work may still be the Big Issue⁶, but how are we to conceptualise those that do it, and to appeal to them to 1) articulate themselves in a manner that is effective within highly differentiated sectors of the labour-force, 2) in a manner also effective for those in other sectors, 3) in the rest of a radical-democratic-global-civil-society-in-the-making? What do we call these people, when we remember that ‘to call’ means also to appeal? This aspect of identity-formation/recognition has been called ‘interpellation’, but I see no reason to use this translation from the Althusserian French (?), rather than the English word ‘hailing’.⁷ It is, in any case, a process through which mutual recognition and approval is established. We also need to remember that a ‘calling’ is an occupation with an ethical logo. Long into the 20th century, ‘work’ gave many workers not only a sense of identity but of pride. I was reminded of this just a couple of years ago, in Lima, when Lucho, who does part-time ‘a-typical’ taxi driving for a living, told me how happy he had been when he worked in the factory from which he was expelled for his union activity.⁸ That factory, like so many others internationally, has long gone. But we still need a name that simultaneously indicates a position within capitalist society, which can create or re-create a sense of common identity, and which has within it some sense of ethic or mission.

In so far as Marx’s ‘proletariat’ and ‘working class’ was created to meet a utopian aspiration and to fill the role of unique or privileged emancipatory agent, we might consider the argument of Hardt and Negri (2003/1999), for whom it apparently serves, today, a related, if relativised, function. I am here drawing on the text from

⁶ Actually, a British weekly, reproduced internationally, not on proletarians, even *an sich*, but on homelessness, and sold by the homeless/unemployed in the streets on which they often live.

⁷ As an example of hailing, consider that classic of dissident Polish cinema, Wajda’s ‘Man of Marble’, from 1976. This is about a Communist model worker, one of a group being specially fattened up for their task - and hated by their fellow workers. The film is also about the relationship to the workers and the state of the intellectuals – in this case the director filming/creating this new brick-laying record. When the workers emerge from their hut, cross themselves and slouch toward the building site, the director tells them that they have to return to their hut and to ‘come out like workers’. The builders then return, to march out, arms swinging, heads high, conforming to the state-socialist model. These were evidently ‘semi-proletarianised peasants’, in urgent need of hailing by a vanguard intellectual.

⁸ At around the time Lucho was involved in working-class struggle, a far-sighted labour sociologist used in his book title a quotation from one of his interviewees: ‘To be a worker is a relative matter’ (Parodi 1986).

which my introductory quotation is extracted. This seems to me to address itself to not only the nature of the category and its emancipatory potential, but also the original internationalist vocation and even to organisational and strategic issues. I am not opposing this to Marcel's argument. I am, rather, posing it as the most economical (in the sense of brief), striking and imaginative extension of such. It would seem to me here, that when we add this to the various post-industrial re-conceptualisations mentioned above, we may recognise that we have a family of interpretations that lean toward a broader understanding of, and more modest role for, the category. In the case of Hardt and Negri, there are added, perhaps, certain implications.

Hardt and Negri's 1999 piece actually ranges over the whole of what was then a still-to-be-published book – and deals thus with nationalism, globalisation, methodology, ontology and other such matters. Where, however, it begins, is with a quotation from William Morris, which for me strikes a classically Marxist, if somewhat pathetic, chord:

Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and then it turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.

H&N also appeal to Marx (as well as to Italian *operaismo* and Gilles Deleuze) to argue that in the beginning there was not Power but Resistance (I myself prefer 'protest' since this seems to me closer to 'assertion' and 'surpassal'). They further admit that this position is axiomatic rather than proven, but they continue to argue the positive political implications of such an understanding. They wish not to celebrate protest, but to recognise its continual existence, and its potential. In arguing, along with Marx, that proletarian protest stimulated the development of capitalism (today hegemonic globalisation), one leaves open the possibility of its one day surpassing these. H&N seem, in other words, to be seeing 'proletariat' as - or also as - a heuristic concept. They start their argument on the proletariat as

a broad category that includes all those whose labour is directly or indirectly exploited by capitalist norms of production and

reproduction.

So far, so common to our other authors. They then continue with the long passage initially quoted, which makes one highly-specific point on the increasing centrality of labour involved in ‘communication, cooperation, and the production and reproduction of affects’.

Although these kinds of labour are here neither specified nor distinguished, H&N are pointing in the direction of labour in the new economy of a globalised networked capitalism. This includes, it should be remembered, not only information workers in general (which could be taken to include those in call centres – hightech sweatshops), but also those involved in housework/caring and such waged personal services as domestic work, health, tourism (the world’s biggest employer!) and social services. Communication here would also, presumably, include the growing cultural and media industries. Whilst H&N do not suggest that these workers provide a new vanguard, *we* could consider them as workers who are, on the one hand, often individualised and hard to organise, but, on the other - and in so far as they are information/communication/cultural workers - commonly familiar with computerised equipment and therefore possibly open to the ‘networked union of the future’ (Hyman 199:112).

OK, so I am looking for a concept that simultaneously says farewell to the working class of Marx, Lenin, Kim Moody (1997) and Chris Harman (2002) but hello to the working classes/categories considered by van der Linden, Hardt and Negri and Gallin.

This is *not* going to be ‘working families’, the latest of a series of horrible soundbites or sitebytes invented (or purchased for serious dollars) by the AFL-CIO in the USA. ‘Working families’ nonetheless remains interesting, in so far as it articulates ‘working’ (the subaltern AFL-CIO prefers this *activity* to the related *identity*) with ‘family’ (borrowed from the ‘family values’ of a corrupt, reactionary, but populist neo-liberalism).⁹ What the AFL-CIO does understand is the necessity of articulating a

⁹ ‘Working Families’ seems to have been downgraded on the AFL-CIO website, in favour of ‘Working America – a Powerful Voice for Non-Union Workers’, <http://www.aflcio.org/>. The appearance and

class concept (if disguised) with a popular/populist one.

What, then, about ‘working people’? It articulates work with people, thus class with popular discourse, which would make it acceptable to at least the Young Laclau and Mouffe (1985). It articulates work, what workers do for capital, with people, what workers are (before work, after work, against work). By its very looseness it overcomes such problems as that of redefining the ‘middle-class’ as ‘intermediate categories in a contradictory class location’ (Wright 1976). Or as the ‘coordinator class’ (Albert 2003) since, as Hardt and Negri might here suggest, they do rather more than this. ‘Working people’, however, would then need to be itself articulated with the a reinvented understanding of social emancipation (Santos 2003)¹⁰, and with a similarly reinvented notion of global labour solidarity (previously, ‘labour internationalism’). In so far as we recognise workers as people and citizens¹¹, then we will, moreover, no longer seek to re-invent an (inter)national working-class culture

disappearance of such slogans from AFL-CIO discourse is a fascinating indicator of problems for which the AFL-CIO does not have solutions. Consider ‘Buy American’, now condemned to another site, <http://www.unionlabel.org/>. For some – possibly contradictory – reflections on ‘working families’, see Clawson 2003: 68, fn 35, 214.

¹⁰ Santos avoids defining emancipation. But he does consider ‘its’ aspects. His identification of the tension between equality and difference reveals also that between the core labour movement value and that of the newest social movements – this tension also existing within the World Social Forum process he is writing about:

Social emancipation must be grounded on two principles - the principle of equality and the principle of respect for difference. The struggle for either of them must be articulated with the other, for the fulfilment of either is condition of the fulfilment of the other. Nonetheless, there is a cleavage among the movements and even, sometimes, inside the same movement on whether priority should be given to one of these principles, and in that case to which one. Among those that say yes to first question, the cleavage is between those that give priority to the principle of equality - for equality alone may create real opportunities for the recognition of difference - and those that give priority to the principle of the recognition of difference, for without such recognition equality conceals the exclusions and marginalities on which it lies, thus becoming doubly oppressive (for what it conceals and for what it shows). This cleavage occurs among movements and intra-movements. It traverses, among others, the workers', the feminist, the indigenous, and the black movements. For instance, whereas the workers' movement has privileged the principle of equality to the detriment of the principle of the recognition of difference, the feminist movement has privileged the latter in detriment to the former. But the most shared position is indeed that both principles have priority together, and that it is not correct to prioritize either one in the abstract. Concrete political conditions will dictate to each movement which one of the principles is to be privileged in a given concrete struggle. Any struggle conceived under the aegis of one of these two principles must be organized so as to open space for the other principle.

¹¹ Consider here the argument of US union activist and academic Paul Johnston (2001), proposing the re-invention of trade unionism as a citizenship movement.

that was once a reality but has today been largely incorporated into the disputed terrain and discourse of ‘popular culture’¹².

What meaning could social emancipation have today for working people? The classical labour movement had, in fact, two major work-related emancipatory slogans (Waterman 2003b).

The first was ‘A Fair Day’s Wage for a Fair Day’s Work’. This notion was, initially, I imagine, a Christian one, later incorporated, along with other convenient bits of Churchlore, into liberalism. Today it is Born Again in the form of ‘Decent Work’, promoted by the International Labour Organisation (an inter-state body in which labour – OK *unions* – has 25 percent representation, and swallowed, uncritically, by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions/Global Unions alliance. In so far as this is or was an emancipatory slogan, this is in the sense, of gaining rights *within* an existing capitalist society and liberal discourse.

The other historical slogan was ‘The Abolition of Wage-Slavery’, a prominent slogan of the anarcho-syndicalist (and internationalist) Industrial Workers of the World (aka IWW, Wobblies). In more contemporary form, this reappears in Andre Gorz (1999), who calls for ‘The Liberation of Time from Work’. In so far as Gorz considers we have reached the end of the work-based society, this slogan should be understood *not* as Eurocentric, *nor* as calling for an increase in unemployment, but as struggle against enforced capitalist work and worklessness. This takes expression in the South, particularly in Latin America, in attempts to both conceptualise and realise a ‘solidarity economy’ - a considerable topic at successive World Social Forums (Waterman 2003a). In so far as this understanding could be linked to the archaic/contemporary demand for the re-establishment of the commons (socialisation

¹² I recall a book with some such title as ‘A Candle at Midnight: Working-Class Culture in Cold War America’ but, although I cannot believe I invented this, I cannot find it on the web. The point, however, is that it was clearly about generally *popular*, not specifically *working-class*, culture. In a thought-provoking piece on the labour movement and civil society, Dan Gallin (2000) states that labour used to have its own ‘civil society’ in a wide range of working-class institutions and practices. This, however, was surely what was then understood as, simply ‘the labour movement’ or else as ‘working-class culture’. Claiming this, as he does, as some kind of forerunner to today’s NGOs and civil society is, it seems to me, a defensive move, rather than one that might encourage trade unions to insert themselves into a set of radical-democratic practices and discourses, within which they are far from central.

of privatised common goods and services), an inter-relationship with the GJ&SM (ecological, citizenship, housing and rural movements) would be reinforced (Waterman 2003d). The paradoxical nature of the Gorz slogan should have at least the minimal effect of de-naturalising ‘work’.¹³

On the new kind of internationalism I will be brief. Ideas like that of ‘a global social movement unionism’, ‘global/ising solidarity’ and suchlike, are creeping onto inter/national union websites, and even motivating institutionalised union solidarity activity¹⁴. These new notes exist in notable discord – I would argue - with dominant union discourses of globalised ‘social partnership’. The latter is actually a subordinate partnership with those corporations prepared to play games with a downsized union movement – which has a reduced membership appeal, and limited reach to ‘working people’ more generally (Waterman 2003b).

If I have wandered too far from Marx’s working class, I blame this on the manner in which capitalist-imposed work and worklessness has likewise wandered, and spread, whether in terms of the geographical movement of workers (from traditional working-class communities, by inter/national migration) or of jobs (high-tech/low-skill call centres). Marx’s proletarianisation continues apace, however - downwards and upwards and sideways - but without the creation of Marx’s proletariat. (If there is here an echo of Thompson’s *processal* notion of class formation, so much the better).

¹³ In response to an earlier draft of this paper, Jeremy Brecher makes two thought-provoking points. One has to do with the specificity of the working class within the emancipatory movement, the other suggests a relationship (which the some of us will call dialectical) between the two historical labour movement slogans:

...there is a set of people who are negatively affected by the rtb [race to the bottom – title of a book by Brecher and friends - PW] by virtue of a position in the production process *that puts them in competition with other workers*. They therefore have common interests as workers relative to the race to the bottom and the various structures that maintain it. I wonder if that might not be a useful way of defining the working class today: *those who share a common interest in countering the race to the bottom...because it threatens them in their role in the production process*. This implies a project that [includes] ‘A fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay’ and/or ‘emancipation from wage slavery’. [My emphasis - PW]. (Brecher 2003).

¹⁴ A Google search on <global solidarity union 2003> will reveal the range. I offer just one reference, to a pathbreaking conference on solidarity internationally between mining and maritime unions, http://www.mua.org.au/journal/october_2002/global.html.

Whether we can find an appropriate appeal, matching the one on my five-hundred rouble banknote from the Russian Federation of Socialist Council Republics, 1919, I do not know. This bears, in some six languages, the closing words of the Old Testament of classical labour internationalism, ‘Workers of the World Unite!’. There was, clearly, no room on this banknote to include ‘You Have Nothing to Lose but Your Chains. You Have a World to Win’! But repetition wears out the force of even inspiring slogans, particularly after 150 years lacking...umm...notable success? Moreover, many workers today may fear that they have something more than their chains to lose: A car-cum-taxi? A plot of land or house? A pension scheme or investment fund? A small-scale enterprise? Democracy, even if Lite? Freedom of expression? A *job*, for God’s sake!¹⁵ In any case, the problem is no longer to ‘unite’, in the traditional sense of accepting (i.e. of faith, loyalty, self-subordination to) one dominant and unchanging identity, theory, policy, strategy or leadership. It is to *communicate*, in the full sense of the word. This is something increasingly possible through the radical-democratic use of the web¹⁶. This is, of course, also something increasingly easy for the newest kinds of worker, as implied by Hardt and Negri. One could always organise, perhaps at a future World Social Forum, a competition for such. My present, omnibus, contribution could be broken down, or combined with others.

¹⁵ In 1989, a Marxist academic in the Philippines was explaining to me the ‘National Democratic’ (i.e. Communist) project for revolution, based on the North Korean model. This involved a brief National-Democratic phase (six months, he told me, in the Korean case), to be followed by a Socialist one based on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat (infinite). ‘But what,’ I asked, ‘is the National-Democratic project for the workers of Shoe Mart?’ Shoe Mart was a chain of gigantic shopping malls, today employing maybe 20,000 young women nationwide. It was selling to the middle class, at local prices, the clothes that would appear the following season in the shopping malls of the USA. I sketched a scenario of what would happen to Shoe Mart, and all modern industry and commerce in the Philippines, should the Communists take power. It became evident that although this man – a consultant to the Communist-dominated union front in the Philippines – had a project for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, he did not have one for the Workers of Shoe Mart.

¹⁶ Here ‘communicate’ should be understood as community-creating. Which further complicates assumptions about political-economically given categories, interests and identities. Community-creation is a barely-developed potential of labour’s own cyberspaces. Labour nets are spreading and increasing in sophistication. They are not necessarily confined, or most developed amongst, new-economy or high-tech workers or the famous ‘intermediate categories’. There are at least two amongst dockworkers (admittedly, an increasingly computerised category), one (mostly in Dutch/Flemish) overlapping with the International Transportworkers Federation, <http://www.havenarbeiders.be/>, the other autonomous of such, <http://www.idcdockworkers.org/>. Interestingly again, however, it is UNI that hosts a website for union web specialists, <http://www.e-tradeunions.org/home.php>.

Working People of All Kinds, Countries and Cultures – Communicate!
Emancipate Yourselves from Capitalist Over/Work/Lessness!
Another World of Labour is Necessary!

Although I do not expect this to win the competition, I do hope, with this note, to have at least set an emancipatory cat amongst the determinist pigeons. And, maybe, to have suggested that we need not spend too much time on re-conceptualising ‘working class’ but should rather concentrate on the other matters raised here. Juliet did not ask Romeo what or who he was, nor, for obvious reasons, his position in relationship to the mode of production or to the capitalist labour process. Her question was ‘wherefore?’. We could do worse than follow her example.

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