Trade unions and the Polanyian countermovement: a Southern perspective

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Karl Polanyi (2001) in his classic study of the industrial revolution showed how society through the state developed regulations, legislation and policies to protect itself against the disruptive impact of unregulated market growth. He described this as the 'double movement' whereby ever wider extensions of free market principles generated counter-movements to protect society. (Polanyi, 2001, 138-139).

Martin Seeliger, in his application of Polanyi's notion of the 'double movement' to Europe, writes that "Political action to represent workers' interests is mainly taking place in the field of collective bargaining (towards capital) and in the field of lobbying (towards the state)". This account of the role of unions in politics is in large part true of the Global North. Trade unions and their political parties played a crucial role in the resolution of the social question after the Second World War in Western Europe. The 'social question' was 'solved' in part and workers' demands were met to a certain extent by the introduction of a welfare state that began a process of redistribution through state transfers underpinned by progressive taxation and full employment.

As the historical compromise of the North came under pressure in the seventies and eighties – through what became known as the Second Great Transformation (Munck, 2002) – so did hegemonic regimes of control. Burawoy argues that these made way for what he calls hegemonic despotism (Burawoy, 1985, 12). "This implies", Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout suggest "that the institutions of collective bargaining are now utilised to enter into a process of concession bargaining, where workers agree to the re-commoditisation of their labour under the threat of factory closures or lay-offs." (Webster, Lambert & Bezuidenhout, 2008, 53) The ideology of neo-liberalism legitimises this.

Table 1: Shifts in regimes of control in the North

First Great Transformation	Countermovement	Second Great Transformation	Countermovement
Rapid marketization and commoditization. Market despotism in the workplace	Emergence of workplace hegemony and construction of a welfare state	Rapid liberalisation and shift to hegemonic despotism	Embryonic global countermovement in the post-Seattle period, new global unionism

Source: Webster, Lambert & Bezuidenhout, 2008, 53

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I will argue in this article that to understand Polanyi's Great Transformation in the context of the Global South one needs to develop a distinctive Southern approach that goes beyond traditional notions of work and union politics.[1] Of course there is enormous heterogeneity within the Global South; some countries continue to be based on extractive industries, while others have become important centres of manufacturing industries. But recognizing variations should not obscure the fact that economic and social development in these countries has led to certain distinctive 'southern features' in the world of work and labour. Let me illustrate.

I will make my argument in two parts: firstly, countries in the Global South have followed an economic and social trajectory that differs markedly from the First Great Transformation in Northern industrialized countries described by Polanyi. The history of the South is marked by the colonial experience of political and economic subordination to the needs of the Northern economies. As Barchiese (2006) has argued, at the core of the welfare state of advanced capitalist society was a link between wage work and social citizenship. However, in the South, Barchiese suggests, colonialism could not deal with the 'social question'. Countermovements in the South often dovetailed with struggles for national liberation (Buhlungu, 2010).

These countries lacked the preconditions for the creation of a welfare state as wage labour is often less then 20% of the workforce. (Webster, Britwum & Bhowmik, 2017, 10-15) Work is largely informal or involves unpaid survivalist activities. As an example, let me take care work. In the South, care work goes well beyond looking after the very young and the very old; it often involves the unpaid reproduction of the household as a whole. "In the former South African 'homelands'", Fakier and Cock write, "many people do not have water on site and have to obtain water from natural sources – dams, rivers or wells – which are often polluted. Many women in rural areas still have to walk long distances to fetch water from rivers and dams with 20 litre buckets carried on their heads" (Fakier & Cock, 366). This also includes the collection of firewood, as many households do not have electricity, or if they do they cannot afford to use it (Ibid, 367).
As we have argued elsewhere, in Polanyian terms the Global South skipped a stage. "These societies" we argued, "never secured a welfare state, high waged employment and social citizenship as their own democratic transition occurred at the very moment of the Second Great Transformation. Political liberation was secured within the global environment of market-driven politics and restructuring of work and society" (Webster, Lambert & Bezudenhout, 2008, 54). This is illustrated in the table below:

Table 2: Shifts in regimes of control in the South

First Great Transformation	Counter-movement	Second Great Transformation	Counter-movement
Colonial conquest and land dispossession. Colonial despotism in the workplace	National liberation movement. Leads to political independence and state corporatism	Structural adjustment, market despotism	Embryonic global countermovement in the post-Seattle period – new global unionism

Source: Webster, Lambert & Bezuidenhout, 2008, 55.

[1] I am using the term Global South not so much as a geographical concept to describe the countries of Africa, South America and South Asia but more of a metaphor to describe the dispossessed and marginalized in the global economy.

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In response to these challenges, unions in South Africa went beyond collective bargaining to respond to demands in the townships and in the broader struggles for economic, social and political rights by black South Africans – I called this form of unionism social movement unionism (Webster, 1988). While responses in the North shared certain characteristics with the 'southern model', the southern context was quite different. As Seidman demonstrated in her comparison of workers' struggles in Brazil and South Africa, social movement unionism in the Global South consisted of struggles over wages and working conditions but it also involved struggles" over living conditions in working-class areas- over housing and social services , such as health care , education, transport, and running water ' (Seidman, 1994, 2-3) She goes on to argue that "Strikes over factory issues receive strong community support ; conversely community campaigns for improved social services and full citizenship are supported by factory organizations as labour movements redefine their constituencies to include the broader working class" (Ibid, 3)

My second argument is that the heterogeneity of work and the ambivalence of class positions makes it difficult to envisage in the Global South the kind of Northern compromise based on an exchange between capital and labour that took place in advanced industrial societies (Webster & Adler, 1999, 351).The configuration of classes that brought about the 'southern compromise' in the wake of decolonization was quite different from the North ; the compromise was struck between the state, urban classes and class fractions (including wage workers, the informal economy workers , the unemployed) and domestic and international capital . The social structure of the labour force differed from that of northern advanced industrialized societies. Where the latter was composed largely of full-time permanently employed workers (represented in the main by national industrial unions), in the Global South a multiplicity of classes and class fractions existed: urban workers, the informal economy, the unemployed, small entrepreneurs., and 'peasants'. (Ibid, 354). "The industrial working class was a minority, while trade unions did not represent the majority of workers – let alone other strata- and were not always the principal agent of the southern compromise" (Ibid, 353).

Henry Bernstein has captured the complexity of classes in the Global South in this paragraph:
"Classes of labour have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive—and typically increasingly scarce—wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure "informal sector" ("survival") activity, including farming in some instances; in effect, various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment… In short, there is no "homogeneous proletarian condition" within the "South", other than that essential condition I started from: the need to secure reproduction needs (survival) through the (direct and indirect) sale of labour power'" (Bernstein, 2007, 5).

The result of this ambivalence of class positions is multiple forms of identity including caste, ethnicity, race, kinship and family. Indeed, power is produced and reproduced at the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality and other aspects of identity. An intersectional approach is necessary in order to understand the way in which these different dimensions of power interact to reproduce inequality in the Global South. But this approach to intersectionality, Naila Kabeer remarked in a recent lecture, is not the same as Western identity politics that is detached from class (Kabeer, 2018).

To conclude: The starting point for an understanding of Polanyi's work is his concept of 'embeddedness'- the idea that the economy is not autonomous, but subordinated to social

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relations. We have argued in this article that trade unions need to be embedded in the social relations that exist and shape market relations in the Global South. It is only through embedding worker organization and action in these social relations and evolving class relations, that a coalition to build a countermovement to economic liberalism will emerge in the Global South.

In developing a southern approach to unions, a research agenda has evolved where we have begun to identify the new forms of organization and sources of power that are emerging in the Global South. The focus of these studies has, we argue, not been the institutional setting of labour relations or the overall impact of major trends like globalisation on labour, but rather the strategic choice in responding to new challenges and changing contexts (Schmalz, Ludwig & Webster, 2018, 113).[2]

We argue in these studies that workers with limited structural power are able to mobilize other sources of power. For example, farm workers in the Western Cape of South Africa mobilized what we call logistical power through street blockades or other forms of joint action by trade unions together with social movements (Webster, Britwum & Bhowmik, 2017, 18-19). In India, a country characterized by a high level of informality, the associational power of street vendors has not been built in the form of a conventional trade union but through associations for informal workers. In this context, the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) was formed as an association of trade unions, community-based organizations, NGOs and individual members, to successfully advocate for street vendors' rights and policy changes (Schmalz, Ludwig & Webster, 2018, 124).

Similarly, in Uganda the structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s fostered the informalisation of the transport industry. The Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU) built informal transport workers' associational power through the affiliation of mass-membership associations of informal workers, notably representing minibus taxi workers and motorcycle taxi riders. This strategy of building a hybrid organisation has assisted the union in bridging the divide between formal and informal workers, to achieve substantial gains for informal workers and to reduce their vulnerability. Taken together, informal self-employed workers with low structural power tend to create new forms of associational power, which diverge from traditional trade unions (Schmalz, Ludwig & Webster, 2018, 125).

These are modest but significant examples of the new forms of organization and sources of power that are emerging in the South. To what extent they could form a countermovement to liberalization in the Global South remains to the be seen. What is clear is that Southern workers are developing innovative responses to the challenge of an increasingly insecure world.

[2] Many of these studies are the result of an international research project – Trade unions in Transformation – initiated by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in 2015, aiming at identifying and analysing innovative forms of trade unionism in different world regions, predominantly in the Global South , See Herberg, editor,

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