Re-empowering labour:
Knowledge, ontology and counter-hegemony

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ABSTRACT

An essential component of union power and issues of empowerment is the production of knowledge. The disempowerment of labour under the neo-liberal intellectual hegemony highlights the need for new forms of counter-hegemonic knowledge. The dominant unions, both in the global South as well as the North, maintain a mono culture of knowledge that situate unions primarily within the realm of production, systems of industrial relations and formal labour markets. In subordinating the realm of social reproduction, and ‘informal’ labour markets, this approach to knowledge evade the lived reality of those, the majority, enduring multiple forms of violence, from hunger to social exclusion in their every day lives. The re-empowerment of unions relates to elaborating union approaches to knowledge or epistemic frameworks that encourage a deeper understanding of union practices as well as communication with other movements. This paper suggests a return to the realm of ontology, the domain of being, in terms of prioritising and transforming the insecurity and violence in everyday life, particularly in the global South. An emphasis on ontology suggests reinforcing social and democratic approaches to knowledge, in order for unions to engage as a counter movement revitalising their identities as civil society actors.

Key words: Knowledge production, trade unions, social movements, ontology, violence, counter-hegemonic knowledge
INTRODUCTION

Central to debates around union renewal and empowerment is the development of counter-hegemonic knowledge capable of organising and mobilising workers (Moody 1997; Lambert, 2002; Waterman, 2005; Clawson, 2003; Hyman, 2004; Webster et al., 2008). Most dominant unions, or the consolidated segments of the labour movement, are compromised within hegemonic knowledge, creating consent to positivist instrumental approaches to knowledge. This mono-culture of knowledge (Sousa, 2003), despite a discourse of diversity and organising ‘new’ workers, represents unions as economic actors, restricted to the workplace, within systems of industrial relations based on a formal economy of exchange. Meanwhile, the less consolidated segments of the labour movement, such as new unions and worker organisations, rely on counter-hegemonic knowledge, or ecologies of knowledge, elaborating their collective identities as a social movement within civil society. The realm of civil society involving organisations, networks and movements, is a space of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles, interrelated to the state. Unions as actors within civil society foreground a social and moral economy which is central to strategic theoretical perspectives of ‘community unionism’ and ‘social movement unionism’ (Moody, 1997; Lambert, 2002; Waterman, 2005; Clawson, 2003; Webster et al., 2008). The representation of unions as actors within civil society, emphasise the movement dimension of unions as well as new approaches to knowledge. Nevertheless, these perspectives often fail to factor in the experience of violence in the everyday lives of workers, particularly in the global South. The “South” refers to a status of subordination, in the core-periphery hierarchies of uneven capitalist development, where the historical experience of colonialism, racism, anti-colonial struggles,
as well as disillusionment with post-colonial state forms influence the Southern trade union identities (Lambert, 2002).

An often ignored significant structural effect of neo-liberal globalisation, particularly in the South, is the spread of violence and insecurity. Under neo-liberal ideology, the spread of “flexible labour markets” and the privatisation public goods, depends on authoritarian state forms that prioritise ‘national security’ over ‘human security’. The generative mechanism of this violence and insecurity are structures of power that reproduce conditions of exploitation, oppression and subjugation (Das, 1990; Galtung, 1996, 2004; Moser, 2001). Various manifestations of violence that permeate multiple scales and temporalities are generated by structural coupling of capitalism, patriarchy, racism and imperialism (Das, 1990; Moser, 2001; Panitch, 2002; Ali and Ercelan, 2004). The adoption of new coercive domestic and international measures by the US in the post 9-11 context, under the ‘war against terrorism’, reflects the restructuring of the coercive apparatuses of all states to coordinate and maintain the US global hegemony (Panitch, 2002). These authoritarian state strategies often depend on ‘uncivil’ actors in civil society for reproducing structures of violence. Of course, this structural violence is debilitating and undermines individual and collective agency. Nevertheless, it is also at the root of social protest and mobilisation (Panitch, 2002). The multiplicity of struggles from Communists Maoists in tribal areas of India to the Zapatistas in indigenous areas of Mexico, illustrate collective struggles forced into violent modes of resistance.

Violence as an expression of power relations involves structural and cultural dimensions. Structural violence (of hunger, poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy) and cultural violence (patriotic, patriarchal, etc) are embedded in power hierarchies based on class, gender,
ethnicity, region, caste, age, (dis)ability, and sexuality. These structures of violence are stratified and differentiated with visible and invisible effects. While direct violence, physical and/or verbal, is visible, they emerge from the more invisible cultural and structural violence (Galtung, 2004). Indeed the resistance to structural violence of state and capital by counter forces also appropriates cultural meanings to legitimize their use of violence as the mode of struggle (Ibid.). According to Galtung (2004), transforming violence through human agency requires a counter discourse of peace and non-violence which must be “built in the culture and in the structure, not only in the ‘human mind’”.

Under neo-liberal globalisation, the deregulation of labour markets and privatisation of public goods has involved an escalation of violence in the realm of production as well as social reproduction. In the realm of production, the global restructuring of production and the spread of ‘flexible labour markets’ have meant a manufacturing of insecurity (Webster et al., 2008). The increasing insecurity of employment and wages intersect with an intensification work which subordinates, neglects and devalues concerns of well-being, dignity and social justice. For women workers absorbed into casualised work, their marginalised status involves a spectrum of experiences encompassing sexual harassment, abuse and humiliation. In the realm of reproduction, women’s unpaid household work has intensified by the uncertainty of paid work. Particularly in the global South, the privatisation of public goods (water, education, health, transport, etc.) has pushed more women into poverty and added to the intensification of household labour. Women have also lost access to decent public sector jobs with the marketisation of the state. The privatisation process involving the displacement of communities from access to common resources (forests, water, land, seeds and genes, oceans and culture) for the purposes of ‘development’ (large dams, roads, SEZs, etc.), illustrates a process of primitive accumulation that reproduces structures generating violence and
insecurity (Chandra and Basu, 2007). The coupling of neo-liberal globalisation with the rise of ethno-nationalist forces, particularly in the South Asia, has reinforced multiple forms of violence, mainly violence against women and marginalised communities (Das, 1990).

The development of a counter discourse depends on factoring in experiences of violence, insecurity and suffering, in terms of articulating counter hegemonic struggles. By factoring in how different experiences of violence permeate the everyday life of people, the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of how hegemonic relations of power and knowledge restrain as well as shape collective agency and counter movements. This focus on ontology is mainly framed from a strategic-theoretical perspective for gaining a better understanding of how the politics of everyday life interact with representative (electoral party politics) and movement politics.

**NEO-LIBERAL INTELLECTUAL HEGEMONY**

The disempowerment of the labour movement reflects the rise of neo-liberal intellectual hegemony, shaping the character and social organisation of knowledge. Under neo-liberalism, the positioning of the state as the epitome of reason and modern science is central to legitimising state deployment of knowledge or government rationality (or governmentality) (Wainwright, 1994:265-7). The governmentality expressed in social engineering state strategies aspires to a knowledge of inexhaustible detail and continuous control (Ibid.). The new active role of the state is to act as a scientific subject, which involves a performance grounded in a positivist notion of science, dominated by an instrumental understanding of society and economy. However, it is also a performance that combines “forms of experiential and practical knowledge, ignored by orthodox economic theorists of all political colours” (Ibid.: 268-9).
The intellectual hegemony under neo-liberal globalisation is based on linking knowledge with individualism (Wainwright, 1994:50-61). Critical of Fordist centralised management of workplaces and the state, this individualist approach to knowledge is based on disconnecting individual intent from social outcomes. Described as process of de-agentification, it restrains agency and undervalues intentionality (Bhaskar, 1993). The outcome of this disembodied individualist approach (grounded in empiricist and rationalist knowledge) is the hegemony of a technocracy as the intellectual elites of the state as well as civil society. (Trust us, we are experts!).

The critique of the Keynesian welfare state launched by Hayek and the Austrian school, focused on the character of knowledge and of social order (Fleetwood, 1995). Hayek saw the attempts by the Keynesian welfare state to centralise dispersed economic knowledge (in a catalaaxy) as unrealistic in practice (Wainwright, 1994:52). In contrast, neo-liberalism focused on co-ordinating a decentralised individualised economic knowledge by way of an unregulated price mechanism, prioritising the role of financial institutions. In turn, the “rationality of the government” required adapting the state to the needs of international finance capital, on the basis of “international competitiveness” and “investor confidence” (Wainwright, 1994). Although Hayek suggested a decentred approach to knowledge, in practice the authoritarianism of a technocracy reproduced the social engineering state, accelerating the commodification of labour and public goods. Unlike the Fordist technocrats who saw state intervention as vital for planning, the new authoritarian technocracy maintains a simultaneous critique of state intervention (Ibid.: 56). Despite the libertarian rhetoric, the neo-liberal intellectual hegemony, in practice, demands a centralised concentrated state.
The neo-liberal governmentality reproduces the capitalist state, by adapting and modernising to face challenges from below (Ibid.: 269). In the process, boundaries are drawn between ‘scientific’, ‘rational’ ‘modern’ and ‘unscientific’ or ‘non-rational’ actors resisting ‘modernisation’. The state, as “the scientific subject”, depends on discourses of ‘law and order’ and ‘security’, giving these boundaries a concrete form by the police, military, paramilitaries and prisons. In creating consent to state strategies, a range of unions as well as civil society actors also target counter movements as ‘anti-modern’ or ‘anti-development’. Nevertheless, the contestation of neo-liberal intellectual hegemony, in terms of debates around development, industrialisation and modernisation in the South, emerges within social movements asserting the validity of social, experiential and practical knowledge.

SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements, in contrast to the state, understand knowledge as a social product embedded in relations of power. They assert alternative approaches to the character and social organisation of knowledge (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Wainwright, 1994:67). The ‘new’ social movements of women, peace, ecology and students that emerged in 1960s and 1970s highlighted the limits of old movements incorporated into the state. They revealed the concentration and centralisation of decision making, along with arbitrary and unaccountable forms of authority, exercised by a range of actors in everyday life, from managers, university administrators, trade union bureaucrats, state bureaucrats to scientistic technocrats (Wainwright, 1994). In contesting hegemonic relations of knowledge and power, these movements de-centred the state and the party as the primary site for social change, and prioritised institutions of everyday life.
In emphasising the social character of knowledge, the new social movements innovated and asserted practical alternatives against the positivist hegemony of knowledge, which separates values from facts. In inserting values back into ‘facts’, they advocate a pluralistic approach to the development knowledge, while demystifying theoretical knowledge (Ibid. :67). As a dispersed collective counter-hegemonic movement, these movements asserted an “eclectic, egalitarian, and above all social approach to knowledge” (Ibid. :68). In recasting the state and political parties, the new social movements elaborated new strategies, terrains and sites in articulating counter-hegemonic struggles. Their focus on constructions of subjectivity and collective identity, contested the reification of collective social agency, which fails to acknowledge an evolving diversity within unity. They rearticulated domains of politics prioritising life politics or politics around species survival, by foregrounding threats of euro-masculine militarism, nuclear war and ecological destruction. This shift in focus from the form to the evaluative content of agency enabled an elaboration of collective agency recognising the significance everyday life, with its own stratification.

In understanding knowledge as a social product, social movements illustrate possibilities of linking the lived experience of violence and disempowerment into transformative movement politics. The emphasis on embodiment and everyday life, or the ‘reality’ principle, is significant for acknowledging the experiential and tacit dimensions (social character) of knowledge. Counter-hegemonic knowledge production validates embodied knowledge, while affirming the differentiation of experience. However, this embodied knowledge interacts with theoretical knowledge through practice. In a transformational approach to knowledge, critical realism sustains the possibility of a real world, independent of knowledge. In this approach, reality consists of transitive (epistemic) and intransitive (ontological) domains of knowledge, where being is irreducible to knowledge, and knowledge is irreducible to being (Bhaskar, 1989:17-18). For Archer, this involves a transmission of knowledge between three levels of
natural, practical and social (Archer, 2001). In avoiding the absences of both positivist and relativist approaches to knowledge, these theories assert the primacy of practice in adjudicating between theories of social transformation. In terms of union renewal perspectives, Hyman’s notion of “praxis of struggle” for resolving trade union as well as class struggle resonates with critical realist thinking (Hyman, 1971:35). Thus, the relationship between social knowledge or theory and social practice is seen as an unfolding, mutually reinforcing, dynamic or “an emancipatory spiral”.

"The relationship between social knowledge or theory and social (more specifically socialist) practice will take the form of an emancipatory spiral in which deeper understanding makes possible new forms of practice, leading to enhanced understanding and so on” (Bhaskar, 1989:6).

**KNOWLEDGE AND UNION EMPOWERMENT**

The dominant form of union knowledge production overlaps with the neo-liberal intellectual hegemony, in terms of their focus on formal sector workers. The emergent strategic orientation narrows unions to institutional representative politics, encompassing the ‘rationality of government’, neo-corporatist arrangements, and notions of “partnerships” (Moody, 1997). Based on positivist frameworks and individualist approaches to knowledge, this mono culture of knowledge situates unions primarily within the realm of production and formal labour markets to ameliorate the status quo or to maintain social order. In absenting the phenomenon of violence, the dominant masculine union standpoint misrecognizes casual mechanisms of structural violence faced by the marginalised and unorganised majority of workers, particularly women. The hegemonic labour internationalism emanating from
institutionalised trade unions, a top down “national internationalism” is increasingly distant from counter-hegemonic social movements within and across national boundaries (Waterman and Wills, 2001; Waterman, 2005; Webster et al., 2007).

The empowerment of labour relates to shifting the mono-culture of union knowledge into recognising the ecology of knowledges. The main discussions surrounding union renewal point towards different domains of politics and articulations of solidarity, in terms of union internal relations (Hyman, 2004) and external relations with community activism (Clawson, 2003). In his emphasis on movement politics and external relations, Clawson focuses on union campaigns that developed alliances with activist networks and community groups, which also involved sharing and pooling knowledge for fostering new tactics and new terrains of struggles. Somewhat uneasy with this external orientation, Hyman prioritises internal relations, encouraging “multiple forms of knowledge” as central to union renewal. Nevertheless, it is the mutual interaction between internal and external relations of unions that shape union capacities to mobilise workers. Similar to most other union renewal theorists, both of these perspectives highlight the social character of knowledge, at the same time encouraging more democratic approaches to knowledge (Moody 1997; Lambert, 2002; Waterman 2005; Clawson, 2003; Webster et al., 2008). In terms of union praxis, they foreground practice (contentious collective action) as the determining issue between different knowledge forms and epistemic frames.

Factoring in the experience of violence in the everyday lives of workers, particularly in the global South, have implications for union praxis. Locating violence in structures of power means reinforcing radical democratic counter tendencies committed to non-violence and a culture of peace, within and outside unions. The dominant unions continue to misrecognise
how neo-liberal macro-economic policies have increased levels of inequality and violence with gender specific impacts (Moser, 2001:33). Factoring in a continuum of violence into union renewal debates suggests a return to ontology, to re-examine how unions accommodate and reproduce or resist and transform, the violence of capital, patriarchy and the state.

The emphasis on knowledge production, and on ontology, for empowering unions demands a better coherence between theory and practice, in practice. It is through practice that collective action reveals things that were previously unknown, which in turn help focus on further action (Wainwright, 1994:75). In the process, the aim is to assert the validity of experiential knowledge, “as clues, signposts and stimuli to a deeper understanding and theoretical innovation” (Ibid. :67). The revitalisation of the movement dimension of unions depends on relating to life politics and the experiential knowledge of people. Recognising the differentiation of experience suggests encouraging social and democratic approaches to knowledge, which recognises different needs and ways to address often localised and concrete issues. Transforming the mono-culture of union knowledge by encouraging an ecology of knowledges demands a pooling of knowledge to initiate strategic alliances with potential allies from different vantage points (Ibid.). This suggests prioritising egalitarian and social approaches to knowledge where a deeper understanding of life politics can make new forms of movement politics possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Knowledge production is a vital component of empowering labour movements and trade unions as a counter-hegemonic movement. The dominant form of union knowledge, focused
on representative politics and systems of industrial relations, encourages a mono culture of knowledge, that neglect the role of unions as moral economic actors. This individualist approach to knowledge overlaps with the neo-liberal intellectual hegemony, maintained by a social engineering state with consensual and coercive strategies. The development of a counter-hegemonic trade union movement depends on counter discourses and counter-hegemonic knowledge (Burawoy, 2003). This paper suggests a counter discourse that foregrounds the realm of existence and being, in terms of mobilizing workers. Factoring in violence and insecurity into union renewal debates is significant for a better understating of the structural context of unions and workers and their situational logic. In effect, violence and insecurity are structural effects of the social ontology in the South, sustained by neo-liberalism and complementing ideologies of communalism, ethno-nationalism and militarism of the state. While unions themselves are affected by this violence and insecurity, they have also reacted in different ways, related to diverse situations and institutional trajectories. The transformation of hegemonic knowledge production demands new approaches to knowledge that encourage sharing and pooling knowledge with potential allies while resolving theory-practice inconsistencies through practice.

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