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LATIN AMERICAN AND INTERNATIONAL WORKING CLASS HISTORY ON THE BRINK OF THE 21ST CENTURY: POINTS OF DEPARTURE IN COMPARATIVE LABOR STUDIES

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The last two centuries have been marked by the triumphant expansion of capitalism which has converted an initially regional phenomenon into a compelling world-wide reality embracing the entire globe, including Latin America. As capitalism's necessary offspring, the modern wage-earning working class has also experienced a global quantitative expansion and qualitative transformation that has strikingly shaped world politics in the twentieth century. After glancing at the labor studies boom Latin America and its political context, this article offers a Brazilian/North Atlantic example in order to illustrate the intellectual gains, for students of both areas, that come with the transcendence of geographical parochialism. At the same time, it argues that the reinvigoration of the labor history enterprise depends, in large part, upon setting a more ambitious collaborative agenda — across regional and chronological boundaries — designed to establish the study of labor as a truly transnational and comparative field of research appropriate to the challenges of ***this*** *age of global capitalism.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary North Atlantic World has been marked by a waning enthusiasm for and salience of the study of workers. Yet the current ebb "in the traditional capitalist 'core' countries" (not to mention Eastern Europe), Marcel van der Linden recently suggested, is far from being a "crisis" in the field of labor history as such. Rather, it is best understood as "only a regional phenomenon" since in much of "the so-called Third World, especially in the countries of the industrializing semi-periphery, interest in the history of labour and proletarian protest is growing steadily." Citing encouraging recent developments in labor history in Asia, he noted how the field has grown in parallel with "the stormy conquest of economic sectors by the world market [which] has led to a rapid expansion of the number of waged workers, and the emergence of new radical trade unions" (van der Linden, 1999a: 159-160). Van Linden's description well fits the study of labor in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the field first gained visibility in the early to mid-1980s and has now won recognition as an established specialization among scholars of many disciplines. After glancing at the Latin American boom and its political context, this article offers a Brazilian/North

Atlantic example in order to illustrate the intellectual gains, for students of both areas, that come with the transcendence of geographical parochialism. At the same time, it argues that the reinvigoration of the labor history enterprise depends, in large part, upon setting a more ambitious collaborative agenda—across regional and chronological boundaries—designed to establish the study of labor as a truly transnational and comparative field of research appropriate to the challenges of *this* age of global capitalism.

No longer a marginal subfield, the study of Latin American and Caribbean labor reached its current boom status in the last decade. When Hobart Spalding completed his pioneering survey in 1977, Latin Americanists were far more deeply engaged with studies of agrarian peoples, classes, and struggles (Spalding Jr., 1977). This general enthusiasm for rural topics originated in one reading of the politics of the 1960s, especially the Cuban Revolution, and was accompanied by a downplaying of the political importance of the urban working class (an intellectual development that occurred, ironically enough, during the decade when the demographic balance in the region as a whole finally tilted from rural to urban). Given the time lag inherent to shifts in scholarly interests and training, the seeds of the current boom in the study of the working class and urban labor began in the late 1970s. Not unexpectedly, this shift in the locus of interest was linked to new perceptions of the political relevance of non-rural sectors of the region's popular classes: the visibility of urban workers in the Chilean Revolution of Salvador Allende that was tragically aborted in the military coup of 1973; the courageous role that trade unions played in opposition to the dictatorships that ruled in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, and Uruguay; and especially the spectacular rebirth of industrial militancy and political radicalism among the metalworkers of the ABC region of Greater Sao Paulo, Brazil between 1978-1980 (the focus of my own work for the last twenty years; see French, 1992a, 1998; French, forthcoming).

Since the mid-1980s, there has been an outpouring of labor studies monographs in both Latin America and the United States. Those Latin American countries with strong workers' movements have long had a critical mass of labor studies scholarship, most notably Mexico, a world in itself (Middlebrook, 1995) but also Chile (Klubock, 1998), and Argentina (Brennan, 1994; Lobato, 1988; Torre, 1990). After the turbulent 1970s, the field also took off with particular strength and innovativeness in Brazil (French, 1992; Fortes et al., 1999; Fontes, 1997; Welch, 1999), Peru, and Ecuador (Condori Mamani et al., 1996; Parker, 1998; Vicuna, 1985). One multinational research team has even produced a fascinating and well researched comparative study of textile workers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

and Buenos Aires, Argentina (Acero et al., 1991).

Scholarship on labor has also shown sustained vigor in Bolivia (Cajias, 1989; Nash, 1992), Colombia (Archila, 1991; Farnsworth-Alvear, 2000; Sowell, 1992), Venezuela and Uruguay (Ellner, 1993; Zubillaga, 1985-1988). The study of urban and rural labor has also gained visibility in the modestly-industrialized countries of Central America (Chomsky, 1996; Miller, 1996; Levenson-Estrada, 1994; Barahona, 1994; Gould, 1990; Collazos, 1991). In the Hispanic Caribbean, the study of labor has flourished in Puerto Rico while interesting work has also been produced on Cuba as well as the Dominican Republic (Quintero-Rivera, 1988; Fuller, 1992; IHMCRSC, 1981; Cassa, 1990). As for the English-speaking Caribbean countries, still too often ignored, excellent work continues to appear that builds on the classic historical monographs written by Ken Post and Walter Rodney in the 1970s (Holt, 1992; Post, 1978, 1981; Rodney, 1981). And more recently still, Brazilian historian Emilia Viotti Da Costa has produced a spectacular volume on oppression, labor, Christianity, and rebellion in her painstaking and sensitive study of the Demerera slave rebellion of 1823 in British Guyana (Viotti da Costa, 1994).

The 1980s and 1990s also saw institutional developments within and across a number of countries that helped focus intellectual energy and resources on questions of urban working people and popular movements. Although not all of these initiatives have been able to sustain themselves, they represented an unprecedented step in the cohering of a generation of labor studies specialists within and across disciplines and countries. This group of scholars was also responsible, in 1989, for establishing a new degree of institutionalization with the founding of a Labor Studies Working Group within the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), the largest interdisciplinary association of Latin American and Latin Americanist scholars in the Americas. The fast paced development of the Latin American labor studies field has also produced a remarkable proliferation of publications. The incomplete bibliographical sources available in the early 1990s included over 900 books in Spanish, French, Portuguese and English and 500 articles and the total production since that time may have more than tripled. Not surprisingly, the proliferation of monographs masks an unevenness in the quality of the work being done. As in any field, there are many publications of marginal value whose lasting contribution, if any, is to make empirical data more easily available to later scholars. Yet on the whole, the most impressive and encouraging aspect of contemporary Latin American labor studies is the surprising breadth, diversity, and sophistication of approach to be found across disciplines, methodologies, topics, national

contexts, and time periods.

There are large numbers of monographs being produced today by historians and anthropologists as well as by sociologists, political scientists, and scholars of gender. In addition, there are individual works by lawyers, journalists, and even trade unionists. An increasing amount of work is also being done in industrial relations per se although economics continues to be grossly under-represented on the whole (except in Brazil where labor economics continues to be an important focus). The best of this new work is of a high technical quality, innovative in approach, and capable of standing on its own with the best of labor studies scholarship in countries with far longer histories of union activity and the scholarly study of workers. Indeed, the freshness of some of this new work on Latin America, combined with the enthusiasm of its authors, stands out favorably when compared to the current stasis or even crisis being experienced in some fields of labor study in the metropolitan countries (labor history and industrial relations in the United States, for example).

The earliest study of workers, especially urban workers, in Latin America goes back to the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution of 1911-1917, the first of the great 20th century social revolutions, which opened the way for the emergence of the popular classes, both urban and rural, as subjects and objects of state action and political dispute. Throughout the region, the impact of proletarianization, urbanization, and industrialization was greatly enhanced by the generalized crisis of legitimacy, after 1929, that undermined existing forms of oligarchical parliamentarianism in what were, at that time, still predominantly agrarian societies. The question of workers — or the "social question" as it was known — also exercised a great symbolic power of attraction in these dependent societies because of its links to "modernity," in both its North Atlantic/imperial and its Russian/Communist revolutionary forms. The entry of the masses, whether organized or unorganized, and their interests into political participation and the calculations of policy-makers was vital in shaping the political system of the region as a whole — a process that occurred, in much of Latin America, under the aegis of populists and populism (James, 1988; French, 1992).

The link between politics and workers or, in most cases, between the state and workers' movements underlay most of the early efforts at crafting a comparative national history of labor in the region such as Moises Poblete Troncoso and Ben G. Burnett's *The Rise of the Latin American Labor Movement* (1960) and economist Robert J. Alexander's *Labor Relations in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile* (1962) and Organized *Labor in Latin America* (1965). In 1977, Hobart A. Spalding Jr.'s *Organized Labor in Latin America: Historical Case Studies of Urban Workers in Dependent Societies* broke new ground with a sustained, comparative synthesis that was both forcefully political and rigorously academic. Spalding's New Left-inspired volume was followed, in 1986, by Charles Bergquist's landmark interpretive volume entitled *Labor in Latin America. Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia.* Like Spalding, Bergquist linked the national trajectories of labor within his chosen nations to the larger structural context of dependency within the international arena. Yet his national portraits, rich in detail and ambitious in scope, simultaneously emphasized labor's centrality and challenged inherited interpretive schemes, whether liberal or Marxist.

If "the number of contributions to the comparative history of labor has been increasing," as Marcel van der Linden (1999b: 112) recently observed, it is indeed true "the methodological reflection that should accompany such investigation has been less evident." In the Latin American context, a new level of comparativist methodological sophistication was reached in 1991 with the appearance of an ambitious 700-page volume by David Collier and Ruth Berins Collier entitled *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Collier and Collier, 1991). These two political scientists went beyond past efforts, in which parallel national treatments were occasionally inter-cut with observations about other countries. In its place, they offered a rigorous and carefully specified pairing of national cases designed to illustrate the broader patterns or dynamics they identified in the relations between labor and political party systems throughout the entire region. In its scope and rigor, the Collier volume set a new standard for sustained comparative discussion although its acceptance, within other disciplinary contexts, was mixed.

The enormous vitality of Latin American labor studies can also be seen in the dozen English-language edited collections in various fields that have appeared since the late 1980s. In labor history proper, three different collections were published in 1997 and 1998 alone: two dealing with the region as a whole (Brown, 1997; French and James, 1997) and a third focused on the sub-region of Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean (Chomsky and Lauria-Santiago, 1998). Earlier in the decade, three other largely historical volumes also appeared: one dealing with the social and production relations of a single crop, coffee, and its impact in Latin America (Roseberry, Gudmundson, and Kutschbach, 1995); a second dealing with labor and the left during the pivotal decade of the 1940s (Bethell and Roxborough, 1992); and a third offering English readers a sampling of the latest production in Argentine social and labor history (Adelman, 1992; for a complimentary collection, see Armus, 1990). In the late 1980s, edited volumes in English were

published with contributions by political scientists and sociologists (Carriere, Haworth, and Roddick, 1989; Epstein, 1989), industrial relations specialists (Cordova, 1989), and scholars in women's studies (Chaney and Castro, 1989). The late 1980s also saw the publication of an English-language beginners' reference work on *Latin American Labor Organizations* (Greenfield, 1987). Yet the volume's uneven quality and limited utility reflected, in good part, its precocious appearance in relation to the state of scholarly knowledge in the field.

Even this cursory survey illustrates the impressive progress that has established the study of the working peoples of the region as a specialization within the intellectual field of almost all Latin American countries. On any major research subject or foci, it is possible to identify dozens of relevant monographs while there is likely to be at least a few studies of even the most obscure or specialized topics (without even beginning to touch on the periodical and working paper literature). This is the most encouraging and positive dimension of the labor studies boom. Yet the boom, although it looks more and more like a flood, is not for the most part sweeping all before it. If anything, intellectual production continues to isolated and insular. Indeed, it is striking how little cross-referencing occurs across disciplinary, chronological, and geographical boundaries in Latin America, even when dealing with similar problems. The defacto rule too often seems to be: if it's not your country, it doesn't exist; if it's not your discipline, it's not relevant; and if it's not your period, you cannot possible learn anything of interest. Such shortcoming are especially unfortunate because they limit our potential intellectual contribution. An exclusive focus on the national or sub-national level, for example, means that we are shying away from the challenge of establishing meaningful generalizations about and periodizations of social, economic, and political processes as they work themselves out across the various nations, regions, and sub-regions within Latin America (a key contribution of serious comparative thinking and research). More importantly, such parochialism diminishes the impact that the Latin American case might have for enriching, challenging, and transforming our inherited understandings, categories, and analytical schemes for the study of class formation and workers' struggle (van der Linden, 1999a).

Disciplinary parochialism, another current limitation, serves to undermine one of the unique advantages of those who study workers and labor in a late-industrializing region like Latin America: the existence of an ample literature from almost all branches of the contemporary social and human sciences (not to mention reflections on and of workers in artistic, literary, film, and theatrical mediums). The labor historians of post-World War II

Latin America, for example, need not restrict themselves exclusively to historical works; rather, they can take full advantage of the rich contemporary primary source material being produced by trained specialists in other fields such as anthropology, sociology, industrial relations, and law. In many cases, we have at our disposal an incomparably richer and more reliable body of evidence on working class life than is true for the historians of industrial labor's first century in the North Atlantic world. In the case of the industrial ABC region of greater Sao Paulo, site of the famous strikes of 1978-1980, it can be said without exaggeration that there is no group of workers, anywhere in the world, whose lives and struggles have been as richly documented and intensely studied.

THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CONTEXT OF LATIN AMERICAN LABOR STUDIES

As we strive to redirect our energies today, students of labor need far more than a technical discussion internal to their subfield. Rather, we must place the labor studies enterprise into the larger political context of the last decade, which has seen a crisis among sectors of the critical intelligentsia throughout the world. For Latin American and Latin Americanist intellectuals, Jorge Castaneda's 1993 book entitled *Utopia Unarmed. The Latin American Left After the Cold War* serves as a useful point of reference and a powerful antidote for collective amnesia (Castaneda, 1993). Castaneda was unsparing in his insistence that current leftist political dilemmas must be placed within the context of earlier beliefs and practices going back to the Cuban Revolution. Whether one shares his "social democratic" political conclusions or not (and he has since drifted further to the right), Castaneda reminds us of things that many would just as soon forget: that there was a time when folks on the left "knew" the future; when knowledge of the genealogy of political or guerilla groupuscules mattered; when we all knew that Cuba was the future or, at least, a future for the region and that its survival was directly relevant to our own lives, countries, and situations.

The leftist political and intellectual visions born of the upsurge of the 1960s and the struggles of the 1970s — of the heady years from the Cuban to the Nicaraguan Revolutions — have seemingly exhausted themselves for now with the exception, perhaps, of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas Mexico. The malaise and uncertainty on the left in Latin America since the mid-1980s could be seen as all the more unexpected because this crisis followed popular victories that vanquished most of the region's repressive military regimes. Moreover, this mood of disillusionment or disenchant-

ment has been intensified by the uninspiring record compiled by the democratic electoral regimes that followed the dictatorships in so many countries. The hopes and expectations of the left, whether in the form of organized leftist parties, "guerrillas," or "new social movements," have been cruelly and seemingly convincingly consigned to the "dustbin of history." The effect has been further enhanced by the ambiguity, for example, of one of the most successful armed insurgencies, the messianic Sendero Luminoso of Peru before its defeat; while the outcome of the "peace processes" in Central America has done little to suggest that a negotiated end to civil wars, even if they *had* been forced upon a powerful dominant class and its foreign allies, has much to offer to the masses of working people in terms of democracy or even jobs, much less social justice.

The dimensions of this general rout was deepened still further by the collapse of the socialist world system between 1989 and 1991. However distorted and marked by crime as well as heroism, the Soviet Union and its allied states had served as a fundamental reference point — even for its critics — since the very existence of a self-proclaimed socialist world proved that an alternative to capitalism was possible. We might be tempted today to ironically rephrase the famous aphorism of the North American muckraking journalist Lincoln Stevens after his trip to the Soviet Union in the 1920s: "I have seen the future and it failed." The destruction of the Communist world has had a profound impact on dependent and peripheral regions, including Latin America, since the existence of the communist bloc played a fundamental role not only in liquidating western colonialism but in the struggle against neo-colonialism.

The uneasy and danger-ridden balance of power between the two world systems that prevailed during the Cold War created political space in the international arena that strengthened the hand of dependent nations in their struggles — economic, political, and at times military — against the world's hegemonic non-communist powers. Where would the Vietnamese or the Cuban Revolution have been in the 1960's without the arms, security guarantees, and economic support from the Communist world? International geo-political rivalries also encouraged the newly-free and dependent nations to try to carve out a precarious independence for themselves through the "non-aligned movement." And throughout the "Third World," fear of communism opened the way for political projects that aspired, at a rhetorical and at times programmatic level, to establish a "third way" that, if judged against Clinton, Blair and Schroder, seems surprisingly radical in its bypassing of the market (it is not entirely unexpected, of course, that a "third way" between capitalism and communism would be more radical than one between capitalism and social democracy).

These interlocking domestic and international factors have contributed to a crisis of confidence on the left and center-left in Latin American politics. Regional political dynamics today are quite different than they were during the gestation of the populist era in the Americas in the 1930s (an era symbolized by U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Brazil's Getulio Vargas, and Mexico's Lázaro Cárdenas) or during the deepening socio-economic transformations of the populist heyday in Latin America from World War II to the 1960s (symbolized by Juan Perón and Fidel Castro). Today, one can detect a clear weakening in the left and center-left's vocation for power in Latin America; at least if power is defined as a substantial reform of the existing order as opposed to merely enjoying the perquisites of the status quo justified with a modestly different verbiage. Even non-communist and non-revolutionary groups on the left, who denied any liberating dimension to the Communist experiment, experienced a jarring crisis despite having been proven "right" about the Marxist-Leninist project. Moreover, the diminution of the Communist threat — both domestically and as a potential ally in the international arena — has moved politics to the right across the board throughout the world.

This rightward shift has been all the more pronounced in Latin America, with the partial exception of Brazil, because of the deterioration of the region's insertion into the global capitalist system over the "stolen decade" that followed the onset of the debt crisis of the 1980s. How can one not be disoriented by the desperate and arguably "shameless" embrace of the U.S. by Mexico through the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994? And who among us is not discouraged by the cynical "betrayal" of the apparently sacrosanct banners of national independence and social justice by the Argentine Peronist government of Carlos Menem from 1989 and 1999? And today we find Chile's socialists embracing, if more decently, the very economic policies established by their former torturers while defending the at-best partially-democratic institutional framework bequeathed to them by the ex-dictator General August Pinochet. That the current Brazilian government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the neo-Marxist founder of dependency theory in the 1960s, has devoted itself so wholeheartedly to currying the favor of international capital through neo-liberal reforms seems to speak for itself. And when even Fidel Castro is reduced to courting foreign capitalist investors, one can say that the political pendulum has swung far indeed towards "realism" and "accommodation" on the part of dependent peripheral powers. As we enter the twentieth first century, the battle cry of independent national development, even if capitalist, is seemingly to be heard

no more; the concept of "social justice" has been replaced with a new-found infatuation with foreign capital flows, efficiency, and flexibility; and the 1970s fight for a "New International Economic Order" is totally abandoned, if not forgotten, in the desperate helter-skelter drive by each nation to find a place, however secondary, within a triumphant capitalist "New World Order."

Thus the "arrival" of labor studies in the academy has been paradoxical since, as Charles Bergquist observed in the early 1990s, the boom has occurred precisely at the moment when "the world labor movement is arguably at its lowest ebb in this century," as measured by unionization rates in many countries. Moreover, the Marxist socialism that "inspired much of the world labor movement and informed, or deeply influenced, much of the scholarship on labor, especially in the field of history," he notes, is now "decidedly on the defensive" while "the 'new world order' of free trade and privatizations" has "no theoretical or practical place" for trade unions (Bergquist, 1993: 757-758). Yet looking backwards at the last decade, at the beginning of a new millennium, it is clear to me that the problems that were "buried" so conveniently under the rubble of the Berlin wall have not disappeared.

After all, the modern study of labor has a long history, going back over the last century and a half, and it has become part of the intellectual life of all of the world's countries and peoples over the last fifty years (van der Linden, 1999a). Yet the disciplined investigation of the lives and struggles of the working and middle class people of the world, in all of their diversity, can easily becomes antiquarianism or arid academicism if it does not search for the future at the heart of the present and the past (to use Sartre's wise aphorism). We have much to loose if our scholarship becomes a purely careerist enterprise that has lost its moral and political moorings. Based on all that we have learned in the last thirty years, one must ask today: How can one write an international or internationally-informed labor history for this era of transnational and global capitalism?

The challenge is to identify the keys for forward advance today, in this historical moment of transition, and there is much to be gained from revisiting past efforts. The abortive movement for a "New International Labor Studies" (NILS) provides a compelling illustration of the direct tie between the political imperatives of the struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s and an innovative effort to formulate a programmatic vision for global and regional labor studies. The Latin Americanist contingent of this largely European-based movement of scholars of Third World labor included North American historian Hobart Spalding and the Argentine sociologist Ronaldo Munck.

The leading theorists of NILS were the radical Africanist scholar Robin Cohen, author of a stimulating volume entitled *Contested Domains. Debates in International Labour Studies* (1991), and the British global labor theorist Peter Waterman from the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague.

Starting in 1979, the partisans of NILS were part of a broader attempt to establish an entirely new interdisciplinary paradigm for labor studies in both the developed and developing world. NILS defined its approach explicitly in terms of their own style of radical politics based on Marxism and anti-imperialism (Munck, 1988: 6). Yet its credibility was undermined by a tendency towards a sectarian presentism that at times characterized this broad scholarly tendency. Moreover, their works too often showed a penchant for cavalier generalization and theorizing based on a fragmentary reading of the secondary literature. These problems contributed to the marginalization of this scholarly trend, although this should not lead us to overlook the pioneering role and ongoing contribution of this and related scholarship in the 1980s in posing some of the most interesting questions about labor's role in the contemporary world capitalist system. For example, *Trade Unions and the New Industrialization of the Third World*, an 1988 edited volume by Roger Southall, has by no means lost its power to provoke and inspire.

At the very moment when two books appeared to outline this approach for a wider audience, the rightward shift in world politics had already begun to undermine the cogency and appeal of this New Left intellectual project. In the case of Munck, the sea-change of the colder political climate of the 1980s can already be detected in what he terms his own "somewhat ambiguous attitude towards Marxism" despite his own past as a Trotskyist and anti-imperialist activist (Munck, 1988: 6). A similar tone infuses Robin Cohen's introduction to his 1991 collection of essays where he speaks as a chastened socialist "realist," eager to avoid "the Scylla of proletarian messianism" without falling into the "Charybdis of a passivity and fatalism generated by the apparently indomitable force of capital and state" (Cohen, 1991: xii-xiii).

DIVERGENCE AND COMMONALITY: LATIN AMERICAN LABOR HISTORY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The study of Latin American labor has yet to experience the same degree of disillusionment that has characterized a large swath of the North Atlantic labor and labor history discussion in the last ten years. The "crisis" of labor history in the U.S. and Europe could be said to parallel both the retreat or weakening of many of the labor movement's traditional institutions and

what might be referred to, only half jokingly, as the aging of the original practitioners of the "new labor history" of 1960s and 1970s. Yet this malaise may not be entirely un-related to a certain political disconnect in our field which has been characterized by ever more specialized studies, often of smaller and smaller geographic areas and ever narrower topics, within strictly national contexts. There has been, after all, a fundamental transformation that has occurred in the structure of today's world that has not yet been sufficiently addressed within the historiography and practice of labor history, whether in the developed OECD core, the developing world, or the ex-Communist bloc (now referred to euphemistically as the "Countries in Transition" to capitalism). Despite all the talk about plant closures, deindustrialization, and the decline of the working class, as Jeff Cowie noted recently, "there are more industrial workers in the world today than there ever were before—they are now just of different colors, speak different languages, and are in different locations than labor historians [of the U.S., Europe, or the OECD countries] have come to expect" (Cowie, 1999: 198; a point seconded in van der Linden, 1999a).

Yet I am convinced that the best, perhaps even the only, way to reinvigorate the labor history enterprise today is if we all, collaboratively, address the bigger and more ambitious questions that confront us in today's "globalized" world — always, however, from a perspective anchored within our own geographic and topical specialties. And this goal can only be fruitfully met by working within the immensely enriched and expanded social history of the 1980s and 1990s, which has introduced fundamental new innovations such as gender as well as new methodological approaches that pay heightened attention to discourse and subjectivities as well as structures (James, 2000). These new techniques and foci, as my colleague Daniel James and I observed in "Oral History, Identity Formation, and Working-Class Mobilization," can contribute to a deepening of our understanding of even the most "traditional" labor history topics such as trade union and political militancy (French and James, 1997).

In pursuit of this end, I would like at this point to turn to the vital question of the use of extra-regional comparison in the field of international labor history, which will be explored through a concrete example drawn from my own work on the metalworkers of Sao Paulo, Brazil. When discussing skilled workers, especially in the metalworking industry, a contemporary labor historian is likely to think of the work of U.S. labor historian David Montgomery who, in the mid-1970s, revolutionized our understanding of labor struggle in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Gathered together in his 1979 book *Workers' Control in America*, Montgomery explored the turn-of-the-century collision between the work culture and traditions of skilled industrial craftsmen and the reorganization of industrial production under the auspices of the new corporate form of capitalist organization (Montgomery, 1979).

The introduction of modern mass production techniques and "scientific management," Montgomery demonstrated, entailed the transfer of knowledge and control from skilled workers to management and the proliferation of the less skilled. Focusing in particular on the metal trades, Montgomery showed how this clash of interests produced a period of titanic struggles over control of the workplace that changed the consciousness of both skilled and unskilled, created new forms of unionism, and even threatened to spill over into the broader political arena through the growing socialist and socializing tendencies among U.S. trade unionists.

A veritable explosion of research on craft radicalism in Europe and the United States followed Montgomery's book and among the best and most interesting was the 1988 book by Jeffrey Haydu, *Between Craft and Class: Skilled Workers and Factory Politics in the United States and Britain, 1890-1922.* Haydu broadened the debate by undertaking a systematic cross-national comparison between the metalworkers of Coventry, England and Bridgeport, Connecticut in order to explain how "the labor process, the unions, industrial relations, and the state (each contributed to) the rise of radical factory politics" (Haydu, 1988: 3).

After reading this exciting and stimulating research on workers' control, an enthusiastic student of Latin American labor history might be tempted to set out to identify such "workers' control" struggles in our regional context. Yet here one might heed Charles Bergquist's warning against the wholesale importation of European and North American concepts into the history of Latin American labor. He has even gone so far as to label it, perhaps half in jest, as a form of cultural imperialism; that is, a Eurocentric effort to deny the distinctiveness of the region's development by importing inappropriate universalizing analytical schemes, be they liberal, Marxist, or social historical in nature (Bergquist, 1990; for a critical response, see Adelman, 1991).

I share Bergquist's objection to the wholesale appropriation and consumption of imported intellectual constructs, especially when dealing with a field as immature as Latin American labor history. Indeed, the historically specificity of the region's trajectory has often been obscured by the Latin American and Latin Americanist tendency to adopt the current intellectual fashions from the metropolis. In this regard, the fundamental reference in our field remains the compelling 1975 article by anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz that explores such difficulties without falling into nominalism (Mintz,

1975). In moving "towards the study of the many working peoples of the world," as Mexicanist anthropologist Josiah Heyman has warned, "our understanding should not become simply a localized, human version of the 'working class' that other social scientists have already produced" elsewhere. Above all, we must avoid slipping "into the assumptions and terminologies inherited with these topics until they have proved useful" (Heyman, 1991: 2-3).

Yet I disagree on principle with the excessively particularizing thrust of Bergquist's boldly-stated reservations, which I believe overemphasize the sui generis nature of the region's labor history. More specifically, I would strongly object to any effort to place "workers' control" struggles at the center of labor's history in Latin America-the title of a collection of essays recently edited by Jonathan Brown (1997; see the critical review by Weinstein, 1999). My objection would not, however, be based upon a belief that one cannot compare social processes between the metropolis and the Latin American periphery. Nor would I accept an argument that the analytical methods and tools developed to understand the world capitalist heartland are inadequate to study capitalism' dependent offspring in the "Third World." Rather, I would disagree with postulating "workers' control" as a central theme in Latin American labor history simply because it is wrong; that is, workplace struggles of the Montgomery and Haydu type simply do not occur on any significant scale in Latin America precisely because of the timing of the industrialization of what was still, in the first half of the century, an overwhelmingly agrarian region.

When modern industrial production was introduced on a large scale in the first fifty years of the century, it involved the importation of the whole system of mass production, scientific management, and modern personnel policies by either foreign investors or domestic capitalists. In other words, the core of the Latin American industrial working class was born and grew up within the system of mass production, free of earlier industrial craft traditions, that was the ideal for which North Atlantic industrialists had fought so hard at the turn of the century. Skilled workers in Sao Paulo, for example, had never exercised the type of control over production that has been identified as the social origin of shop floor struggle in the early twentieth century North Atlantic factory. Such resistance, Montgomery argued, naturally arose from the ranks of workers who had exercised such regulation in the recent past, that is from craftsman who, in resisting standardization and craft dilution, were radicalized and emerged as a potent leadership for the grievances of the vastly expanded unskilled and semi-skilled majority of machine tenders and factory operatives.

Unlike their turn-of-the-century compatriots in older industrial societies, skilled industrial workers in Latin America had never controlled production to any significant extent within the shop. Thus, they could not and did not object to factory life or management's power on the same grounds as a metalworker in 1920 in Pittsburgh, Coventry, or the Ruhr. Even their socialisms were different than those of, say, the Shop Stewards movement in World War I England. Indeed, one of the most striking features of my in-depth interviewing with leftist working class militants — reinforced by my interviews with the Communist president of ABC's metalworkers' union Marcos Andreotti and my reading of the labor and leftist labor press — was the virtual absence of any type of rhetoric about "workers' control" in the sense of direct control of production.

But if this is true, then why should I, as a Latin Americanist, refer to Montgomery and Haydu at all? There are two reasons to do so, I believe. First, the differences between the Latin American and North Atlantic cases enables me to better understand Brazilian reality. The "workers' control" literature allows me to see the striking contrast between a situation where the power of the skilled is structural in nature, that is firmly based upon control of production, as opposed to the more unstable conjunctural strength enjoyed by Brazilian skilled workers, which was derived largely from labor market leverage. Secondly, there are nonetheless significant similarities between the behavior and role of skilled workers in these two radically different contexts. After all, skilled workers emerged in both regions as the "natural" leaders of the less skilled majority and displayed a propensity for trade unionism and political radicalism that was especially pronounced among metalworkers.

These similarities can, I would argue, suggest something important about the sources of working class radicalism in the North Atlantic world. Enthused by the discoveries of Montgomery and others, too many North Atlantic labor historians have assumed a phenomenon of class declension after World War I, especially tied to the centrality of positive state action in labor struggles from the 1930s onward. We can take Haydu as an example of this tendency. He argues that the defeat of the industrial craftsman, with his vision of workers' control, lessened the workers' potential for radical or revolutionary action after 1920. The dynamics of the workers' struggles of the late 1910s, after all, was derived from the coalescence of "the radicalism of the besieged craftsmen and the militancy of the less-skilled employees." The end of this phase, Haydu concludes, produced the triumph of "economistic, defensive, and sectional" working class politics devoid of any more ambitious program of working class emancipation (Haydu, 1988: 2). Yet the

absence of besieged craftsmen in the Brazilian case has by no means produced the quiescence that might be expected from this hypothesized scenario. Indeed, if anything, the Brazilian industrial working class has repeatedly shown strong propensities toward industrial militancy and political radicalism under the leadership of skilled Communist or socialist workers like Andreotti or Luis Inacio "Lula" da Silva, the founder of the socialist-oriented Workers Party in 1979. Thus the Brazilian case suggests, in this regard, some possible confusion between cause and effect on the part of some North Atlantic analysts.

A similar comparative insight was also reached by sociologist Gay Seidman in her 1994 monograph entitled *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985*. Seidman emphasized the common patterns shared by Brazil, South Africa and other Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) and suggested that "industrialization in what are sometimes called 'semi-peripheral' areas may not mirror the European and North American experiences: patterns of proletarianization, labor processes, and political opportunities may be quite different from those that prevailed a century earlier. ... While de-skilling of artisans has occurred from place to place," she observes, imported technologies and the use of modern production processes "have frequently been put into place without many of the labor process conflicts that apparently marked earlier industrialization. Mass production processes using semi-skilled workers have been in place from the start of industrial growth: workers in newly industrializing countries may be more likely to go through re-skilling than de-skilling as they move from agriculture or informal sector work to capital-intensive factories." As she underlines, "labor movements in late-industrializing countries have responded to the demands of a relatively undifferentiated work force" through the adoption, "so frequently that it cannot be simply an aberration,"of "a militant discourse of class and class mobilization" in which "factory-based organizations [come] to take up broad issues of citizenship and inclusion." Yet her search for commonality within the NICs today does not lead to a one-sided emphasis on the "newness" or "uniqueness" of the phenomenon in relation to its North Atlantic precedents. As she notes without elaboration, the workers in these settings "confront labor processes and industrialization patterns that hold some parallels to workers experience in earlier industrializers" (Seidman, 1994: 6, 7, 265, 4-5, 200-201).

This permanent tension between similarity and difference in international and comparative labor history, I would insist, can not be bypassed through some theoretical formula or permanently resolved through an analytical maneuver; rather, we must live, think, and work our way through it in relation to the specific historical problems we face in our empirical research. Andrew Gordon's 1998 book on Japanese labor since World War II offers a fine example of this fruitful alternation of perspectives. In his prologue, Gordon sets out the radical shift in interpretation of Japanese labor/management relations between the 1970s, when he began to study it, and the period after the "bubble economy" burst in the late 1980s: from uncritical praise to "exaggerated prognostications of doom" for "a [Japanese] political and economic system deeply rooted in modern history" (Gordon, 1998: 1-3). With Japan's economic and political crisis of the last decade, he goes on, the standard wisdom of foreign journalists and even many scholars shifted abruptly from celebrating Japan's unique labor relation's system to a "shallow rhetoric of sudden change and collapsing institutions." Yet he caution strongly against predictions, based on the present, that do no bear in mind the power of the legacies from the past that shape distinctive national approaches to inter-class conflict and cooperation. In warning against one-sided conclusions, he insists that this rhetoric "is also misleading because it misconstrues the institutions said to be on the brink of extinction" and, in doing so, serves as a barrier to human understanding and, I would add, struggle (Gordon, 1998: 211).

"The story of the ascendance of the corporate-centered society in Japan," Gordon insists, "shares much with the histories of working people across the advanced capitalist world." Indeed, the "postwar experience in Japan is part of a global postwar history because for some years a self-conscious [Marxist] movement of the working class was very important," through at least the mid-1960s (Gordon, 1998: 195). "In these three respects—the early postwar sense of crisis, the salience of class conflict, the eventual achievement of capitalist hegemony—Japanese experience is part of a history that is international more than it is peculiar to Japan. To recognize this common ground is important in the face of seemingly endless portrayals of Japan as exceptional." Yet he goes on to warn against the "banal conclusion that life has been essentially the same in the past fifty years across the industrial or postindustrial world, [and] that neither a nation's institutions, historical experience nor culture amount to much." Yet even Japan's specificities, he goes on, do not set the country "apart from the rest of the world in a consistent fashion." When viewed in perspective, he concludes, one might say, that "the United States and Japan came to harbor extreme (although very different versions of the corporate-centered society, in contrast to Europe, where social democracy sunk deeper roots, or the Third World, where the challenge to capitalism was more profound" (Gordon, 1998: 196). And explaining the durability of this Japanese model is at least implicitly, he

noted, a comparative task because, "since the 1960s, the hegemony of the corporation has been more durable and less profoundly challenged in Japan than in any other major industrial nations" (Gordon, 1998: 1-3).

The study of the late(r) industrializing countries of the developing world have been marked by repeated attempts to identify the specificity of working class formation in the "Third World." In 1986, Mexicanist anthropologist Frances Rothstein intervened in one such debate — the singular importance of "worker-peasants" — with some useful observations as to how one should maintain a properly dialectical balance in undertaking such comparative analysis of the center and periphery. "It is not merely that we must avoid transposing European models onto Asians, Africans, and Americans. We need a model of the totality, that is, of the experiences of all, that does not make the European industrial experience more significant just because it was first" (emphasis added). This has too often been done, Rothstein went on, by those who implicitly or explicitly "hold the nineteenth-century European experience (and often an idealized version of that experience) up as the standard to which third world workers should be compared and from which they are found deviating." Such analysts also err in another direction by ignoring European industrialization in the twentieth century and how it has changed from the nineteenth century version. Given the uneven development of capitalism, changes in the labor process occur at different times and rates in different industries and regions. As a result, there are important differences in the labor process, the organization of labor, and in workers struggles. But there are also important similarities. ... Whether or not workers at different times and places respond similarly to industrial work is an important empirical question. But it cannot be answered by comparing third world workers only to third world peasants and/or nineteenth century European workers. The concept of peasant-workers who are stuck in a prolonged transitional stage does just that (Rothstein, 1986: 236)

What is to be the aim of a new international and comparative labor history appropriate for today's transnational world? I would argue that the central objective must be, above all, to refine and reshape inherited categories, conceptualizations, and analytical schemes in light of the varieties of experiences among the working people of the entire world. In intellectual terms, we must reject both homogenizing universalisms and a defensive insistence on the unsurpassable alterity of the local. In this regard, there is much to be learned from an unfortunate and ill-conceived recent polemic by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, who combined both of these false alternatives in their defense of French universalism, attack on U.S. cultural imperialism, and defense of racism Brazilian-style (1999; see French, 2000). In political terms, efforts to establish a different world, beyond the demoralizing alternatives facing us today, will "require a complex balance of local, regional, national, and transnational systems of political action and social identity" (Cowie, 1999: 200; French, 2001).

CONCLUSION: THE "GLOBAL" AND THE LOCAL, THE NEW AND THE OLD

Let me end with the observation that too often, especially in U.S. and European history, we develop our theories, concepts, and generalizations based solely upon national or at best North Atlantic comparisons. I strongly believe, in contrast, that we need to rethink the entire field of working class and labor history in an international and global sense. In other words, the response to Eurocentric theory or concepts does not lie in retreating into regional compartmentalization. That we have not done so, as yet, reflects an important similarity between intellectuals who study labor and the workers' movement itself; in both cases, we remain encapsulated in narrow national or regional contexts that capitalism has long ago transcended.

The last two centuries have been marked by the triumphant expansion of capitalism which has converted an initially regional phenomenon into a compelling world-wide reality embracing the entire globe, including Latin America. As capitalism's necessary offspring, the modern wage-earning working class has also experienced a global quantitative expansion and qualitative transformation that has strikingly shaped world politics in the twentieth century. In my case, I deal with the history of one of the youngest and most rapidly growing contingents of this world working class.

Although there are specificities to my case, I would argue nonetheless that the study of industrial labor in Brazil is best done when informed by a comparative perspective. And I also believe that the study of Brazilian labor, beyond its great intrinsic interest, sheds light on the dynamics of working class life and struggle in the developed capitalist world (as I have tried to suggest however schematically). In highlighting the differences, we arrive at a better understanding of the unique and particular aspects of working class development in nineteenth and twentieth century Western Europe or North America. At the same time, the existence of significant cross-national similarities helps to more firmly establish the general and common aspects of industrial working class life. When combined with the study of labor in non-capitalist or socialist societies (whether failed or ongoing), huge strides would be made towards a truly comparative history of the world working class under the different stages and epochs of international capitalist devel-

opment.

Any broadly comparative approach naturally carries with it great dangers and pitfalls. And in the face of the realities of international diversity, it would be risky if not foolhardy to pursue comparison at the global level of entire national societies (Morner, French, and Vinuela, 1982). Yet the compelling logic of capitalist relations can be shown to shape the dynamics of life and struggle of the urban working class, especially the industrial proletariat, even when the national outcomes are quite distinct. This point is made most elegantly in a recent monograph entitled *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* by Jeff Cowie, who is the first but hopefully not the last of North American and not just *U.S.* labor historians. A student of Charles Bergquist, myself, and U.S. labor historian Leon Fink, his dissertation director, Cowie offers a timely and stimulating labor history of the mobility of capital, one of the most visible and highly publicized aspects of contemporary "globalization."

Capital Moves traces the history, since the 1930s, of the radio and television manufacturing operations of the RCA Corporation, which has seen production shift from Camden, New Jersey to Bloomington, Indiana, to Memphis, Tennessee, and then across the border to Ciudad Juarez in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Yet the RCA story, according to Cowie, does not in fact mark a radical departure from past practices; rather, he shows how the disquieting trends of today have parallels deep in twentieth-century labor history.

> Although the pace and scope of events may have increased as the century waned, industrial capital has been engaged in a continuous struggle to maintain the social conditions deemed necessary for profitability. 'Offshore' production may be a focus of political attention today, but neither the causes of the transnationalization of production nor the problems it creates differs dramatically from those of the transregionalization of industry several decades earlier. Moving employment across an international boundary does mark a very important development, particularly as it throws into question the role of the nation-state as overseer of industrial relations, but it nonetheless stands as a continuation of earlier patterns and strategies (Cowie, 1999: 2-3).

Cowie goes on, however, to indicate the contradictions that underlay and still underlie the use of spatial mobility as a weapon by capital:

> Each of RCA's plant relocations represents the corporation's response to workers' increased sense of entitlement and control over investment in their community. Capital flight was a means of countering that control as the company sought out new reservoirs of controllable labor. The search for inexpensive and malleable workers that shaped each location decision had its own subversive logic, however: the integration of production into the economy and social life of the new site irrevocably transformed the community into a new place of conflict with the corporation (Cowie, 1999: 2-3).

His research, Cowie frankly admits, was originally conceived "as a way of illumining the presumably many and dramatic differences between the experiences of the various communities," whether in racial, cultural, political or gender terms. Or, alternatively, he expected to identify a "sharp divide between an old labor relations system and a 'new international division of labor.'" Yet his primary conclusion, based on his four case studies, was:

> that RCA workers in all the sites exhibited amazingly high levels of shared experience across time and space. In an age in which the political celebration of difference and the intellectual examination of the singular and unique dominate the stage, I found commonality not just in the ways of work but, most important, in the challenges and opportunities RCA workers faced across North America in the twentieth century. One of my hopes, in fact, is that workers may be able to recognize their own experiences across the barriers of national experience, ethnic difference, and geographical distance (Cowie, 1999: 7-8).

Cowie's insight parallels Seidman's experience with comparison when she reports that, in the end, she "could not help but recognize the broad degree of similarity" between her two cases *despite* "the overwhelming differences in Brazilian and South African political institutions, racial formations, and labor histories. ... Instead of contrasts, I found remarkable parallels" (Seidman, 1994: 1-3). Yet neither Cowie nor Seidman embrace the dangerous tendency, common to much of the current intellectual pro-capitalist "globalization" industry, toward an abstract "universalized" discussion, "western" or OECD in nature, that effectively erases the radically different historical trajectories and experiences of the peoples of different parts of the world. It is not a question of emphasizing the "similar" over the "different," or of choosing the "local" over the "global," since either would be an error. Rather, the challenge is to identify those contexts where one, or the other, takes preeminence in our explorations of causation within the relevant social totality. In this regard, *Capital Moves*, while far from simplistic or celebratory, hopes to:

> encourage new approaches to labor history by reinvigorating the idea

> that shared experience formed within the context of culture and community is often the source of agency and power — even today — while also arguing that community is one of the key limitations and weaknesses of working-class mobilization. Moreover, evolutions in culture are linked to economic transformations. The sources of the changing geography of capitalism and its impact on a community can be found at the local level but can be understood only through a global view of labor-capital-relations. The changing nature of space — economic, cultural, political — can supplement changes over time as a fundamental way of approaching the history of labor (Cowie, 1999: 7-8).

Indeed, spatiality and the systematic study of space has emerged as an issue of fundamental importance both in contemporary "globalization" and in current theoretical discussions (Dirlik, 1999). An outstanding recent monograph by anthropologist Miriam Wells echoes Cowie in arguing that mastering space may be essential to any challenge to capitalist globalization. Her monograph, entitled *Strawberry Fields: Politics, Class, and Work in California Agriculture* (1996), offers a comprehensive study of "the bases of class mobilization and labor process change in California's central coast strawberry industry" in the post-World War II period (Wells, 1996: 11). Her "story of class formation and interethnic conflict" offers a compelling critique of the "dominant portrayals of economic restructuring" which, she argues, have tended "to privilege global causes over local, structure over agency, and technological and market forces over social and political influences." Too often economic reconfigurations are "portrayed as the inevitable and value-neutral outcomes of changing global economic structures" when they may, in fact, be "primarily the result of local sociopolitical conflicts. ... If the political construction of the labor market establishes the overarching balance of class power, and if industry characteristics further shape the options of social classes, the locality established a third, and most particular, structure of constraint on class relations at work" (Wells, 1996: xv, 16).

Wells' monograph is all the more impressive because her understanding of the local industry embraces both the structural characteristics and the subjectivities of both farmers and farm workers within a social field that was far from unitary. "Rather it contained several relatively distinct spheres of activity, divided along lines of ethnicity, position in the occupational structure, and locality of dominant involvement" among both workers and employers. "Neither group could be treated as homogenous and [I realized] that most individuals understood only their own part of the bigger picture." Extensive use of interviewing established "that there was no single set of meanings among them, but rather several patterns of understanding"

(Wells, 1996: xv, xvi). Rigorous and comprehensive, Wells's sophisticated book has much to offer us in both methodological and political terms in today's world:

> To understand the dynamics of class relations at work, then, we must challenge the ontological priority of economic events. We must be more catholic in the range of influences we acknowledge and less fixed in our expectations of the forms that socioeconomic systems will assume. Our inquiries must delve below the level of structural abstraction but reach above the level of daily action. Although economic forces must retain a central role in our analyses, we must broaden our notions of the inherent tendencies of capitalist economic structure, including the pulls towards oppositon and conflict generated by workers' and owners' diverging interests in the quality of work and the disposition of surplus value, as well as the pulls toward cooperation and compliance generated by workers' dependence on their jobs and owners' interest in workers' efforts. ... Social classes and their relations do not unfold mechanically from places and tensions within the system of production: these structural forces are only part of the contexts in which actors coalesce their intentions and their alternatives. As a result, we cannot anticipate the transformations of economic systems or the contributions of each class to constructing these changes from the inherent dynamics of capitalism alone. We must also bring work and politics closer (Wells, 1996: 10).

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