**Across disciplinary boundaries: Leveraging complementary perspectives on global labour**

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**Abstract**

This symposium-style article brings together scholars from history, sociology and political science to explore how different disciplinary traditions can contribute to a productive dialogue on workers’ collective action and labour power around the world. Grounded in reflections on recent research in three disciplinary communities, the article encourages scholars to tap into findings from other academic traditions to refine the focus and the contextualization of their own analyses. This strategy of moving beyond disciplinary boundaries, the article argues, promises to expand inherited styles of inquiry by encouraging analyses with a wider selection of cases, a more conscious temporal anchoring and broadened geographic reach. The evolution of scholarship along these lines would honour each discipline’s particular conceptual commitments, and simultaneously seek to enlist them more broadly for a deeper understanding of labour’s contemporary reorientation.

**Keywords**

Global labour, collective action, labour power, cross-disciplinary scholarship, industrial relations

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Calls for interdisciplinary scholarship abound in today’s academy. Yet, when it comes to delivering on these calls, it is hard for scholars to agree on what engagement across disciplinary boundaries could – much less should – look like. Even the most open-minded researchers tend to approach their subject matters with implicit commitments on how to think and go about exploring complex social processes and patterns of causation. It is thus no surprise that research on workers’ evolving collective action and labour power around the world often displays particular disciplinary flavours. There is no single answer to the question of how to balance disciplinary grounding and fertilization across disciplinary boundaries.

In the social sciences, the field of industrial relations has arguably been ahead of the curve in breaking down disciplinary divisions. As a discourse community focused on studying the interactions that govern the regulation and practice of labour processes, academic research on industrial relations has come closest to the interdisciplinary ideal. Yet even the field of industrial relations has retained, rather than done away with, disciplinary and national traditions (Clarke et al., 2011: 242; Colling and Terry, 2010: 4; Frege, 2007). Furthermore, both the empirical and theoretical pillars of cross-disciplinary integration in this field have progressively been crumbling. Empirically, over the past three decades, the wealthy democracies have almost universally experienced declines in the industrial sector’s share of employment, trade union strength, collective bargaining coverage and long-term employment. With respect to theorizing, these empirical changes have called into question some of the core tenets of the field’s integration and institutionalization, which, in the United States (U.S.) at least, had rested on assumptions drawn from institutional economics and modernization theory (Dunlop, 1958; Kerr et al., 1960).

Against this background, industrial relations researchers have been searching for a new set of core conceptual principles that can help integrate different disciplinary traditions. Such attempts at reformulation have often come with particular regional or disciplinary flavours, which analysts have subsequently sought to adapt for a better fit in other contexts (Katz et al., 2015; Kelly, 1998; Kochan et al., 1986). Debate about which disciplinary tools could best help reinvigorate the field’s toolbox has clearly intensified (Hauptmeier and Vidal, 2014; Heckscher, 2015; Jackson and Muellenborn, 2012; Piore, 2011). Recent analyses of labour’s responses to the rise of neoliberalism have also sought to more actively tap the field’s own history, revisiting Sidney and Beatrice Webb’s classic analyses from the United Kingdom, and those of the Wisconsin School in the U.S. (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017; Schulze-Cleven and Ibsen, 2017). Prominent introductory textbooks on the comparative analysis of employment relations reflect the field’s ongoing process of self-examination (Bamber et al., 2015; Frege and Kelly, 2013).

At the same time, two related and similarly cross-disciplinary discourse communities on labour politics and the contemporary reorientation of workers’ collective action have emerged: global labour studies and comparative political economy research (Schulze-Cleven, 2017). Global labour studies have brought together critical labour scholars, often – though certainly not exclusively – from sociology, and frequently focusing on the Global South (Burawoy, 1979; MacCallum, 2013). Recent comparative political economy has been particularly anchored in historical-institutionalist American political science. Yet European sociologists and economists have delivered some of this evolving field’s most crucial advances in the understanding of labour politics, usually with an emphasis on the wealthy democracies (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Streeck, 1992; Thelen, 2014).

While progress has thus been made in cross-disciplinary engagement to better understand labour’s shifting fate globally, the speed of change associated with technological advancement and the rise of neoliberalism has, at times, undermined the continued applicability of scholarly findings, which become outdated more quickly than new ones are being established. Shifts in global value chains have frequently – and quite fundamentally – tested inherited patterns of employment relations and labour politics by destabilizing workers’ long-standing identities, shifting institutional incentives and altering power relations. Workers, in turn, have strategically engaged with changing circumstances. As they recast their individual and collective strategies to build and mobilize power, their relationships to each other have not remained stable and involved a significant recomposition of labour as a collective actor (Herrigel, 2010; Schulze-Cleven, 2017). These transformation processes are ongoing, and their outcomes shape potential progress toward realizing egalitarian visions for societies and improving labour standards for workers around the world.

This symposium-style article argues that the different social sciences and related disciplines can make complementary contributions to disentangling the causal processes that govern labour’s ongoing reorientation. It calls on scholars to recognize this complementarity and seeks to encourage them to more actively tap into it for refining approaches to the study of labour globally. Theoretical and empirical cross-fertilization, this article contends, could pave the way for better leveraging the disciplines’ distinct approaches to research for the scholarly understanding of contemporary labour politics.

This article builds on reflections by boundary-crossing scholars who have emphasized opportunities for mutual learning in the theoretical realm with respect to conceptualizing causation and developing convincing explanations. Social scientists have praised historians as masters of thinking about the temporality of social processes, urging their colleagues to incorporate such sensibilities by better placing ‘politics in time’ (Abbott, 2001; Pierson, 2004). Simultaneously, historians have recognized that they could productively draw from social scientists’ proclivity for abstraction and desire to build structural accounts of social life (Sewell, 2005; Stinchcombe, 1978). Moreover, calls for a more sustained engagement between sociology and political science have fallen on fertile ground, with political scientists now frequently considering how the sociological construction of meaning shapes economic conflicts (Blyth, 2003; Hay, 2002).

There are also important empirical opportunities for mutual engagement in the study of global labour. Labour politics have become a lot more fluid, increasingly spilling over national boundaries or beyond the realm of employment, and often displaying new similarities across quite different locales. This fluidity calls for relating developments around the globe to each other and embarking on comparisons that might, at first sight, appear rather unusual (Ragin, 2014). This is no easy task given that the comparison of ‘apples and oranges’ requires scholars to properly ‘contextualize’ their analyses, but it can be highly instructive (Burawoy, 2009). If researchers carefully place particular labour actions in their specific contexts, and use comparisons strategically, they are poised to gain significant leverage to learn about the social processes that underpin labour’s contemporary experimentation (Locke and Thelen, 1995; Pierson, 2003).

This article develops the agenda for cross-disciplinary engagement in two steps. The first three sections reflect on recent findings in history, sociology and political science as distinct entry points into the study of global labour. Seeking to illustrate both complementarity and points of intersection, each section focuses on a subfield that seems particularly amenable to cross-disciplinary dialogue: global labour history, political sociology and constructivist political economy. The specific thematic emphasis of each section differs slightly, as does the exposition. In the first section, Nelson Lichtenstein’s review of scholarship in labour history emphasizes parallels between the dynamics of the global economy in the past with those of today. As such, Lichtenstein explores the structures of the highly uneven playing fields that confront workers’ collective action globally. In the second section, on political sociology, Gay Seidman picks up core themes touched upon by Lichtenstein, from the interdependence of capitalist accumulation and work conditions to the Janus-faced roles of governments. Seidman’s review most closely follows the focus of this introduction, tracking what sociologists have learned about workers’ capacity for collective action and recounting the evolution of attempts to institutionalize better workplace standards and social welfare protections by tapping into new roles for state action. Gary Herrigel uses the third section, on political economy research, to examine the relational character of labour as a concept before spelling out the implications of his reflections for studying the dynamics of contemporary social conflict and collective action. By invoking historians’ and sociologists’ findings about the influence of state formation and employer strategies on patterns of labour mobilization, Herrigel powerfully illustrates how important it is for scholars to reach beyond disciplinary boundaries to come to terms with the changing political economy of contemporary labour.

Section four builds on these reviews, further developing Herrigel’s reflections on points of intersection between disciplinary concerns, and spelling out three practical ways for researchers to bridge common boundaries. This section emphasizes that scholars could productively use other fields’ findings as prompts for expanding inherited styles of inquiry, by embracing a wider selection of cases, striving for a more conscious temporal anchoring and working toward a broadened geographic reach. This is particularly true for explicitly comparative work but also important for attempts to integrate separately produced research findings and arrive at productive syntheses. Notably, the evolution of scholarship along these lines would honour each discipline’s particular conceptual commitments. Rather than attempting to level these commitments within interdisciplinary approaches that often lack a clear conceptual core against which to assess research quality, this cross-disciplinary strategy would seek to tap into disciplines’ respective strengths for a deeper understanding of contemporary labour’s global reorientation and recomposition. Section five, the last section, briefly concludes.

**The historical lens: Contemporary globalization in nineteenth-century perspective**

Nelson Lichtenstein

For historians, globalization is not new, nor is the ‘labour question’ that it embodies. This section discusses three core findings from historical scholarship that continue to apply in the current evolution of global capitalism and the world of work it underpins. It develops its core propositions by drawing on three important recent books – particularly Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton* (2014), but also Leon Fink’s *Sweatshops at Sea* (2011) and Julie Greene’s *The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal* (2009), which are highly relevant to understanding the dynamics of workers’ collective action and labour power globally today.

The nineteenth century constituted the first great age of globalization, one in which the transoceanic movement of commodities, manufactured goods and labour reached levels proportionally far higher than that achieved during that era of nationalism, war and Cold War that some call ‘the short twentieth century’, 1914–89 (e.g., Hobsbawm, 1995). Commodities, even those in a partially processed form, had been traded since ancient times, but in the nineteenth century the linkage between commodities and manufacturing turned symbolic: coffee, sugar, tea, cotton, coal, wheat, guano, oil and lumber became intrinsic to a set of global supply chains that not only transported but also financed, processed and redistributed these commodities and the finished goods that eventually made their way into homes, factories and infrastructure of the North Atlantic metropole.

And of course, in that century, labour was almost as mobile as money or commodities. The cost of steamship passage was exceedingly low, passports were not yet universal, and the stream of rural folk to urban centres was a phenomenon that encompassed almost every agricultural district whose products came to be traded on the world market. But mobility is not the same thing as freedom. Historians and social scientists soon recognized that the similarities and continuities between slave, free and unfree labour in both the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries have been as important as the distinctions between them, which were once thought to be well ratified by the abolition movements that swept the globe in the Victorian era (Brass and Van der Linden, 1997; Brass, 2013; Fudge and Strauss, 2013; Magliari, 2004; Parreñas et al., 2012). With respect to these developments in the nineteenth century, the American Civil War was arguably the most important world historic event. In its cause and resolution we find an extraordinary exemplification of the way in which categories of labour, especially free and slave, dissolve when situated within a global capitalism that demands an ever-mounting supply of cotton and other commodities once exclusively the product of slave labour. To be clear, this is not to deny that distinctions between free and unfree labour can be useful – see, for instance, analyses in contemporary migration studies (e.g., Castles et al., 2013). It is rather to underline and show how students of twenty-first century globalization and labour can learn a lot from historians’ analyses of the first Industrial Revolution and the global trading regimes that were indispensable to its success.

In what is arguably the most important current treatment of nineteenth-century globalization, Beckert traces the startling emergence of cotton as its most important commodity, the industrial transformation it engendered, and the role it played in the world trading system and the new imperialism of the second half of the century. Cotton was indeed king, giving rise to both a ruling class and a proletariat, rural as well as urban, that Marx saw as embodying all the contradictions and possibilities of world capitalism. When Marx and Engels (1848: 16) wrote ‘all that is solid melts into air’, the pair might well have had in mind the radically transformative impact of cotton on the American frontier, the South Asian rural economy, the Lancashire hand loom weavers, and the political character of the United States, colonial India and the Ottoman Empire. In line with Beckert’s analysis, there are three points to emphasize as they have strong contemporary relevance.

First, violence, imperialism and the expropriation of native property were prerequisites for the rise of merchant capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Crucial to the ability of merchants to find a ready supply of cotton was the emergence of a powerful, militarized state that could shove aside native peoples and impose its own system of property rights and labour coercion within colonies and dependent regimes. Beckert (2014: 29) calls these decades of merchant supremacy an era of ‘war capitalism’. Thus, an expansive slave power, often financed by British and New England merchant bankers, spearheaded the expropriation of native American lands in what would become the heart of the cotton kingdom in the lower Mississippi Valley, while in colonial India and Egypt, British imperialists were equally resolute in their efforts to transform land-owning peasants into debt-oppressed cotton farmers or landless labourers dependent upon a world market controlled from Liverpool and London. In the U.S. South, and throughout the British, French and German empires, too, no merchant, manufacturer or state official thought cotton could be grown with any system resembling free labour, either before or after the formal abolition of chattel slavery.

States were therefore more important in this era of globalization, not less so (see particularly, Beckert, 2014: 340–378). Peasants would not voluntarily grow cotton unless market prices were extraordinarily high, as in the cotton famine of the American Civil War years. Normally their commitment to cotton culture required coercion from above and beyond if only because cotton was the sort of commodity that could neither be directly consumed nor relied upon to generate an income free from disastrous fluctuations. From Reconstruction Era Alabama to late colonial Berar Province in India, an intrusive state apparatus created the legal codes – and the administrative apparatus to enforce them – that sustained the conditions under which an indigenous population found cotton production to be the only alternative to dispossession, starvation, or imprisonment.

Second, merchants were the central players in the construction of a global capitalism. Until late in the nineteenth century they were far more potent, both in economic and political terms, than the storied manufacturers of the Wedgwood, McCormick, Carnegie and Ford lineages. As Beckert (2014: 205) puts it: ‘The ability of merchants to organize the radical spatial rearrangement of the world’s most important manufacturing industry was as much of an invention as the more corporal machines and novel labour organization that dotted the globe by the 1850s… By bridging the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the slave plantation and the factory staffed by wage workers, they created modern capitalism.’ Central to this process was the construction of a set of transnational standards designed to measure the volume and quality of the commodities these merchants bought and sold. When commodities turn into fungible assets that are independent of any particular geographical or entrepreneurial source, future markets become possible, and with them credit, securitization and other kinds of financialization.

From the Baring Brothers to Brown Brothers Harriman, many of the great banks of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries got their start as merchants extending credit to those who bought or supplied far-flung commodities. Moreover, because systems of standardization reduce the dependence of merchants on any single source of supply or the nation state that controls it, downward pressure on prices and labour standards is endemic, a condition that applies both to nineteenth-century cotton production and twenty-first century manufacture of apparel, toys, consumer electronics and all the other commodity-like products that are sucked out of the global supply chains that originate in East Asia, Central America and Bangladesh. By casting a global net to buy and sell fungible commodities produced under a wide variety of labour regimes, the nineteenth-century merchant houses of New York, Hamburg and London were analogous to the brands and retailers that dominate supply chains in the twenty-first century (Lichtenstein, 2012).

Finally, and most relevant for our contemporary world, Beckert and other historians have begun to deconstruct the clear distinction that historians, sociologists and economists once created between free and unfree labour (e.g., Brown and Van der Linden, 2010). The existence of formal slavery in the American South was of course the Achilles’ heel of North American cotton cultivation, and Beckert shows that the Union’s blockade of southern ports – and the subsequent cotton shortage – during the Civil War provided the impetus for the British, and other European powers, to thicken the bonds of empire and transform loosely administered colonies into intensively cultivated and aggressively administered centres of commodity production. In the U.S. South and elsewhere, slavery was no more, but unfree labour flourished on the land and in the cities where ‘native’ labour was increasingly subordinate to ‘white’ labour. Thus, the legal and administrative authority created by British imperialists, Czarist officials and white legislators in the Reconstruction South was designed to maintain or introduce a large measure of coercion, both physical and financial, into the production regime that moved cotton from field to factory.

Recent books by Leon Fink and Julie Greene also explore the racial coding of free and unfree labour. Both analyses offer narratives that probe how racial and national identities came to play a decisive role in constructing the legal and social regimes under which managers and ministers mobilized transnational labour for their purposes, as well as how labour organizations came to defend working-class interests. Fink’s *Sweatshops at Sea* recounts the century-long effort to transform the employment status of seamen from something close to seaborne slavery to a legally protected work regime approaching that of free labour. The key issue here is the definition and implementation of citizenship for a workforce that has always been both multinational and multiracial in a world of porous borders. Because labour control on board a storm-tossed vessel was long thought to require a level of draconian authority nearly equivalent to the master-slave relationship, nineteenth-century seamen had but an ambiguous relationship to the free-labour ideology and praxis that became hegemonic in the decades after the Civil War, at least when applied to white, male, industrial labour. Even after flogging was banished, imprisonment for desertion remained a standard employer instrument for ‘regulating’ the maritime labour market, paralleling the kind of vagrancy statutes found only in the most oppressive counties of the American black belt.

Fink also demonstrates that nation state and empire remained central to this history. Even within ostensibly progressive and social democratic institutions like the International Labour Organization, racial coding by radical or socialist trade unions and their governments remained entrenched for decades, not so much because of overt racism, but because labour cost differentials so closely mirrored the citizenship status of those seamen recruited from India or East Asia on the one hand and those whose home ports were Liverpool, Bordeaux, New York and other North Atlantic shipping centres on the other.

Greene’s *Canal Builders* charts the role of the Progressive Era managers who recruited and deployed a multiracial workforce derived from the Caribbean and Southern Europe. A contemporary parallel would certainly be the migration of equally desperate workers to the Persian Gulf, or even the role of guest workers in Western Europe during the first few decades after World War II. And like today’s migrants working in the Gulf, the canal builders of the early twentieth century were semi-free labour consigned to a racial/national status below that of the well-organized craft workers and professionals recruited from the United States. The latter were paid in gold, the former in silver. Indeed, those on the ‘gold roll’ constituted an aristocracy of labour that took full advantage of the opportunities opened up by U.S. power, trade and imperial reach. Their unionized presence remained potent even well into the late twentieth century era of U.S. Canal Zone administration. In contrast, the statelessness and voicelessness of those on the silver roll is familiar to anyone who studies contemporary export processing zones, illegal migrants, or those enrolled in state-regulated migrant worker programs.

Scholars of contemporary economic globalization can tap into these studies of historical experiences to inform their analyses of today’s mechanisms of subordination and regimes of unfree labour. Just as in the nineteenth century, the contemporary global economy revolves around the interests and strategies of merchant capitalists, now located in the finance, consumer-goods and retail sectors. Governments’ perceptions of national interests continue to be intertwined with these traders’ strategies, in turn producing public policies that tend to be more geared to meeting the needs of the market than those of citizens or the natural environment. As economic geographers and sociologists delve more deeply into evolving global production networks and global value chains (e.g., Coe et al., 2010; Gereffi et al., 2005), they could more actively follow historians in exploring how experiences in particular localities or sectors speak to the evolution of broader linkages between finance, states and labour around the globe.

In the process, these studies will likely uncover that managers and ministers do not have an entirely free hand in the deployment or exploitation of the global labour supply they seek to mobilize. The same was true in the nineteenth century, when Atlantic seamen formed some of the most radical and effective trade unions of their era, even when their militant syndicalism was put at the service of a racially divided maritime order dependent on the privileged status of ships and seamen linked to a particular nation state. Likewise, among the tens of thousands of canal workers, Greene found an ideologically wide-awake set of workers, some inspired by Italian and Spanish anarchism, others by Garveyite nationalism then sprouting its first militant shoots in the British Caribbean. And in Panama, no Progressive manager could discount the potency of U.S.-style craft unionism, even if it shared some of the racial exclusiveness found among the seamen’s unions of that era. And finally, the largely unorganized, but nevertheless profound and long-lasting, peasant resistance to commodity production remained a stubborn obstacle to the global triumph of cotton for centuries.

While this opposition incentivized the ruling elites of the nineteenth century to create increasingly harsh legal and economic structures to drive production, that same resistance engendered political movements that would eventually demand independence from colonial rule (India), overthrow collaborative local elites (Egypt), or bring greater civil and economic rights (United States). Today, there are new movements for emancipation. From Egypt to the U.S., they are similar in spirit to their historic precedents, seeking to overcome widespread inequities and injustices. Thus, historical studies can offer not only important impetus to contemporary scholarship but also lessons to the activists that fight against the exploitation of labour in global supply chains.

**The sociological imagination: Can transnational campaigns ‘bring the state back in’?**

Gay Seidman

Just as trade unions in the early twentieth century were often organized along patterns established in an earlier era of craftwork and guilds, today’s labour activists tend to act within the national collective bargaining channels established during the heyday of assembly-line manufacturing. But globalization, new labour processes and changing corporate strategies have fundamentally altered the broader context in which interactions between unions and employers take place. Labour scholars, and union activists, are struggling to respond.

Scholarship from sociology might help them look beyond the familiar institutions of collective bargaining, to consider how changing labour processes create new dynamics at the workplace. Particularly outside the industrialized democracies of Europe or North America, new pressures may limit workers’ ability to challenge employers’ control, and new vulnerabilities may undermine organized labour’s bargaining power. After all, in a globally integrated economy, even unions representing highly skilled workers in well-established collective bargaining structures must fear the threat of capital flight (Rothstein, 2016).

Historically, political struggles have been as important as workplace militancy in efforts to strengthen labour protections. Throughout the twentieth century, labour reformers pushed governments to ensure safer workplaces, to reduce workers’ vulnerability to retaliatory firing, and, of course, to create collective bargaining institutions, protecting vulnerable workers, and setting a floor under the proverbial ‘race to the bottom’.

Since the early 2000s, efforts to ‘bring the state back in’ have gained steam. In the United States, for example, recent campaigns have urged cities, states and the federal government to raise legally enforceable minimum wage levels, promising a living wage to vulnerable workers as well as union members (Luce et al., 2014). Some scholars have called for increased government involvement on the shop floor, through strengthened and better-funded labour inspectorates (Weil, 2014); others have urged unions to work directly with government regulators, providing on-the-ground ‘eyes and ears’ to alert state agencies whenever employers violate existing labour laws (Fine and Gordon, 2010).

But how relevant is this approach in poorer countries in the Global South, where politicians depend on private investors to create employment, and where formal unions and bargaining institutions only cover tiny fractions of the workforce? Where unions and bargaining institutions are weak, and where most workers can be easily replaced, politicians are often reluctant to intervene to protect workers. Seeking to speed up economic growth, many governments have been persuaded to weaken legal workplace protections, rather than strengthen them. In the context of long-standing and persistent inequalities in particular, many post-colonial states justify weakening labour laws as a way to create employment, rather than seeking to make sure that employers pay decent wages, respect workers’ health and safety, or protect the local environment.

Historically, post-colonial labour movements have often been deeply engaged in political struggles, in places like South Africa, Brazil and South Korea, and, arguably, today in China or Indonesia. Most labour advocates view democratic political rights as a key component in workers’ victories – just as many working-class and poor communities have supported labour militancy as a key part of efforts to expand citizenship rights. But it is also important to acknowledge that in societies marked by stark inequalities, union leaders may overlook the needs of vulnerable workers, especially those who work outside the formal, regulated sector of the economy. As long as managers can exclude ‘temporary’ workers from workplace negotiations, union leaders may be tempted to focus on dues-paying members, falling back on corporatist approaches, and working within established collective bargaining channels rather than pushing to extend formal labour protections beyond an existing collective bargaining framework (Agarwala, 2013; Plankey-Videla, 2012).

For workers not covered by formal unions and collective bargaining institutions, ‘vulnerability’ depends largely on politicians’ willingness to pass, and enforce, labour protections; and in highly unequal societies, political winds can change. Until recently, democratic Brazil seemed to offer an inspiring case of reform, with a newly democratized state led by a political party closely allied to militant labour unions. Beginning in the early 2000s, Brazil’s labour-friendly government gradually strengthened labour laws, and, perhaps even more significantly, strengthened enforcement, extending ‘formal’ employment status to many more workers and giving them greater access to workplace-linked pensions, healthcare and other benefits (Pires, 2008; Pochman, 2009; Seidman, 2010). But when a major recession hit, starting in 2014 and deepening in 2015, wealthier citizens rebelled against redistributive social policies. In early 2016, Brazil’s political elite impeached the Workers’ Party president, installing a new president and cabinet. Sadly, some of the very first moves of that new cabinet included weakening Brazil’s much-heralded labour protections – drawing, once again, on old clichés about the need to attract investors.

If politicians, especially in ‘developing’ regions, are reluctant to enforce labour laws to reduce workers’ vulnerability, can activists find new ways to bring states’ regulatory power into the workplace, to protect workers’ health, safety and voice? For twenty-some years, as the global economy has become increasingly integrated, labour and human rights activists have tried to bring global consumer pressure to bear, demanding that transnational corporations should be forced to monitor and improve the conditions in which their goods are produced around the world (Anner, 2011; Bonacich and Appelbaum, 2000; Klein, 1999).

While transnational campaigns have prompted many global brands to urge their subcontractors to comply with corporate codes of conduct, study after study, however, has shown that companies’ voluntary monitoring programs have had surprisingly limited impact (Collins, 2003; Locke, 2013; Seidman, 2007). Most brands are far more concerned with whether suppliers can meet their standards for speed, cost and quality, than with labour rights. Given the opaque character of global supply chains, even very visible brands have found it relatively easy to avoid taking responsibility for abuse by far-off third-tier suppliers (Locke, 2013) – to the point where a cynic might view corporate codes of conduct as schemes designed to protect brands’ images, not workers.

Recognizing the limitations of consumer-based shaming, recent transnational labour campaigns have increasingly turned to government action to protect workers, just as activists urge democratically elected governments to help vulnerable workers as well as union members. Moreover, labour relations scholars are looking beyond traditional forms of industrial organization and voluntary corporate monitoring schemes – particularly since the 2013 collapse of Bangladesh’s Rana Plaza building, when factory owners ordered employees to resume work inside a building that government inspectors had declared unsafe.

Prompted by more than a thousand deaths and thousands of additional injuries, transnational labour activists, unions and global brands have begun to experiment with new organizational templates, many involving schemes to strengthen national governments’ roles, and creating new mechanisms that might hold transnational companies legally accountable for conditions in their subcontractors’ factories. Working together with Bangladeshi unionists, government representatives and local factory owners, transnational activists and a handful of European brands put together a pact known as the Bangladesh Accord, whose signatories promise to assume responsibility for improving conditions.

Rather than simply abandoning the country’s garment factories, the Accord’s global corporations agree to change the dynamics of their global supply-chains, promising to make sure subcontractors comply with labour laws, to give workers some voice in the process, and to help pay for improvements in working conditions. Perhaps the most significant shift is that the Accord’s lead companies accept legally binding obligations to workers in subcontracted factories. Businesses promise to monitor supplier factories, and to fund remediation if subcontractors’ factories fail to meet basic fire and safety standards; moreover, these promises are enforceable, not only through international arbitration processes, but also through courts in global brands’ home countries (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2015; Ter Haar and Keune, 2014).

The Accord’s reach is limited, however. Even though most of the European brands that sub-contract in Bangladesh have signed on, most of the American brands involved have refused to join in, explicitly to avoid the possibility that they might be held responsible in U.S. courts. Major American retailers like Wal-Mart and The Gap have created an alternative scheme, confusingly labelled the Bangladesh Alliance, which recreates the kind of voluntary arrangements that were supposedly monitoring production in many of the factories where workers died at Rana Plaza.

Yet despite the fact that many American companies are not signatories, leading transnational labour activists characterize the signing of the Bangladesh Accord as a ‘breakthrough’ moment, a new turn in transnational labour campaigns (Lichenstein, 2016; Nova and Wegemer, 2016: 27). By bringing global corporations and powerful states in to strengthen pressure on local employers, could this governance mechanism change the dynamic of the ‘race to the bottom’, at least in Bangladesh? Ultimately, even if the Accord falls short, it may suggest a new approach to institutional design, one that seeks to bring workers’ voices and state pressure into global supply chain dynamics.

**The political economy of the wealthy democracies: Tracking labour’s reconstitution**

Gary Herrigel

Constructivist political economists take as their starting point the observation that there are no natural units of analysis in the political economy of labour and industry. In particular, there are no natural social identities or pathways to solidarity. And there are no natural arrangements for the organization and governance of social processes around industry and work. Actors, and many social scientists, have often treated specific units as if they were natural – nation or class or firm or trade union or wage relations, for example – but history and social processes invariably undermine such efforts to impose stability and predictability on the world. Relations underpinning institutional and governance arrangements change; identities once seemingly unitary and exhausted by specific commitments and understandings begin to disarticulate with the emergence of new relations, actors and the introduction of alternative ideas and possibilities for action. Gradually, the salience of old self-understandings, attendant interests and the arrangements put in place to govern the interactions that follow from them, seem inadequate to newly emerging circumstances and the challenges and opportunities that they pose to social actors. The ensuing reflection, contestation and experimentation among social actors about how to interpret the new situation, how to (re-)conceive themselves, and how to re-arrange the institutions and practices of governance is always open-ended. Inherited structures, identities and patterns of action only constrain insomuch as they are thought to be the source of the problem (Abbott, 2016; Herrigel, 2010). We are currently experiencing such a process in the broad intertwined (and increasingly global) terrain of identities, relations, practices, institutions and modes of governance related to work and labour in the developed world.

Labour as a social category is itself barely two centuries old. It emerged in industrializing Europe and North America as one way to make political, social and economic sense of new relational experiments in the socio-economy. The category was applied to (and sometimes embraced by) those social actors who did not own sufficient assets to operate their own enterprise, who were untethered from agrarian pursuits, and, crucially, who were ‘free’ in the sense that they were neither chattel slaves nor indentured serfs. This was a fairly broad social space in which many finer grained functional distinctions could be made regarding skill, gender and position within or outside factories, mines or ships. Even if it seems relatively easy to state the core features of modern labour in the abstract, the boundaries of the category were – historically – extremely ill-defined and nearly always highly contested. Much of the variation stemmed from both micro-differences in the character of work experience and macro-normative, political and ideational differences in the relationship between labour and other concurrently emerging, highly contested categories, such as capital, nation, state, party, market, enterprise, class and citizen (Bendix, 1974; Polanyi, 1944; Thompson, 1963; Veblen, 1914; Weber, 1918).

The conceptual, practical and institutional articulation of these streams of social relations yielded enormous variation over time and space: conceptions of labour as social identity ranged from the proletarian universal class, through producer-republicans, to citizen-workers. Labour-related political projects ranged from communism, fascism and anarchism, through social democracy, catholic social teaching and republicanism, to liberalism. Labour-based institutional governance arrangements ranged from pure market relations through mutualist and syndicalist decentralization, craft-, producer-, company- and industrial-unionism, to corporatist estate organization. All of those dimensions of modern labour could be (and were) constituted in various combinations, depending on the composition of the political and social imaginary and what was contextually possible in a particular time and place (e.g., Biernacki, 1995; Prasad, 2012; Silver, 2003).

So, labour has never been a transparent or natural social category. What it was, the way it was understood, how it informed identity, implied interest and involved institutionalized forms of governance, depended on the specific way in which the category related to all the other emergent and equally protean social categories and institutions that were simultaneously being struggled over and defined. Ultimately, modern labour identities and interests have been *intersectional* phenomena that emerge out of and continually evolve through complex, open-ended and mutually interactive historical processes at many levels of social life.

In the most recent half-century, crucial identity categories in the developed political economies that were just coming to be taken for granted, and that had helped define and legitimize the social meaning and position of labour, in particular nation and class (not to mention those involving race, gender and sexuality), have undergone significant destabilization. Post-war economic growth across the developed West gradually weakened class bonds in the labour movement (Bell, 1973; Inglehardt, 1977; Marcuse, 1964). Cultural shifts, prompted by prosperity and the profundity of civil rights claims, destabilized a whole array of taken-for-granted racial, ethnic, sexual, gendered and familial roles and self-understandings that also had been crucial anchors for labour movement coherence (Piore, 2011). Those challenges were then compounded by growing transnational interdependence and interpenetration (through money, goods and labour flows), that weakened the nation state’s ability to control economic processes within its own borders.. All of which fractured domestic solidarity relations even further (Streeck, 2014).

Identities at work, as well as established social roles and lines of authority, were profoundly destabilized through these processes (Herrigel, 2010). Many social players, who had once identified with (or as) labour, and who were core supporters of labour institutions, abandoned the project – often for multiple not always congruent reasons. Others were forced out or prevented from being included in the labour project by energized and newly empowered labour opponents. In still other cases, new players emerged who laboured in ways that fell outside the boundaries of the classic parameters of labour, as in cases of independent contracting and workers in the ‘platform economy’.

All of this disarray and disintegration at the level of mutual recognition has, in turn, undermined the social, economic and political effectiveness of functional interest representation and of governance organizations in the political economy (i.e., trade unions, business associations, political parties, industrial relations systems and welfare states) that had in large part depended upon (and helped to stabilize) older identity commitments. These processes have been destabilizing, not to say devastating, for labour movements (and labour, social democratic, socialist and other left parties), trade unions and industrial relations systems around the globe. Most distressingly, the crisis of the old postwar identity-organization-governance nexus that surrounded production, labour and work has led to a significant real deterioration in the working conditions, relative compensation levels and overall quality of life for millions of working people (e.g., Baccaro and Howell, 2011).

This crisis in the social, political and economic position and meaning of labour in advanced countries has engendered a broad array of identity, institutional and governance reform contests and experiments. The extent to which older understandings of labour, and institutional and governance arrangements involving labour, have been displaced varies significantly across regions and countries. As an abstract matter, the empirical and moral salience of the original modern features of labour endures. But the extent to which those objective features of social actors’ selves inhabit their identities or create a basis for solidarity varies greatly. And it is extremely unclear how the boundaries of those features intersect with rapidly recomposing parallel categories and institutional domains (such as state, nation, class, family, firm, citizen and gender). There are many possibilities for the reconstitution of labour today, but it is also possible that labour as an identity category could be subsumed within a whole array of alternative and competing categories dealing with political, racial, ethnic, gendered and sexual dimensions of the labouring self.

Three research areas seem central to understanding the contemporary social, political and economic dynamics around labour in the global economy, and for identifying possibilities for labour’s reconstitution. They cover only part of many current intersectionally relevant dynamics, but each quite precisely highlights the manner in which old commitments have been destabilized and, as a result, how a new terrain for the recomposition of labour has been created.

First, just as it is important to recognize that labour is not a natural category in social analysis, it is also important to view labour as a dependent or relational category, not as an independent or autonomous category (Abbott, 2005; Herrigel, 1993). Its meaning and modes of practice are intertwined with other dimensions of social and political identity, status and rights. Historians have noticed this about the original emergence of modern labour and have produced fascinating studies, for example, on the intimate mutual dependence of labour as a category and as an actor with liberal and republican ideas about rights, authority and citizenship (e.g., to take only prominent American examples, Davis, 1967; Montgomery, 1993; Wilentz, 1984). Promisingly, contemporary political theorists are also exploring the conceptually intertwined political and social contests over the meaning, rights and status of labour in the contemporary environment (e.g., Fung, 2013; Gourevitch, 2013; Hsieh, 2008; Ince, 2016; Landemore and Ferreras, 2015; Nakhimovsky, 2013). Sociologists and industrial relations specialists have made particular headway in tracking the role of workers’ intersectional identities for the organization of immigrant workers, community unionism and the recasting of global union strategy (e.g., Milkman, 2006; Turnbull, 2006).

But this sort of interpretive work tends to be less central to scholarship on the comparative political economy of labour. Much of that latter research takes labour’s identity and status dimensions for granted and focuses instead on questions of institutional reform or shifting power alignments around imputed or unexamined incumbent understandings of what labour is – including, for instance, its status as one end of a wage relation. Without acknowledging the intersectionality of labour as a social category, these sorts of institutional and structurally oriented forms of analysis are likely to have limited value. Concretely, this means that arguments for the reform or adjustment of labour institutions and mechanisms for governing labour cannot be separated from arguments for the reform and adjustment of political and social institutions and mechanisms of governance, such as representative democracy and the nuclear heterosexual family.

Second, the repositioning of the nation state both in the imaginaries and strategies of social and political actors needs to be taken more seriously. It is especially important to examine the way conceptions of the nation condition stakeholder strategies, solidarities and dispositions toward cooperation and conflict around labour and the labour market. The comparative political economy of labour matured as a scholarly field in the postwar period at the apogee of nation state sovereignty. Country cases were compared in ways that suggested that the interconnections between the cases were trivial. Nation states were viewed as watertight containers of relatively sovereign institutional and interest politics (e.g., Kochan et al., 1986). Yet, this would be an exceedingly misleading assumption to make in the current environment. Multinational corporations (MNCs) now frequently produce more products in foreign markets than they do in their own home markets. A large part of what they do is to coordinate, transfer and optimize knowledge, technology, organizational practices and resources among their global operating units and subsidiaries (Herrigel et al., 2017). Many other industries depend upon the maintenance of highly complex transnational supply chains (Gereffi et al., 2005; Herrigel, 2010). In both cases, the decisions and strategies that employers pursue regarding labour and production in one location are intimately conditioned by strategies and decisions they pursue in other locations. In order to properly understand the possibilities for labour in any one case, it is now increasingly necessary to understand how that location is linked to other locations (Herrigel, 2015; Lakhani et al., 2013).

The shift away from the central importance of the nation as a category also affects the politics surrounding the reconstitution of the social meaning of labour. Historically, battles for the social and political definition of labour were fought within larger conflicts over the recognition of labour as a legitimate base for national greatness. German unions and German skilled workers, for example, succeeded in making themselves viewed as crucial carriers of German democracy. Including and supporting the unions and skilled workers translated into support for postwar Germany’s democratic order – and vice versa (Markovits, 1986; Pirker, 1979). As the German labour market becomes more transnational, through the influx of Turkish guest workers and streams of refugees from North Africa and the Middle East, as well as via the internal circulation of foreign nationals within German MNCs (Herrigel, 2015), arguments for labour solidarity, protection and support come into unfamiliar conflict with ethnic or national notions of the state and democracy. Without examining the political and shared meaning dimensions of this intersection of economic, ethnic, labour and political dynamics, the full range of possibilities for (or constraints on) labour (and democratic) recomposition will not be properly recognized.

Third, the central relational interlocutors for modern labour, employers, have changed their strategies and shapes enormously since modern trade union systems came into being in the mid-twentieth century. Then, unions oriented themselves toward – and often organizationally mimicked – the bureaucratic and vertically integrated structures of large-scale industrial employers (Chandler, 1977; Dunlop 1958; Lipset et al., 1956). But since at least the 1980s, such large-scale employers have been engaging in systematic disintegration, choosing strategically to coordinate production and value generation across extensive supply chains, crossing many property and functional boundaries and markets (Herrigel, 2010; Sabel, 2006). Very few union movements have been able to adjust to these employer moves. Often unions are blocked by commitments to members threatened by job loss in disintegrating facilities, leaving *emerging* employment in supply chains unrepresented. At other times, when they accept disintegration and embrace producers in the supply chain, they are forced into tolerating conditions and wage rates significantly beneath those in ‘core’ firms. As a result, even the most successful union movements, such as those in Germany, wind up more often than not merely managing segmentation and inequality, rather than actually combating it (e.g., Thelen, 2014). Or, as in the case of successful American unions, such as the SEIU (Service Employees International Union), in stepping away from the individual firm (or, indeed, the firm as such) in their efforts to organize and manage new service labour markets, they often wind up losing touch with their membership base and exacerbating a sense of powerlessness at the point of production (McAlevy, 2015; Osterman, 2015; Voss, 2015).

These cases point to the remarkable contemporary paradox involving the separation of trade union organizations and the formal industrial relations systems that they are part of. Old incumbent ‘Labour’, in the worst cases, excludes or even exploits new labourers (Van der Linden, 2015). Research needs to be done on successful efforts to overcome this divide and re-think the projects and boundaries of trade union organizations. One potential avenue for this is the promising research being carried out on coordinated action among unions, social community organizations and other NGOs. Will such research help identify (or perhaps help imagine) new forms of labour organization, industrial relations and their social and political expression? Scholarship and political action will only make progress here if the deeply relational character of labour, including its intersection with the transformation of nation and enterprise, is acknowledged and becomes a guide for research and theorizing.

**Engaging across vantage points: Breaking down the limits of inherited styles of inquiry**

These three discussions of disciplinary concerns and propositions make clear that there is much to be gained from each camp. Given historians’ focus on the less recent past and long-running processes, they provide an important baseline for judging contemporary developments, uncovering ‘hidden’ dynamics in the present by elaborating strong parallels with earlier patterns. Sociologists illuminate worker agency and the changing modes of governance that it gives rise to. Finally, political scientists provide a sharper reading of how lines of social conflict shift and are being reconstituted. Even analyses within more traditional ‘rationalist’ political economy research on the varieties of advanced capitalism (Beramendi et al., 2015; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Thelen, 2014) have much to contribute, as long as scholars are sufficiently cognizant of their analyses’ limits and willing to question and continually revise standard assumptions. There is thus no need to sacrifice diverse tools or contrasting topical interests on the altar of a shared approach or methodology (see discussion in Brady and Collier, 2004). Different disciplines’ locus of attention and style of reasoning should continue to differ. Nevertheless, scholars from different camps could do more to advance knowledge on the (re-)construction of contemporary labour.

As the previous section’s discussion of constructivist political economy has illustrated, theoretical reflections across the different scholarly communities could find better expression in the way that empirical research is conducted. Taking a concrete step toward this goal, scholars could use other disciplines’ findings as prompts to reflect on how they frame their own inquiries, in particular how they select data and contextualize observations. The exploration of more ‘diverse’ cases in particular offers opportunities to continually refine the conceptual categories that underpin research and theorizing. Using a broader set of observations could simultaneously improve the internal and external validity of analysis, enhancing both the explanatory power and generalizability of findings (Gerring, 2007: 97–98; Ornston and Schulze-Cleven, 2015; Skocpol and Somers, 1980). Going down this road logically involves movement beyond the restrictive conventions that have characterized much of contemporary analysis. Be it in localized and comparative studies or in broader assessments of multiple studies, it is important to push beyond typical organizational, temporal and geographic categories to make progress in understanding the fate of labour and workers globally.

*Toward recognizing diverse forms of labour organization*

Rather than focusing solely on unions (Frege and Kelly, 2004), scholarship on innovation in workers’ collective action should also include decentralized and networked forms of activism, both by workers and in support of related social causes (Evans, 2010). At a time, when the meaning of labour itself is being renegotiated, restricting analysis to particular organizational forms will ensure overlooking important transformations. For instance, as the review of constructivist political economy emphasized, unions are often too involved in defensive fights to lead the mobilization of workers in newly emerging forms or realms of employment.

Given the size of the informal sector, which may lack statutorily protections for employment relationships, unions can only be one of many possible vehicles for workers’ collective action. Exemplifying this trend, community-based worker centres in the U.S. have rapidly expanded, from 5 in 1992 to 140 in 2005 and 214 in 2012 (Fine, 2006; Fine and Theodore, 2012). Moreover, some networks and movements have strong virtual components that tap into new technological opportunities. For instance, coworker.org seeks to provide a global platform that brings together individuals and groups of employees to launch, join and win campaigns to improve their jobs and workplaces. Finally, in many countries, even unions have sought to break out of institutionalized forms of collective action, reaching out to precariously employed workers, including immigrants (Keune, 2013). To fully grasp this transformation, scholars need to engage more with the diversity of mobilization among workers, migrants and citizens.

*Toward more conscious cross-temporal and temporally embedded research*

As historical research has demonstrated, the challenges of recent financialization and global value chains are structurally similar to the first globalization during the nineteenth century. Then, capitalist rule prevented substantial improvements for workers, with state-sponsored coercion, merchants’ control over commodity flows and early manufacturing, and racialized labour usage combining to sponsor a highly oppressive global labour regime. More recently, official commitments to democracy have failed to translate into safe work conditions, fair pay and life chances for many. A longer time frame provides leverage for uncovering the complex causal relationships that underpin parallels as well as differences.

There is much to learn from grounding the analysis of contemporary developments not merely – as is often done – in the social democratic institutionalization of class conflict after World War II or through the twentieth century (Dahrendorf, 1959), but in a much longer historical *durée* (Mahoney and Thelen, 2015). This broader framing would emphasize the fact that many social processes – including working-class formation (Katznelson and Zolberg, 1986) – operate as protracted long-term developments. At the same time, it allows for some phenomena to be specific to particular conditions. In short, it recognizes political contestation as taking place within a temporal context that brings together both long-running and situation-specific processes.

Such a perspective would allow for a better understanding of the role played by ideology as context in particular. As American history demonstrates, ideological dynamics have strongly shaped working-class identities, government policies and the reach of capitalism (Cohen, 2003; Cowie, 2012, 2016; Rodgers, 2012; Stein, 2011; Zakim and Kornblith, 2012). More broadly, research on global labour history illustrates how forms of worker mobilization and advocacy have changed greatly over the last century, with links between organizational structures, agency repertoires and effects of mobilization being far more contingent than a shorter time frame and narrowly institutionalist perspectives on contemporary ‘insider-outsider’ politics would suggest (e.g., Emmenegger et al., 2012). Finally, this historically grounded approach would show how there is nothing automatic about power resources translating into actual influence and producing outcomes. After all, even in Europe, it was not until the postwar period that unions were able to translate productivity enhancements and financial accumulation into benefits for the broader populace (Berman, 2006; Marks, 1989).

*Toward more geographic breadth in comparisons and integrated analyses*

Scholarship in political sociology has shown that the politics of ‘advanced’ or ‘developing’ countries have become more similar and intertwined as global value chains have deepened, capitalism’s social conflicts have again taken centre-stage, and the structures of economic sectors have left strong marks on employment relations (Katz and Darbishire, 2000). The evolution of employment relations has come to exhibit striking parallels across the world’s regions, at diverse levels of economic development and in different political regimes. Conceptions of particular countries’ or regions’ exceptionalism have been broadly rejected (Chan, 2015).

By not restricting analysis to either rich or poor parts of the world, scholarship could break with the logic of case selection employed by many analysts of institutional change, who tend to focus on similar contexts in order to control for variation in external influences and gain leverage in assessing labour’s relative influence. Probing *similar* processes across *different* geographic and political-economic contexts would help elaborate the global scope of developments (e.g., Patel 2016) and demonstrate that cases illustrating typical causal mechanisms could be found around the world (Gerring, 2007: 89). This global form of analysis would help uncover growing commonalities among contemporary patterns of labour mobilization, such as a focus on local protests or the pursuit of particular goals, including better enforcement of labour laws and the passage of living wage ordinances (e.g., Luce et al., 2014). Finally, it would also allow scholars to better track transnational labour campaigns that have come to target international value chains and involve activist networks that link the Global North and South.

**Conclusion: Toward a cross-disciplinary conversation**

This symposium-style article has argued for more active engagement among complementary perspectives to break down typical boundaries of contemporary research. Be it within the community of industrial relations scholars, among contributors to global labour studies, or to research on the comparative political economy of labour, analyses continue to be shaped by disciplinary norms. That is not a bad thing, but the negative externalities associated with disciplinary grounding can be reduced by more conscious cross-disciplinary engagement.

This article has illustrated different disciplinary fields’ particular concerns, styles and findings, and it has also showcased crucial examples of interpenetration and highlighted potential synergies. As such, the analysis picked up where this special issue’s introductory essay left off. While the introductory essay makes the case for a common vocabulary with which to advance theorizing on labour’s contemporary global transformations, this article has sought to clarify how different disciplines could engage in this process. Together, the two pieces provide grounds for strengthening important conversations on workers’ collective action and labour power around the world.

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