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Introduction

Hope for Labor in a Neoliberal World

E. Paul Durrenberger

Background

In August of 2015 an international group of anthropologists along with a few sociologists convened at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa, to discuss our work on the national contexts of the unions we had been working with. These included Manos Spyridakis from Greece, Gadi Nissim from Israel, Julia Soul from Argentina, Christian Zolniski, who has worked in northern Mexico, Maria Eugenia de la O from Mexico, Staffan Löfving from Sweden, Christopher Kelley from Switzerland, Alicia Reigada from Spain, Darcy Pan, who worked in China, Alpkan Birelma from Turkey, Steven Payne, who has worked in the United States and Brazil, as well as me and Suzan Erem, who have collaborated on two decades of work with unions in the United States. There was extensive discussion of each paper, and longtime academic and labor activist Biju Matthew acted as a summarizer and discussant. This book is the result of that workshop, funded by the National Science Foundation Anthropology Section.

Participants in the workshop were not only different nationalities, they were different ages. There were young colleagues such as Emma Braden, Darcy Pan, Steven Payne, Chris Kelley, Alicia Reigada, and Alpkan Birelma. The more senior members set an example of collegial discussion that we hope will guide all of our work in the future.

Every participant mentioned feeling alone in his or her own country and a kind of relief at finding others pursuing the same kind of work, people who were not faltering at the idea of taking sides in an unequal struggle to tell the stories that bring hope for the future of that struggle. For a brief moment we filled a room with ethnographers and told our stories, discussed them, and compared notes. Nobody was looking for a job or rushing to an interview; nobody was trying to please a dean. It was liberating. For this we thank the NSF Anthropology Section.

All discussed the consequences of neoliberalism in their countries, especially as it has affected labor organizations, the focus of this workshop.

This collection of labor research and analysis from around the world is meant to illustrate the complexity, strength, challenge, creativity, cynicism, and hope of workers' struggles today. It is a tall order for a small book, but one contribution to what I hope will become a body of meaningful anthropology of and for working people no matter where they live, what language they speak, or what work they do.

What I've Learned about Unions in the United States

In an introduction to the workshop I summarized what I have learned about unions in the United States over the past two decades. First, consumer debt turns workers into indentured servants of the capitalist class. When Suzan and I were working with a Teamster local in Chicago, there was a meeting to take a vote to authorize a strike in case the negotiators needed to use that tool. The vote failed. The older drivers explained it was because the younger ones had to make payments on their houses, their cars, and their credit cards and could not afford to miss a paycheck. Younger workers confirmed that. Consumer lust, as Chinese anthropologist Pung Ngai (2005) calls it, makes people into slaves, because without the ability to strike, unions have only the ability to maneuver, not the ability to change the political or economic system.

Second, most American union locals are typically highly centralized and their members are uninvolved. As sociologist C. Wright Mills found in the 1950s in the United States, we also found almost half a century later—union members use the union to pursue individual interests, not class interests, and some union leaders have come to identify with the employing class more than the working class for which they're supposed to fight.

Third, most union staff and officers were also concerned with the personal interests of members, not class struggle. But I learned that when you have to be constantly vigilant to maintain the rights you have negotiated for members, when you have to have an army of quasi lawyers taking on management case by case, worker by worker, worksite by worksite, there's precious little left for class struggle. Each day is its own struggle. Thus the demands of servicing subvert the goals of organizing. It can become overwhelmingly discouraging or impossible to continue the work when the goal is constantly receding, never within grasp. Or as a receptionist for the SEIU local where Suzan worked would say whenever I asked how things were going, "same shit, different day." There are victories, but each takes place in a setting of growing despair.

Fourth, even though unions are centralized, the politics of locals can sabotage programs that come from the international organization. This may take the form of passive resistance rather than active opposition, so only detailed ethnographic work can reveal such resistance. After SEIU announced a program to shift from servicing to organizing members, I was sitting in the office of a union representative I'd been riding with all over Chicago when he got a phone call from a sociologist. The rep proceeded with the survey the sociologist was doing and was very agreeable to the program. The sociologist later wrote a learned paper about how union staff supported the program. But I had been seeing the program sabotaged by these same organizers, who had no reason to promote a program that went against their personal interests nor any reason to publicize their actions.

Fifth, the internal politics of locals and larger organizations is too strong for any outside analysis or internal critique to break through. The union movement in the United States is so beleaguered, so harassed and besieged, that there is little room for critique from within or without, as union veterans Bill Fletcher and Fernando Gapasin discuss in their 2008 book, *Solidarity Divided*. This defensive stance leads to a rejection of any critique as attack. Paradoxically, in self-defense the labor movement turns on its own.

Sixth, in the labor movement, as in the United States in general, any idea of democracy is a sham. During the workshop, when he learned that the University of Iowa was searching for a new president, Greek anthropologist Manos Spyradikis asked me who would be voting on the new president. My first response was embarrassed laughter. I knew that students and faculty vote for the rector of the University of Iceland. But Iowa? I could only laugh. I went on to explain, and Manos said, "It's democracy?"

"Your people created democracy," I answered. "My people can't even imitate it." As it happened, only the regents, all appointed by a reactionary governor, could vote, and they voted against the wishes of the faculty, students, and staff of the university to hire a corporate executive to run a public university. Yet another turn of the neoliberal screw.

And in another paradox the practice of democracy can be a weakness when only a small minority of the membership participates. Suzan and I actively worked to promote the reelection of a progressive leader in a Chicago local of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. It was a sorrowful day for us when the votes were counted and a coalition of disaffected members, a small group of the highest-paid workers in the union, dissatisfied with how they had fared in the last contract negotiation, won the election. To carry out meaningful change, for instance from servicing to organizing, required the kind of centralization to overcome internal sabotage and member resistance that we'd seen in SEIU locals. Its effectiveness could be debated, but it was certainly not democratic. While American unions may be hamstrung by such contradictions, not all unions are, as Chris Kelley points out in his ethnographic work with Swiss construction workers.

Seventh, unions in the United States can vary between the intensely democratic Healthcare PA, or, as it was formerly known, SEIU 1199-P, to the Mafia-linked International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) local of Bayonne, New Jersey. When insurrectionary members of that local approached me to enlist Suzan and me to tell their story, Suzan flatly asked whether I was ready to die and be found stinking in the trunk of a car, as had happened to witnesses in a recent federal case against that union. Not believing it could be that bad, at Suzan's suggestion I talked by telephone to Ken Riley, the president of the Charleston ILA local we'd been working with. When he affirmed Suzan's fears, I dropped the project. Ken Riley leads a group that is trying to diminish mob control of the ILA.

Eighth, the encouraging dimension is that there are insurrectionary members of that local in Bayonne, of the ILA, and of the Teamsters and that an SEIU local in Pennsylvania can be intensely democratic. Around the world workers are organizing for their own interests, as the cases in this book illustrate, sometimes within the structure of their unions, as several of the chapters in this book illustrate.

Ninth, Suzan and I have also seen at least one example of remarkable international solidarity. It was specifically the support of Spanish dockers that turned the tide for the Charleston longshoremen. This example showed the weaknesses of business unionism not only in the United States but internationally in their failure to respond to the needs of Charleston or Liverpool longshoremen.

Perhaps some of those business unionists reading this book will be annoyed by the brash tone of scholar-activists preaching better ways to those who have devoted their lives to their unions. That response may be built into their structural positions as defenders of an ineffectual status quo in the face of the needs of new generations of the international working class resisting the capitalist class in the neoliberal world. We appreciate the perspective of that structural position, because many of the authors in this collection are or have been in that position. We hope that to balance that annoyance some readers will gain a sense of agency, hope, and vision from our work that might empower them to continue their struggle in a new way and take next steps to create a responsive and effective labor movement that will answer to the interests of the working class of our planet.

Neoliberalism

Since the 1980s, a number of national governments followed US president Ronald Reagan and UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher in their march to privatize government functions, remove government regulations from financial institutions, eliminate any barriers such as tariffs from international trade, commodify collective resources such as fishing rights with individual transferrable quotas and air with such programs as “cap and trade,” and to convert fictive things (e.g., mortgages) into instruments of speculation (as fishing quotas were converted into financial goods in Iceland) all for the benefit of financial and other corporations. The most effective environment for

the implementation of these programs is crisis borne of disasters, whether natural or instigated. During crises, established procedures and practices become inoperative, providing an opportunity to manipulate events such as hurricanes and wars to redistribute wealth to the capitalist class, which benefits most from neoliberal practices and policies (Klein 2007).

Iceland offers a microcosmic example. Complete with lunatic neoliberal economists writing about the virtues of fictive wealth on the eve of an economic collapse that ruined the nation's economy, Iceland's 2008 crash benefited a few cronies of the powerful at the expense of everyone else in the nation (Durrenberger and Palsson 2014).

Economist Joseph Stiglitz (2002) discusses neoliberalism as "market fundamentalism," drawing an analogy between economics and religion because, from a materialist or empiricist perspective, economic theory has no necessary connection to realities, and "fundamentalist" because it strives to enact a pure form of economics in a return to classical doctrine—that institutions arise from the action of maximizing beings, each seeking individual gain, and that markets efficiently and effectively regulate all matters. The political implications are clear: to market fundamentalists, government is an intrusion and a cause of all problems rather than a solution. The best solution to any issue or problem is a market solution. Government, commons, regulation, and collective action are anathema.

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2011) suggests that neoliberalism is the conjunction of two trends in government and industry. In industry, the notion of the firm that had been in place from the 1940s through the 1970s was exemplified by the principles articulated and practiced by Henry Ford, or the Fordist firm. Labor unions would organize workers and gain consensus among them regarding what return they should get for their labor, from remuneration to healthcare, retirement, job safety, and handling of workplace grievances. They would bring these proposals to management, and the two sides would come to agreement on the details of a contract that would govern both. The collection of these functions from negotiating contracts to enforcing them is called servicing the members or a servicing model for labor unions. These collectively bargained contracts between labor unions and management defined the relationships of workers to the firm as well as, indirectly, the relationship of workers to their unions. Negotiating these contracts may be an intensively political process entailing the assessment of the relative power

of each side—“putting power down on paper,” as one organizer put it—but it is definitely not a market process.

Because it is not a market process, it is antithetical to neoliberalism. The neoliberal market-centered conceptualization of labor is that it is an abstraction, a line item in a budget, not anchored to place or organization, a commodity to be accessed via the least expensive means, disposable and replaceable with no other relationship to the firm besides the provision of labor. Thus healthcare and retirement benefits are not relevant. In virtually all industrial countries, those functions are the role of government. Not in the United States. In the United States they are functions of employers. In the neoliberal model, however, they should be market functions that each individual provides by shopping the market to seek the greatest returns for the least expenditure. Workers should be at the direct disposal of capital with no mediator. The firm sets the pace and schedule of work, and workers must be sufficiently flexible to provide labor when and where the firm requires it. Such workers are notoriously difficult for traditional unions to embrace or organize, one of the motivations for the enactment of such a labor regime in neoliberal polities. In this book Birelma discusses these workers in Turkey and the hopeful advances in organizing them, and Spyridakis describes how such a labor regime has corroded the traditional union structure among ship workers in Greece.

The second tendency Ortner mentions is changes in the economic role of government. Keynesian assumptions that provide the basis for the institutions created by the postwar Breton Woods agreements held that governments should regulate their economies and sustain social programs for the welfare of their citizens. Because neoliberals see these as market rather than government functions, neoliberal governments do neither. Stiglitz (2002) shows the fundamental contradiction between the Breton Woods institutions and neoliberal practice. He goes on to describe how when in power, neoliberals replaced key personnel and redesigned government programs to produce crisis conditions for neoliberals to manipulate to their advantage.

Ortner (2011) suggests that the term “Late Capitalism” of the 1980s and 1990s was associated with globalization, which had both positive and negative dimensions. The shift to “neoliberalism” does not signal so much a change in institutional structures as a change in the story from one that contained some positive elements to one that has none, a darker and more

conspiratorial endeavor to create a world economy that extracts even more wealth for the dominant class. She observes that while some dismiss treatments such as Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* and David Harvey's *A Short History of Neoliberalism* as conspiracy theories, both statistics and ethnography expose the facts—that neoliberalism results in the vast wealth of the few and the precarious wage work and stark poverty of the many. I would add that when people get together and devise a scheme, it makes little difference whether you call it a policy, a conspiracy, a plan, or an operating system. What you cannot call it is natural, evolutionary, or inevitable. The sad and undebatable fact is that a very few people have created both the statistics and the conditions for the ethnography we observe. If people involved must discuss underlying assumptions, perhaps it is a conspiracy; if they all operate on the basis of tacit and shared assumptions, it's what anthropologists call culture. It comes down to the same thing in practice.

The works in this book do not dispel that notion of an intentionally ideologically driven move to remake the world in market terms that Naomi Klein and David Harvey discuss. Instead, they fill in some of the details that ethnographers see in our close observation of everyday life. These encounters show us that against the gray canvas of a bleak and unpromising neoliberal world there is room for hope among building trades workers in Switzerland (Kelley), metal workers in Argentina (Soul), bank workers in the United States and Brazil (Payne), subcontracted workers in Turkey (Birelma), and agricultural workers in Mexico (Zolniski). These take the form of direct action, often against established unions but sometimes by and within unions (see Kelley, Soul, Payne, and Birelma in this volume). These stories suggest alternative possibilities for a less bleak world. It is this potential that we consider in this book.

Traditional unions on the century-old Fordist model are not often relevant to workers' responses to their employers in the neoliberal political and economic milieu, where the ground has shifted dramatically beneath them. But when union leadership can respond innovatively to new challenges, their example offers hope for the continuing relevance of traditional union models and the promise of future developments.

We expect that activists and academics still running hard but losing ground in the American labor movement will take issue with the successful alternatives to the traditional union model we offer here. Those involved in this

volume who have worked or are still working with traditional unions sympathize with those readers; yet when we look at the numbers, we cannot deny that the traditional union model has not responded effectively to this new world economy. In the United States and many other countries, union membership continues to drop. Wages continue to fall. Benefits are out of sync with the majority of nonunion workers, placing them on the precipice and sliding fast. But the movement's resistance to all forms of critique dooms it to repeat endlessly failed forms and shun and ignore the voices of their most steadfast allies. This stance sets the stage for continuing tragedy in the United States and the rest of the world of labor, one that has already played out for more than three decades.

We believe, however, that in this book we have struck a good balance between discussions of labor activists working within unions and pushing their boundaries by experimenting with new forms of organizing and aggressively implementing older ones on the one hand and those who have studied alternatives to unions and new forms of unionism to address labor issues on the other.

Why a Book on Unions from an International Perspective?

The purpose of the workshop was to develop a comparative understanding of the relative contribution of national policies, politics, histories, international economic forces, international institutions, and union structures in the organized labor of different countries in order to provide a framework for a comparative understanding of unions as a form of collective action.

Traditionally, the chief goal of unions is to organize workers for collective action in support of their interests to redress the power imbalance between those who provide labor and those who control the conditions of its use through their ownership or management of productive resources. Because workers and owners of capital do not share interests, this relationship is necessarily adversarial (Durrenberger 2007).

Ostrom and her colleagues in political economy, the intersection of economics and political science, have done extensive theoretical reflection, experimentation, and historic and ethnographic exploration of the issues that arise from theories of collective action (e.g., Ostrom and Walker 2003; Ostrom 1997). Ostrom et al. have discussed the provision of public goods

such as policing and education. Acheson (2003:7) succinctly states the question as what happens when the interests of individuals and those of the collective diverge. The solution is to establish rules to constrain the behavior of individuals. Without such rules, individuals acting in their own interests create negative consequences for the collectivity. “In collective action dilemmas, it is not rational for individuals to cooperate, even though cooperation would bring positive results for all” (Acheson 2003:7). In such dilemmas, one person’s solution is another’s problem if it imposes costs. “People whose interests are being damaged by the activities of others have a strong incentive to produce rules to curb the damage, while those who stand to gain in the short run have a strong incentive to oppose such rules” (Acheson 2003:7). Anthropologist Acheson apart, the collective action theorists seem to see these matters as parts of natural processes rather than historically given cultural or political ones or as collective action on behalf of one class. There is no sense that collective action issues may occur in a power imbalance or that there may be recourse to the use of force or the appropriation of the law to favor one group.

Perhaps because economists take markets to be natural phenomena, their model of collective action parsed into the four categories of common pool, public, private, and toll according to the degree of subtractability and excludability of goods is strangely devoid of any sense of culture, history, or politics (Ostrom 1997; Ostrom, Gardner, and Walker 1995; Ostrom and Walker 2003; Durrenberger 2007, 2010). For instance, when Iceland declared an individual transferrable quota system for managing its fisheries in 1990, fish immediately moved from the “common pool” cell to the “private” one by the stroke of the policy pen (Helgason and Palsson 1997). The characteristics of the resource were constant. But this policy move fundamentally changed the Icelandic economy and paved the way to the economic meltdown of 2008 (Durrenberger and Palsson 2014).

The collective action theorists do not discuss collective action on behalf of classes, such as the National Association of Manufacturers or its scion, the National Chambers of Commerce, that represent corporate interests (Fones-Wolf 1995) that have accomplished what Doukas (2003) calls a cultural revolution in the United States. Nor does the academic literature discuss the consequences of the capture of public apparatus for the benefit of private interests—for example, the so-called “outsourcing” of functions such as

police, prisons, education, and military, environmental cleanup, government bailouts of irresponsible lending agencies to preserve their grasp on wealth at public expense, or the externalization of numerous corporate costs to public agencies (Bakan 2005).

Slaves are private property by definition. In the United States abolitionists tried to change the ownership of the person and his or her labor from the master to the slave, but in a market system the individual's labor was still a private good. Labor unions originated to amplify the negligible power of individuals who have nothing but their labor to sell. By joining together, such individuals can bring the force of their collective action to represent their interests versus the owners of capital.

Workers organize unions to achieve collective goals. One question regarding unions is what legal or extralegal means unions and management can bring to bear in their struggle against the other. When law enforcement is lax, corporations often break the law (Durrenberger and Erem 2005). Unions may do the same (Erem and Durrenberger 2008). Each attempts to appropriate the power of the state via whatever political processes are available including influencing legislators and legislation, elections, administrative rules, and administrators.

Historical works show how intense the involvement of nations has been in creating and maintaining various kinds of markets as well as the role of wages, profits, and capital in their economic systems. If labor is sufficiently organized to make collective claims on behalf of union members, then they may claim some of the production for those who produced it. However, owners of capital may exercise sufficiently great influence that the antisocial dimensions of market fundamentalism, as Stiglitz (2002) called economics, become apparent. For instance, Kate Bronfenbrenner et al. (1998) show that the weakness of the labor movement in the United States is due to well-organized, massive, and often violent opposition rather than workers' lack of interest, individualism, or some inscrutable difference between the United States and European countries (Cohen and Hurd 1998; Durrenberger 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 1995, 1996). Vanneman and Cannon (1987) outline a general pattern of worker intimidation that Fantasia (1988) shows ethnographically.

It is not possible to understand labor unions in the United States without distinguishing "right to work" states. The law of those states specifies that workers represented by unions may not be required to pay dues. This creates

a “free rider” problem for unions and a major disincentive to expending resources for organizing in those states, perhaps the intent the “right to work” legislation. The 1935 legislation that established the legal and bureaucratic machinery for labor unions was one dimension of Roosevelt’s New Deal program for recovery from the Great Depression and, as such, was contested. During the Second World War, many American unions agreed to cooperate with management to achieve what they saw as common wartime objectives and thus developed an idea of partnership between labor and capital for collaboration to achieve prosperity for all.

In 1947, after the war was finished, the National Association of Manufacturers proposed legislation to strengthen the hand of management (Fones-Wolf 1995; Peale 2000). The Taft-Hartley Act was a set of amendments to the Wagner Act that a Republican Congress passed over Democratic president Harry S. Truman’s veto (Durrenberger and Erem 2013). These changes of law had the effect of moving labor unions from a social movement aimed at replacing capitalism to a form of worker insurance, a shift from the “organizing” to the “servicing” model. Thus the emphasis of collective action shifted from worker control of workplaces to negotiating and enforcing contracts that specified the terms of employment for workers (Durrenberger and Erem 2013). Thus workers were rendered incapable of other forms of collective action (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008; Fletcher and Hurd 1998).

From the point of view of American workers more than half a century later, unions are like insurance companies to protect them individually. For their part, unions became professionalized bureaucracies whose leaders are hard to distinguish from their counterparts in the corporate world. Union “bosses” became complacent after the Taft-Hartley amendments became law and made common cause with corporate management (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008).

The laws that set the legal framework for all union activity in the United States also specified the bureaucratic means for enacting the legislation via the National Labor Relations Board, people appointed to oversee and enforce the law. As Wells (1996) showed, the implementation of labor law depends very much on the political inclinations of the enforcing personnel. So in the United States at every level, from the federal to the state to even the local, unions are constrained by the laws, policy, and politics that define and constrict collective action.

As capital has become global, corporations are no longer tethered to particular countries. Contrary to the standard labor narrative, labor economist Robert Reich points out that the precipitous decline of unions in the United States started not in the 1980s in response to Republican Ronald Reagan administration's firing and replacing the striking air traffic controllers, and their policy of worker replacement to combat strikes, but rather in the 1970s as American corporations began to respond to the process of the globalization of capital. This was not a "natural" event but the result of free trade policies of Republican and Democratic administrations as well as the Breton Woods consensus that established the administrative machinery for globalization in the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, and the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). As manufacturing functions in the United States were curtailed and moved to other countries, so labor unions began to collapse. This view is borne out by the numbers, timing, and dynamics of globalization in the United States (Reich 2008).

A wide range of ethnographic research converges on the conclusion that the relationships of power that law and policy define are the most important dimensions in shaping union activity and thought (Durrenberger 1996; Stephen 2003; Weinbaum 2001, Wells 1996; Zolniski 2003). The differences in context between, for instance, the corporatist states of Scandinavia, postrevolutionary Mexico, and northern Europe and the United States are so great as to define distinct phenomena under different legal regimes in the different countries. These contrasts highlight the inadequacy of collective action approaches that assume that "all things are equal" or that people attempt to resolve collective problems or dilemmas in the absence of historically given relationships, culture, policy, politics, and even violent opposition.

The rise of global economic institutions further weakens nations. Labor becomes contingent and flexible rather than constant and governed by long-term contracts. In this process unions and workers lose power (Nissim and De Vries in press). Spyridakis (2013) illustrates these processes in detail in the daily lives of Greek workers. Zolniski (2010) shows how Mexican politics, policies, and laws constrain the unions in that country and how those are in turn shaped by neoliberal globalization policies and practices. The unions in corporatist states such as those of Scandinavia are essentially parts of the government as they enter into the process of policy formation as equals with government agencies (Apostle 2012; Durrenberger and King 2000). In China,

unions are pro forma, more or less branches of central and local governments to manage labor recruitment (Ngai 2005). Existing ethnographic literature thus offers a tantalizing glimpse of the differences in government policies, politics, and history, but until our workshop the topic itself remained out of focus, in the background, a matter of peripheral vision rather than a topic for description and analysis.

These are examples of ethnographic works that take into account national politics, history, and law in their descriptions of union activity, but there was still no way of assessing the relative strength of national policy, global economic forces, global institutional structures, and internal structures of unions in determining their efficacy as agents of collective action on behalf of their members.

By its nature, ethnography is always local. The details of ethnography provide a corrective to theoretical abstractions that may be logical but lack empirical confirmation such as the “tragedy of the commons” (Feeny et al. 1990). But the local is increasingly enmeshed in global processes and structures that contain and constrain local activities and systems. Governments may remain in some sense sovereign, but international bodies often determine their economic policies (Finan 1997; Spyridakis 2013; Durrenberger and Marti 2006). Neoliberal economic theorists assume that markets distribute goods and services most efficiently, that free trade increases the wealth for all, that increased consumption is the measure of well-being and national wealth, that the role of government is limited to providing the institutional context for free markets, and that structural adjustment programs such as those of the IMF to limit government spending are a means to obtain those desirable objectives. Ethnographic work shows that, on the contrary, such programs impose negative burdens on the disadvantaged and has critiqued the theory as fallacious (Finan 1997). James Greenberg (1996) has shown that such programs do not have uniform consequences but depend on the details of local situations.

So a substantial body of ethnographic work shows that while global structures and processes influence local practices in fisheries and agriculture as well as labor in other contexts, practices depend on local conditions, which in turn are largely shaped by government policies, histories, and politics.

In addition, neoliberal globalization has enhanced the mobility of capital, production, and labor undermining the national or domestic arenas in which

most labor unions regularly operate, as Julia Soul's chapter in this book illustrates. Neoliberal globalization thus raises additional questions: how have national unions been affected by globalization and neoliberal labor politics and legislation? how have they responded? do we find common trends in the ways in which traditional labor organizations and/or new alternative movements are responding? To answer these questions requires a comparative international approach.

Finally, the comparative perspective is a trademark and one of the main strengths of anthropology as a discipline. Within this tradition the book seeks to move away from a US-centric perspective to examine labor unions in a global setting. For instance, the works in this book show the disintegration of stable employment into transitory contractual relationships in the ship repair industry of Greece, healthcare in Turkey, and in more extreme forms in the reorganization of work in Israel's retail industry and Sweden's automobile manufacturing. We see a union struggling to maintain the organization of industrial labor against the forces of globalization in Argentina, the virtual impossibility of collective action for labor in China and the struggle to provide some relief in the intermittent gaps of the Chinese security system, and the effort to reconceptualize labor and collective action in Brazilian and US banking. We see the continual redefinition of work in agricultural labor in Mexico and the fight to maintain some kind of representation for factory workers in special export zones. In many cases we see the problems that the mobility of labor causes for patterns and practices of immigration—for instance, in Spanish strawberry production and the Swiss construction industry.

A Role for Ethnography

Only some of the participants were academic anthropologists with a traditional disciplinary outlook on ethnographic description and comparison. Others were activist anthropologists whose reference points are utility, practicality, and effectiveness. Both types, however, rooted their findings in the fine-grained ethnography of everyday life from the strawberry fields of Spain to the coffeehouses of Sweden, tearooms of China, worksites of Greek ports and ships, retail establishments of Israel, union offices and construction sites of Switzerland, and agricultural zones of Mexico. Others, however, were sociologists who took a more structural point of view less

rooted in everyday life to portray workers' struggles in Argentina, Turkey, and the manufacturing zones of Mexico. We hold, however, that both perspectives are necessary because portrayals of everyday life without understanding the structures that contain and shape them are as insufficient as vapid descriptions of abstract structures that are devoid of life and struggle. In any case, there is a large if differing ethnographic content to all of the studies, and all contain analytical dimensions; the difference is one of emphasis rather than of kind.

Thus the studies in this book are from varied perspectives, each of which illuminates some dimension of people striving in their own contexts and daily lives to act collectively on behalf of the working class in the contest with the global capitalist class.

All of the participants at the workshop repeated a common theme that they and their colleagues should not simply be impartial observers but should be committed partisans in the class war with the capitalist class by whatever means (see Braden's chapter in this volume). We are united in our hope that the works we present here will contribute to that struggle.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, American anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker worked as an organizer with a progressive union. After a few years, however, she decided to return to academics and went to England to study anthropology with Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics. She had a long and productive career and published an autobiography in 1966, *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist* (Powdermaker 1966). At the time, Laura Bohannan (1968), author of the widely read but pseudonymous anthropological novel cum memoir, *Return to Laughter* (Bohannan 1954), wrote that Powdermaker's book was unique for its blend of anthropological method, theory, and personal reflection. More recently, Ortner (2016) suggests that there is an underlying tension between Powdermaker's implicit theoretical analysis and her explicit ethnography, that Powdermaker felt she "could not combine a scientific ethnographic attitude with a critical political interest." In part this was because her political outlook was Marxist in a repressive era in the United States that takes its name from the primary opponent to all things Marxist and Communist, Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The participants in the Iowa workshop felt no such compunction. That is a testament to the changing times in which the neoliberal program has become transparent to all who are not of the elite class that benefits from

it. They see the necessity to make common cause on behalf of our planet and our species. Or it could be because they are young enough not to have suffered the hammering of the McCarthy witch-hunts. Or perhaps because neoliberals have declared victory and can ignore any opposing voices. In any case, all asserted their simultaneous commitment to objective ethnography and to activism, each in service of and enhancing the other. Steven Payne, Chris Kelley, and Emma Braden are following in Powdermaker's footsteps in working with unions but see their anthropology as integral to their work rather than separate from it.

Commenting on the workshop, Chris Kelley said:

Just as there is ethnographic evidence to suggest that established unions often fall victim to bureaucracy and "class snuggle" (see Durrenberger and Erem 2005:188–90), there is also ethnographic data to suggest that steering established unions back onto a progressive path can be a successful undertaking.

Besides the ethnographic aspect of the above, this point also means very much to me as an *activist* anthropologist. . . . 5 days of the week, quite often 6 or even 7, I see organizers as well as activists in my union that do all they possibly can to build a strong and movement-oriented trade union, a union that is able to strike and win in conflicts—even if this brings with it serious legal as well as personal consequences. Of course, there were decades in which the exact same movement was indeed bureaucratized, yet the case today speaks not only for the existence of established unions with a social movement perspective, but also for the possibility of changing the established unions from bureaucratic messes to innovative and conflict-ready organizations.

Unions and Class Struggle

In the United States four processes transformed unions from a social movement on behalf of a class to a self-satisfied bureaucracy: violent opposition, the corporate-sponsored American cultural revolution, a corporate legislative program, and corporate response to neoliberal trade agreements that encouraged the exportation of industrial jobs and increasingly insecure or flexible employment that diminished the base of union membership, as Spyridakis shows in Greece and Birelma in Turkey. There has been a similar response of capital in Europe, China, Latin America, and Israel, as the work in this volume shows. Capital has successfully eroded the social contract that

labor had established by joining in the process of governance in the respective corporatist states. This model is foreign to Americans, so it bears brief explication for that audience.

In these forms of governance, exemplified historically by Sweden, there is a bureaucratic technocracy consisting of professional and nonpolitical administrators for each important function such as healthcare, agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing, housing, aging, and education. These experts work with elected members of the government, the ministers of each department, and organized sectors of the citizenry and associations of capitalists who own the various enterprises to make and implement policy in each area. Thus all farmers belong to a farmers' union that enters into negotiations with the experts of the department of agriculture and the elected representatives of the government in the ministry of agriculture to formulate and implement agricultural policy. A fishers' union negotiates with the association of processors and boat owners as well as the ministry of fisheries and fisheries management experts from the government. Corporatist states are an alliance of capital, aristocracy, technocracy, and labor ostensibly to manage the interests of all to the mutual satisfaction of all. Of course this becomes impossible when corporations are dedicated only to maximizing profits, as they are in the United States, with no other possible objective such as social or environmental benefits.

The model is based on the idea that the government should serve the interests of the people as a whole. This is the dimension that is foreign to Americans, who are more apt to believe that the government's function is to restrain parties from harmful actions such as polluting the water or cheating consumers while those corporations are well within their rights to organize themselves to look for their own economic interests and try to limit the reach of government regulation. Unions are largely outside that picture. But corporate interests have been successful in eroding the functions of the corporatist states insofar as they represent interests other than their own. After all, an automobile firm may have one foot in Sweden but more important roles in China and the United States. The US owners may favor its own profitability over the welfare of the Swedish people. Thus, the role of the corporation in Swedish policy is largely irrelevant to the firm, as Löfving shows in his chapter on Saab whereby the government becomes a willing adjunct to the corporation.

The contributors to this volume would by and large agree that established trade unions have been unable to function for the benefit of their members and for the working class in general for many decades because of their incorporation as partners in labor negotiation with employers and as players in state-sponsored protocols for “labor peace,” whether in the United States or other lands with corporatist arrangements. Because of this, workers have taken two broadly diverging paths.

One is to develop new forms of labor organizations, independent of the established trade unions. These new organizations may speak up for workers in informal ways, as the labor NGOs in China could during Pan’s fieldwork there before the wide-ranging crackdown in 2016 on all forms of labor representation there. As Zolniski shows, agricultural workers in Baja California, the northern Mexican vegetable basket of the United States, have managed to successfully organize alternatives to the corporatist unions to represent their interests, but on the model of more or less traditional union organizations. Other alternatives include worker centers (Bobo and Pabellón 2016) in the United States such as Brodtkin (2007) describes in Los Angeles.

The second path has been to bend existing labor organizations more to the interests of the working class. The ethnographic work of Kelley, Braden, Payne, and Soul document these efforts. This, for instance, is the kind of work that Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the reformists in the International Longshoremen’s Association are undertaking in the United States and what Justice for Janitors did in SEIU (Zolniski 2006).

Nineteenth-century railroad tycoon Jay Gould wasn’t just kidding about hiring half of the working class to kill the other half, but if he did that, he would have no workforce to produce profits for him, no workers from which he could extract surplus value, profits. His task was to organize a focused campaign of violence to kill and imprison enough to intimidate the rest. He could then hire half of the working class to manage the other half of the working class and offer them sufficient privileges that they would not continue to identify with the working class (Ehrenreich 1990). The cultural revolution would then develop an appropriately comfortable and self-congratulatory individualistic ideology for them to live by within the capitalist system (Doukas 2003; Newman 1988).

By the end of the 1920s violent raids and imprisonments had broken the IWW in the United States. While the Franklin Roosevelt administration—

sponsored Wagner Act of 1935 gave labor the right to organize, the corporate-sponsored Taft-Hartley amendments of 1947 redefined the role of unions as negotiating and enforcing contracts on behalf of their members under the Fordist model, as described above. This made the supply of labor to corporations more predictable and controllable, insulating employers from the direct action of their workers. This legislation redefined unions from social movements to benefit the working class to allies of corporations to control their labor supply. This alliance disguised and denied both the existence of classes and the necessity of class struggle and curtailed traditions of direct action such as unsanctioned strikes to resolve work place grievances. It also cultivated dependence of workers on unions for their servicing functions.

Starting in the 1970s, corporate-sponsored legislation to remove international barriers to trade via agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and, later, the proposed Trans Pacific Partnership made cheap labor available to multinational corporations and thus removed much of the industrial base for union membership while increasing corporate profits and, hence, corporations' potential for effective political action.

By job exportation, legislative action, violence, and a massive propaganda campaign, the capitalist class in the United States has engaged in collective action on its own behalf to control labor and any organizations that may act on behalf of the working class. Ethnography has shown that this cultural revolution, unstintingly sponsored by trusts and fledgling corporations at the end of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has been largely successful (Durrenberger and Doukas 2008). The American working class accepted the self-congratulatory ideology of individual merit that the cultural revolution and the managerial class promulgated through schools, churches, universities, and media programming (Durrenberger 2001). Part of this ideology was codified in the doctrines of economics, now enshrined in universities across the world and given the status of a science.

A Role for Democracy in Unions

While law requires a show of democracy inside American unions, ethnographic work shows that it is at best a sham. If progressive leadership attempts to favor principles of organizing over those of servicing, it becomes vulnerable

to coalitions of disaffected members who benefit from the servicing model. At the same time, they are vulnerable to internal sabotage from their own staff, who also benefit from the servicing model (Durrenberger 2004).

Labor leaders can insure at least short-term stability by making the electoral processes inaccessible to members (Durrenberger and Erem 2005). Reform movements from within the membership may be less effective at bringing change than top-down nondemocratic forms of organization, vulnerable though they may be to both internal sabotage and member resistance (Durrenberger and Erem 2005). On the other hand, there is a lot of evidence that progressive change can come from the rank and file, even though they may have to struggle against their own leadership (Erem and Durrenberger 2008; Lynd 2015).

The contributors to Ness (2014) document hopeful exceptions of worker autonomy. Then there is the example of the International Dockers' Council, which arose from the organizing efforts of locked-out Liverpool dockers during the Thatcher years. Finding no support in their own union, these dockers began to organize other dockers' locals in Europe into the International Dockers Council (IDC). For six years, starting in 1995, these locals met together to go under or around their own ineffective unions (Erem and Durrenberger 2008). While those unions were in fact moribund, still fighting the Cold War and incapable of responding to the needs of these workers, the workers organized a response within the shell of those organizations and in the process strengthened their local unions and created a new organization that did serve their interests.

Late in 2000 when a handful of Charleston, South Carolina, longshoremen were arrested after an altercation with 600 police, their president began to try to mobilize support for them. He could find none in his own International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) or the overarching labor confederation, AFL-CIO. But when longshoremen from the West Coast's International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), heirs to the IWW traditions of democracy, autonomy, and direct action, heard of the arrests, they immediately began to organize support and raise funds, even contrary to their own union leadership. With support of IDC dockers in Europe, the Charleston local could make credible a threat to shut down world shipping. Suzan Erem and I tell this story in detail in our 2008 book, *On the Global Waterfront: The Fight to Free the Charleston Five*.

Markets, Mutuality, and the Economics of Collective Action

In my honorary lecture for the *Journal of Anthropological Research* (Durrenberger 2009) I celebrated the IDC as an example of class solidarity and the last wall to fall to neoliberalism. There I developed the standard anthropological critique of Elinor Ostrom's collective action theory—that she had not honored the cultural variability that we see ethnographically. But in a note I argue that this critique missed the mark. Ostrom's approach is more deeply flawed because it is based on the assumption of all economics, methodological individualism, the idea that institutions are the total of individual decisions and their outcomes. This is a cultural artifact of capitalism that was propagated by the great cultural revolution along with the discipline of economics to achieve scientific respectability for the ideology that wealth creates wealth, or the gospel of wealth, as Doukas calls it.

So, for Ostrom, institutions still emerge from the behaviors of maximizing individuals, but in examples of collective action, each is able to maximize his or her benefits by cooperating with others in similar situations. The goal of Ostrom's ethnographic and historical work was to define those situations in which parties could maximize their individual benefit by cooperation. These examples posed a puzzle for economists because, from that perspective, there is no room for common interests or collective action. Yet there are historical examples such as people being willing to pay taxes in return for schools and police services, though in recent decades both of these classic examples have seen challenges from neoliberals. Paradoxically, the principle promoters of the ideology of economics and of neoliberalism, corporations, have mastered collective action in their approach to gaining control of government functions. So their interests are represented not only by an array of think tanks to influence media, but also organizations such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the National Chambers of Commerce that are more directly aimed at influencing policy and legislation on behalf of their members.

The ideology of economics that poses collective action as a puzzle rather than an expectation defines a kind of humanity that is quite different from the social animals that anthropology knows—creatures that evolved over five million years. The evolutionary view of humanity has the strong helping the weak in the image of solidarity that is the basis of unions. Goldschmidt (2005) argues that what made us human is the selective advantage of the

flexibility that solidarity conferred on groups whose members could be more committed to serving group interests than replicating themselves—groups that were more committed to collective action than individual advancement. Everything human, Goldschmidt argues, takes place in the “gap between the encoded genetic instruction and behavioral performance” (Goldschmidt 2005:18). In that fissure is culture, collective thought. Goldschmidt argues that we learn culture because of an inborn necessity to please those who are trying to teach—a trait known as “affect hunger.” The individuals and groups who could not transcend the first competitive evolutionary imperative—the selfish gene—with cooperation and collective action have long since perished, unable to be sufficiently responsive to changing conditions of time and space.

From this point of view, collective action is an expectation, not a puzzle that requires solution, as it is for Ostrom and her followers. It is part of our species’ evolutionary history. What needs to be explained is not collective action but any departures from it. Thus, some of the questions we should try to answer are “Why are there economists?” and “Why is there capitalism and neoliberalism and other *departures* from collective action?” The answer is in the history of the corporate-sponsored great cultural revolution that Doukas (2003) provides.

In spite of the few examples of collective action that have caught the attention of Ostrom and her followers, most of it escapes the attention of economists. Economists work with tidy data sets, and a lot of what the human species has done since we walked out of Africa has escaped the detection of data collectors. In the early 1970s anthropologist Keith Hart found that was true of most of what was going on in Africa, so he coined the term “informal economy” to describe black markets, informal trading networks, and transactions that governments define as illicit, such as drug deals and prostitution (Hann and Hart 2011).

In marked contrast, ethnography, with its close attention to daily life, much of which escapes the official records, reveals plentiful examples of collective action. Carol Stack (1974) and others have shown that much of the economic activity in poor communities in the United States is “off the books.” I fix your car and you keep an eye on my kids, and my mom feeds your kids when you’re at work and I give your grandmother a ride to the emergency room when she’s ailing. We help each other out. The poor are excluded from participation in the market by lack of money, if for no other reasons such

as race. But when people are better off, they don't do that. The ideology of meritocratic individualism militates against it. They purchase these services on the open market instead. The ideology of the managerial middle class excludes them from collective actions and creates the puzzle for economists. Yet among the *very* wealthy and powerful, we see examples of collective actions, as mentioned previously. The market is in a sense as irrelevant to the wealthy as it is to the poor.

Much of the work of any society is in what anthropologists call "reproduction," all of the work of cleaning, cooking, bearing babies, raising children, and keeping households operating so that people are able to go to their formal economy jobs to earn income that the government can tax. But none of that activity gets recorded or into the economists' data sets, so it remains off the economic radar. It's what anthropologists call domestic or household economics. Households need money, but making profits isn't part of their plan; getting by is. Wherever they are, households manage to keep going when governments can't fund themselves, during times of peace and war, terrorist attacks, industrial-strength bombing, foreign conquest, occupations, depressions, recessions, and recoveries. Therein lies the adaptability of our species.

Domestic economies run on what feminist economist Nancy Folbre (2002) calls love, reciprocity, and obligation, the elements of family and community. Economists tend to think that wealth comes from money. In these domestic economies where there is no money, it is obvious that any value comes from work. The poorer the community, the larger the sphere of the domestic economy and the wider the sphere of mutuality.

The ideology of these systems is what Doukas calls the gospel of work. She coined that term to describe the ideology of America before the corporations took over in the late nineteenth century (the National Association of Manufacturers was founded in 1895). Since that time, there's been a cultural revolution to make the activities of corporations seem reasonable, legal, natural, and inevitable. In her 2003 book, *Worked Over*, Doukas documents the process.

Because they do not operate on market principles, family and community are at best vestigial organs where the gospel of wealth reigns; but they are sites of collective action. And so are unions; hence their appropriation of the terms of reference for families and communities reference to fellow union members as "brother" and "sister," for example, or public

presentations that seem to owe much of their rhetorical style to the pulpit and their music to the choir.

Clearly neoliberal corporations are willing to sacrifice both family and community to their need for profit; hence the withering of both in the United States along with the attendant nostalgia for a past era of collectivity and the efficacy of a political rhetoric based on a return to an America of the imagination.

In the midst of the rather dismal picture that neoliberal globalization presents, it seemed to me that people were looking for some glimmers of hope. I hope this book gives reason for such hope, but more importantly, I think it imperative that we stop looking for hope. Hope is what the happy endings of corporate-provided Hollywood movies use to distract us from the realities of our everyday lives. We don't need hope; we need action. We need to organize to create a new future and to preserve our species and our planet.

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