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O N E

Introduction

E. Paul Durrenberger and Karaleah Reichart

The Anthropology of Labor Unions in a Global Political Economy

This collection is a move toward a definition of an anthropology of unions. Questions about unions can only arise in complex social orders with class structures that define incompatible interests between owners of capital and workers. Unions only come into existence when those with privileged access to resources hire others to create value the owners can appropriate for their own use. When those without privileged access to resources organize to identify, promote, and protect their interests, labor unions are born.

Most studies of unions are developed from historical perspectives or are based on national data sets collected by government agencies. Few use the defining method of socio-cultural anthropology: ethnography, which has much to teach us about the nature of unions. The studies in this book bring ethnographic methods to bear on unions. Anthropology is also comparative. The authors in this volume situate their individual ethnographies within a broader comparative framework that tells us what the ethnography of unions can contribute to a broader anthropology of contemporary states.

While most of the works in this collection address labor unions inside the United States and look outward from that perspective toward its global supply and production lines, the picture would look quite different through a view from the South (such as Zlolski sketches), from Africa (as Otañez develops), or from Europe. In Northern Europe, for instance, jobs are more stable than they are in the United States; although “structural” unemployment is high in countries such as Germany, the state is more supportive of working-class organizations than the North American state has ever been. We cannot go into the details of such a comparison here, but we hope to lay the groundwork for comparative studies of unions within a larger global framework.

The postindustrial United States is the site of six of the book’s eight studies, inviting regional comparisons as well as suggesting national trends. The other two chapters describe working life among people in two countries that provide some of the lowest wages in the global labor market: Mexico and Malawi. The globalization of manufacturing as well as agricultural products such as vegetables from Mexico and tobacco from Malawi is a component of a larger global process of integration promoted by the Bretton Woods agreements that were intended to provide stability after World War II. These international agreements have resulted in the normalization of neo-liberal economic policies of free trade and a race to reduce labor costs by exporting manufacturing and production of raw materials. These processes have resulted in the exportation of manufacturing jobs to low-wage markets and the immigration of people from low-wage lands to Europe and North America. Both processes pose challenges for the American labor movement.

Ethnography is local, so each study in this book discusses a local response to these issues of globalization. Although we do not explicitly develop them, regional comparisons within the United States could develop the themes the local ethnographies discuss—for instance, the place of rugged individualism and the American myth in the “right-to-work” states of the West that Smith discusses in her ethnographic treatment of miners in Wyoming versus eastern states with longer traditions of unionism such as Reichart discusses in her ethnography of West Virginia miners. The question of regional differences in the role of religion in U.S. politics and culture comes to the fore in Smith-Nonini’s treatment of farmworkers in North Carolina. Likewise, the comparison of agricultural workers in North Carolina with those on the California border arises from Zlolski’s description of agricultural production in Baja California. The mutual dependency of transnational corporations

and state-sponsored unions that Otañez and Zlolski discuss illustrates the power of global political and economic forces when national elites give them free reign to keep their citizens living and working in serf-like conditions. Matters of place are the central focus of Savage's discussion of how a union is but one dimension of the complex lives of its members. Zlolski points to similar gender issues of the timing of agricultural and domestic work that Savage discusses in connection with healthcare work and domestic duties.

In addition to the insight these studies provide into processes of globalization, they offer a privileged window through which to study the processes of class as they unfold over time and across space. Unions are perform a phenomenon of class. The study of unions therefore helps elucidate the operation of classes in stratified social orders.

Collective Action

Unions are a form of collective action to achieve shared goals. These chapters focus on unions as such rather than on collective action. The topic of collective action is important in anthropology because it has played such a large role in both our biological and our cultural evolution (Goldschmidt 2005) and poses significant questions for academic reflection as well as practical action (Acheson 2003). Several questions resonate through the studies in this volume, including:

- What happens to unions that are denied a collective goal? How can they organize members for collective action when collective action is not available to them?
- How do organizations pursue collective goals in the face of strong opposition?
- How do members whose individual interests are not being directly served but who are financing collective action conceive of such collective action, and to what extent should they support it to achieve longer-term, more abstract goals?

All these questions are important from the standpoint of theory as well as practice. Anthropologists agree that culture is collective, although they may question what groups of people share it, as Ulf Hannerz (1996) does. But there is quite a leap from collective thought to collective action.

Economic theorists distinguish categories of goods according to two continuous criteria: (1) excludability—how easy it is to deprive others from

using the resource, and (2) subtractability—the extent to which one person’s use of a resource precludes someone else from using it (Ostrom 1998). The intersection of these two criteria defines a four-by-four table of possibilities:

	<u>Subtractability</u>	
	high	low
<u>difficult</u>	common pool	public
Excludability		
	<u>easy</u>	toll
	private	

Those goods from which it is difficult to exclude others’ use and that are highly subtractable are common-pool resources. The classic example is fisheries resources (Acheson 2003). If one person takes fish from the sea, there are fewer for the next; further, it is difficult to police the seas. Goods with low subtractability and that are difficult to exclude others from using (excludability) are public goods. Police protection and education are examples Elinor Ostrom (1998) develops. If everyone enjoys the good and it is not possible to exclude anyone from its enjoyment, there must be some form of organization to produce the good. The typical “solution” is institutional structures to tax those who benefit from that good. The other two categories of goods are private property (high subtractability, easy excludability) and toll goods (low subtractability, easy excludability).

Cultural usage and public policy define subtractability and excludability, so different polities or cultural usages may define the same goods in different ways. For instance, in medieval Iceland there was no institutionalized state to easily exclude others from using the land one claimed. Claims to exclusivity could only be enforced by whatever force one could muster through coalitions of armed fighters. Thus land could not be considered private property and, according to this scheme, was more like a common-pool resource with a private boundary defense, as James Acheson (2003) has described for lobstermen in Maine.

Until Iceland’s contemporary government enacted a system of Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs) in 1990 that redefined fish as private property, fish were a common-pool resource. The ITQ policy, however, transformed them into private property. After September 11, 2001, the Bush administration and the U.S. Congress agreed that airport security should be a public good, provided by the government to benefit all citizens, rather than a private or toll good provided by airline companies for the benefit of their passengers.

Bonnie McCay (1998:193) has observed that the conclusions of Ostrom and similar theorists are limited by the “high and sometimes misleading levels of abstraction from empirical cases” that often omit significant details of how political and economic factors are embedded in social relations and cultural constructs. She further believes their perspective is narrowly focused on institutions as constraints that define rules of the game rather than on how institutions both restrain and empower people and establish values that create sense and meaning. The works in this volume contribute empirical ethnographic work on unions to provide more adequate data upon which to base such theories of collective action.

None of the collective action theorists contemplates a scenario in which people successfully organize to achieve collective class goals against a different class that responds by changing laws and culture to undo those achievements and thwart further collective action. None of these theorists contemplates class warfare on behalf of the capitalist class.

The contributions to this book are more concerned with how, and under what circumstances, unions do or do not achieve their goals. Rather than defining the topic as an economic or a political abstraction, we have examined it using the traditional method of ethnography: participant observation. Several of the chapters are self-consciously first-person accounts (Smith, Smith-Nonini, Durrenberger and Erem), while others, although equally based on firsthand observation, take a more distanced view (Richardson, Zlolniski, Otanez, Reichart). These are not romantic or nostalgic celebrations of great victories of the working class (although we would like to edit that book someday); that is not what we and our colleagues have been seeing in our ethnographic work. We instead see successful corporate co-optation of issues such as international child labor (Otanez), wages, benefits and safety (Smith), and even the epistemological definition of what jobs are (Richardson). But we also see union organizers building personal relationships with members to build strength in the workplace based on a community of common interests (Savage).

The Role of State Policy

We have mentioned the works of Zlolniski and Otañez that depict the role of corporate-friendly state policies in the formation of conditions of work and in the emasculation of unions in Mexico and Malawi. In the United States, the 1947 Taft-Hartley amendments to the Wagner Act of 1935 inhibited

union organization by focusing on the servicing functions of negotiating contracts and handling grievances (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998). Employers' political and workplace actions introduce other institutional impediments (Wells 1996). In short, any union faces massive opposition because the rules at all levels are designed to oppose them. In some jurisdictions, the arenas of action such as labor boards are equally arraigned against effective union action (Wells 1996).

The academic literature does not discuss the consequences of the capture of public apparatus for the benefit of private interests—for example, the use of armed forces to suppress labor action (Saitta 2007; Reichart, this volume)—or the outsourcing of functions such as police, education, and military or government bailouts of irresponsible lending agencies to preserve their grasp on wealth at the public's expense. Collective action theorists seem to see these matters as parts of natural processes rather than as historically given cultural or political matters as those who act for collective interests, whether on behalf of the capitalist or the working class, struggle for control of the apparatus of the state—the power to make and enforce law and regulations.

The characteristics of goods, excludability and subtractability, do not occur in nature; they are not given by the nature of things but are culturally defined. Where states shape usage through policy and enforcement, policy determines the nature of goods. Thus policy defines whether union representation is a collective good.

Policy may require all workers in a place to belong to a union and to pay dues to support its operation. This is familiar in the corporatist states of Scandinavia, but in the United States it is called a “closed shop.” The Taft-Hartley amendments forbade the practice unless a majority of workers in a place voted in favor of it. Even that was too strong for business interests, however, and the law was changed in 1951 so they could support “right-to-work” legislation in their states. In the one-third of states that have passed such legislation, unions can represent workers, but workers are not required to pay for union services (including any increased wages, benefits, and leaves they receive through the union-negotiated contract). So these laws do not prohibit collective action but instead prohibit those who organize such action from forcing its beneficiaries to pay for it, unlike the way a state can force its citizens to pay through taxation. Thus, those workers who are union members pay for the services the union provides for all their non-dues-paying fellow workers.

Other states require that workers pay at least their fair share of the costs, usually defined as a large portion of union dues. Still other states require that if workers at a site elect a union to represent them, all workers must be members and must pay dues, as in a closed shop. Thus states within the United States define different collective action rules for unions.

An argument for closed shops is that everyone should pay for the benefits they receive. An argument against them is that requiring such payment is an infringement of individual rights. The analogue for airport security might be that searching any individual passenger is an infringement of that person's individual rights. The counterargument would be that the individual must waive that right to ensure security for all. The right-to-work legislation is analogous to asking only those passengers who elect to be searched to pay for the privilege or asking those on the ground who feel directly threatened by the possibility of being blown up by a hijacked airplane to pay for the protection they receive.

For unions, the financial issue includes the institutional wherewithal to pay people to negotiate and enforce contracts. Thus unions in right-to-work states face a dilemma—whether to expend resources to bargain on behalf of all workers in a worksite in which only some of the members pay for the benefits or to represent no workers in that bargaining unit. Many opt for the former, in the hope that in the long term the majority will pay their way and the union will grow strong enough and have enough political influence to change the right-to-work law. Clearly this approach imposes costs on members in return for very long-term and often abstract goals. This is a problem unions representing agricultural workers in Mexico also face, as Zlolski discusses.

Organizers in right-to-work states appeal to the morality of the people they represent and show them the differences the union makes in their work lives in terms of pay, benefits, and working conditions. As a final recourse, organizers mention that while unions are required by law to represent all workers who have grievances, regardless of whether they pay for that representation, unions are not required to represent them in bargaining contracts that give them those benefits. Thus if larger portions of the workers in other divisions are dues-paying members, the union will bargain more aggressively for their interests. Finally, only dues-paying members may vote on whether to ratify and accept the contract union representatives reach with management.

Unions represent workers in such situations to gain some influence in those workplaces while pushing for long-term legislative changes that would

more greatly favor unions. When the legislation does change, either because of lobbying or the replacement of legislators, the union will be in place to reap the benefits. Like community police and school functions (Ostrom 1998), unions rely on co-production among members for the public good—the people who benefit from the service must help produce it. Members must provide negotiating teams to assist in negotiating contracts and provide stewards to help enforce them once they are in place.

Dilemmas

One of the dilemmas of the contemporary union movement is that the ability to negotiate and enforce contracts depends largely on the power of unions to control certain segments of the labor market. This has been a traditional element of the skilled-trades unions such as carpenters and plumbers, who now see their ability to maintain good wages eroded by an influx of non-union competition. But it is also a factor in organizing less-skilled workers. This was a major issue when mining operations began to open in Wyoming, the topic of Smith's chapter in this book.

The urban service industry provides another example. If all in-house and contracted janitors in an area belong to a union, that union has the power to negotiate good contracts for all. But if only some janitors belong to the union, employers have the option of using nonunion workers or contractors. This was the difference between the very favorable pay and benefits downtown Chicago janitors enjoyed in the late 1990s compared with the unhappy working conditions of suburban janitors. Thus one of the goals of Chicago's SEIU Local 1, which E. Paul Durrenberger (2002) studied in the late 1990s, was to organize all suburban janitors in an effort to protect the downtown janitors' higher wages and benefits.

Some, such as the workers Smith discusses, may believe their skill isolates them from the threat of easy replacement. Historically, though, capital replaces labor; examples include the containerization of freight (Erem and Durrenberger 2008), the automation of butchering and meat packing that replaced skilled butchers with unskilled labor (Stull, Boradway, and Griffith 1995), and the automation of automobile manufacturing, as Richardson discusses in this book.

Organizing all workers in an industry or industrial sector requires resources that might otherwise be used to provide services to current members. This poses one collective action dilemma because it imposes costs on current

members for the long-term future benefit of the collective. With their dues, current members underwrite the organization of future members. It was the dues of the United Mine Workers of America in West Virginia that Reichart discusses that paid for the organizers who tried to organize the miners in Wyoming that Smith describes. Why would West Virginia miners pay to organize miners in Wyoming?

Leaders recognize this dilemma in their discussions of the benefits and costs of what they call the “servicing model,” which concentrates on negotiating and policing contracts, versus the “organizing model,” which shifts resources from such services to organizing—a longer-term and more abstract goal (Durrenberger 2002). Ethnographic work suggests that while leaders are aware of these dilemmas and favor longer-term goals, members favor the servicing model (Durrenberger and Erem 1999a, 1999b, 2005).

Chicago union stewards’ knowledge of available actions and outcomes is determined by the day-to-day realities at their worksites, not by the programs of their unions. Members judge actions to be more or less reasonable insofar as they affect conditions at their workplaces. Thus they hold that such actions as registering people to vote or using union resources for political action are not as reasonable as resolving grievances (Durrenberger 2002), even though their unions are making more resources available for organizing and political action (Durrenberger and Erem 1999a, 1999b).

Anthropology and the Union Movement Today

Where is the union movement today, after more than a hundred years? In the summer of 2005 the venerable American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) split into the successor AFL-CIO and the Change to Win Federation. This ineffectiveness stems from the alliance of unions with capital that Samuel Gompers (1850–1924) and his successors in the labor movement developed. This alliance disguised and denied both the existence of classes and the necessity of class struggle and also curtailed traditions of direct action (Fletcher and Gapsin 2008). The Taft-Hartley amendments defined collective bargaining agreements as enforceable contracts between the unions and management. Unions became responsible for seeing that their members adhered to the contracts, especially not striking during the term of the contract. Corporate America had bought labor peace, and unions became bureaucracies for resolving grievances that arose between

workers and management. From the workers' point of view, unions were like insurance companies to protect them against arbitrary management actions (Durrenberger and Erem 2005).

These policies reoriented unions from constantly organizing workers to maintain strength in worksites and to develop a nationwide and worldwide workers' movement to negotiating and enforcing contracts and handling grievances. Unions became professionalized bureaucracies whose leaders were hard to distinguish from their counterparts in the corporate world—management bosses.

Another policy change undid even the pretense of the power of labor. Starting with Ronald Reagan's busting of the air traffic controllers' union in 1981, there has been an organized attack on unions in the United States. Having become as complacent as C. Wright Mills (1951) suggested they would, unions have failed to respond effectively to the assault, and corporate interests have organized even more virulent collective action for attacking unions (Brodtkin and Strathmann 2004). A multimillion-dollar industry of anti-union consulting has grown in the United States since the 1990s. John Logan (2002, 2006) has shown that two of every three organizing efforts will face the opposition of such firms, and unions have yet to develop a successful response beyond collusion with management in so-called top-down organizing.

Although unions can be vehicles for industrial democracy (Smith, Savage), the chapters in this book document failures of democracy (Durrenberger and Erem) as well as failures of unions (Smith, Richardson, Otañez, Zlolniski, Reichart). Some are co-opted by corrupt states (Zlolniski) or by corporate strategies (Otañez, Smith). In her chronicle of a successful union campaign, Smith-Nonini holds out hope to gain popular community support. That hope was blunted, however, by an e-mail message she sent on April 14, 2007, as we wrote these lines, carrying the news of the murder in Mexico of an organizer from the union with which she worked. But Savage's story of organizing a hospital shows the promise of grassroots organizing to build a community of interest and support among members.

As global warming becomes a daily topic of discussion, sustainability is present in college curricula, and American lives and treasures are squandered on an irrational war for oil in Iraq and a massive bailout of irresponsible and unregulated financiers, one need not accept adaptationist paradigms to understand some of Roy Rappaport's cautions about the relationships among truth, power, complexity, class, and sustainability. Rappaport (1979) argued

that adaptation depends on accurate information. Differentials in power amplify the human ability to lie that communication-based symbolization confers. Because adaptation relies on truth, power undermines it with its potential for actions based on untruth. As societies become more differentiated, the more powerful are able to elevate their goals above those of all others. Symbolization brings consciousness and makes it possible to value reason, which is often self-serving. Economics, Rappaport pointed out, defines rationality as competitive activities that pit people against each other and is, by necessity, antisocial. These rational acts are “the application of scarce means to differentially graded ends to maximize the position of the actor vis-à-vis others” (Rappaport 1979:236).

Dimitra Doukas (2003) has shown that economics as a discipline is an important component of the corporate-sponsored cultural revolution that has been under way in the United States since the late nineteenth century. As the economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1992) has pointed out, economics carries an aura of sanctity, as it justifies corporate rapacity as natural and inventible. Thus is the relationship between sanctity and authority inverted. Authority is not contingent on sanctity, but sanctity has become an instrument of authority in defending the position of the privileged class. In complex systems, because authority distorts information, it is maladaptive.

Rappaport observed that power threatens truth and thus the cybernetics of adaptation. He (1979:237) observed that the theology of Buber’s I-thou is not so much an ethical dictum as an ecological imperative. This puts democracy and its failures at the center of any meaningful research agenda for anthropology of complex societies.

Eric Wolf (1999, 2001) spent his life studying these questions and saw class and power as central to any understanding of culture. As Aram Yengoyan (2001:x) put it, “[C]ulture is fully embedded in power relations, nothing is neutral in modes of control, and, thus, social-structural relations are all marked by a differential defined by who controls what and who controls whom.”

As anthropologists have studied these processes in complex societies, they have observed class and power. Some have focused on unions to understand not only the prospects for but also the failures of collective action.

The logic of unions is collective even if the practice is not. Individual workers in complex orders have virtually no agency or power apart from what the process of selling their labor confers. For any individual, that is insignificant. But the more individuals act for their common interests, the

greater the power of the organization. Recognizing that power, corporations have successfully transformed law, practices (Smith), and appearances (Otañez) to counter it and manufactured the ideologies that justify, even sanctify their actions.

The anthropologists in this book have all seen these processes at work in industrial agriculture (Zlolski, Otañez, Smith-Nonini), manufacturing (Richardson), mining (Smith, Reichart), transportation (Durrenberger and Erem), and healthcare (Savage).

We are not writing a manual for labor unions. We would if we could, but no anthropologist who has observed the hardworking and highly intelligent staff of today's labor movement thinks he or she has much to say to them that they don't already know. Even if we did, they wouldn't have time to read it. If perchance they did read it, it would just make them angry because we would be stating what to them is obvious. There is the other kind of union leader, the one who acts like Rappaport's holder of power in complex systems, who obfuscates realities and inhibits the collective action of his or her own members at the expense of the entire movement. Like their virtuous counterparts, these leaders wouldn't have the time or the inclination to hear any sermons from the holier-than-them.

But we have no compunction about speaking to our fellow anthropologists to call their attention to the importance of class, context, policy, law, power, and culture in understanding complex societies and the unions that strive to find a place within them. When we turn to understanding the constrictions on agency and thought these structures impose on workers, we have to understand their unions as one other context of power. It may be in Rappaport's sense virtuous, but it need not be. It may be obfuscatory, but it need not be. It may be collaborative with corporations, but it need not be. Such possibilities define the contexts for our research and the questions we ask.

To quote Rappaport (1979:243) again, "[T]he generation of the lie is continuously challenged by the living—by prophets, mystics, youth, revolutionaries, and reformers—who, in their search for wholeness, restore holiness ever again to the breaking world by re-establishing the adaptive connection of the timeless sacred and the immediate numinous to the continuing here and now." This, too, is our task in our study of anthropology and of unions.

Individually focused union practices have not inculcated in members the view that their own collective action creates the power to stand against

the power of ownership and wealth. We will return to some of these questions in the Concluding Thoughts.

All but one of the chapters in this collection were originally presented as a session at the 2005 meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Lydia Savage's chapter was added later. The authors have since rewritten the chapters, and we have edited them for publication in this volume.

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