

FOR INGEMAR LINDBERG

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Rebuilding the unity of the “labour front”

The linkage between the current scientific and technological revolution (with particular regard to its information technology dimension) and the socio-economic strategies implemented by the dominant forces (and particularly the most powerful segment of the capital set up by the trans-national entities) have brought about far-reaching changes in the organisation of labour and the working world for that matter.

The so-called “fordist” organisation of production that marked a large part of the last century, which was based on the concentration of the big mechanised industries and access to markets seldom differentiated from mass consumption, had therefore specially structured the hierarchies of the working world (mass labour, supervisory staff and management) as well as the new social life in urban settings. This pattern of production had also created the conditions of procedures for collective negotiations (Unions – Employers) at the base of the Welfare State. The then dominant forms of organisation (socialist and communist parties and mass unions), like those concerning the organisation of struggles (strike actions and negotiations, demonstrations and elections) produced in this framework turned out to be efficient and therefore credible and legitimate.

In the developed capitalist centres, the functioning of all these mechanisms had guaranteed a high level of employment (the almost “full-time” employment and social security) and stable income distribution. The limitations of the system – ideologies and patriarchal or even male chauvinist practices, waste of natural resources and disregard for environment – were criticised by women’s movements and ecologists, who progressively raised popular awareness in this regard.

On the other hand, in the peripheries of the global system, this same model could at best be implemented only partially in the “modernised-industrialised” niches immersed in an ocean lightly and especially inadequately integrated into the national set. The political formulas for managing such “dualism” between the modern formal sector and the informal and peasant worlds generally implied an undemocratic “control” and prohibition of direct expression among the dominated classes. The success of the national populism, in which such management found expression, did stem from the overtures it offered through social mobility upstream and the expansion of the new middle classes. Today, this page of history is turned.

The rapid dismantling and latent restructuring of the organisation of the working world now dominate the scene. In the relatively privileged centres, this far-reaching change process is manifested in the recurrence of mass unemployment, job flexibility, casualisation of many employment opportunities, with the resultant resurgence of phenomena of “poverty” (that inspires a language implying a reversion to the 19th Century “charity”) and proliferation of all kinds of inequalities, which in turn have a bearing on the democratic traditions in crisis. But simultaneously, this process ushers in the reconstruction of new forms of labour organisation whose analysis in terms of “networks” constitutes the most obvious expression even if it is sometimes formulated in naïve terms out of inordinate “optimism”.

In the peripheries of the system the integration of peasant reserves in the sphere governed by the principles of neo-liberalism, stagnation or decline of the modernised niches or even their expansion into formats dictated by job flexibility – insecurity result in the gigantic growth of the “informal” system with its deplorable social repercussions (i.e. metropolises of slums...).

This “systemic crisis” calls into question the forms of organisation and struggles of the previous phase, which find expression in the crisis of parties (and of politics), union crisis, fuzziness and fragmentation of “movements”.

Par ailleurs la globalisation impose des réponses qui s'adressent à la fois aux travailleurs urbains des centres et des périphéries et aux masses paysannes de ces dernières. Faute de tenir compte de l'interdépendance des conditions qui régissent les uns et les autres, les réponses populaires mises en œuvre risquent d'être incohérentes et de ce fait peu efficaces.

The New Labour Question

The planet’s urban population now represents about half of humanity, at least three billion individuals, with peasants making up the other half.

In the contemporary stage of capitalist evolution, the dominant classes—formal owners of the principal means of production and senior managers associated with bringing them into play—represent only a very minor fraction of the global population even though the share they draw from their societies’ available income is significant. To this we add the middle classes in the old sense of the term—non-wage-earners, owners of small enterprises, and middle managers, who are not necessarily in decline. But the large mass of workers in the modern segments of production consists of wage-earners who now make up more than four-fifths of the urban population of the developed centers. This mass is divided into at least two categories, the border between which is both visible to the outside observer and truly lived in the consciousness of affected individuals. There are those who we can label stabilized popular classes in the sense that they are relatively secure in their employment, thanks among other things to professional qualifications which give them negotiating power with employers and, therefore, they are often organized, at least in some countries, into powerful unions. In all cases this mass carries a political weight that reinforces its negotiating capacity. Others make up the precarious popular classes that include workers weakened by their low capacity for negotiation (as a result of their low skill levels, their status as non-citizens, or their race or gender) as well as non-wage-earners (the formally unemployed and the poor with jobs in the informal sector). We can label this second category of the popular classes “precarious,” rather than “non-integrated” or “marginalized”, because these workers are perfectly integrated into the systemic logic that commands the accumulation of capital.

From the available information for developed countries and certain Southern countries (from which we extrapolate data) we obtain the relative proportions that each of the above-defined categories represent in the planet’s urban population. Although the centers account for only 18 percent of the planet’s population, since their population is 90 percent urban, they are home to a third of the world’s urban population.

Percentages of Total World Urban Population
(Percentages may not add up exactly due to rounding.)

	Centers	Peripheries	World
Wealthy and middle classes	11	13	25
Popular classes	24	54	75
Stabilized	(13)	(11)	(25)
Precarious	(9)	(43)	(50)
Total	33	67	100
Population concerned (millions)		(1,000)	(2,000) (3,000)

If, as a whole, the popular classes account for three-quarters of the world’s urban population, the subcategory of the precarious today represents 40 percent of the popular

classes in the centers and 80 percent in the peripheries, that is, two-thirds of the popular classes on a world scale. In other words, the precarious popular classes represent half (at least) of the world's urban population and far more than that in the peripheries.

A look at the composition of the urban popular classes a half century ago, following the Second World War, shows that the proportions that characterize the structure of the popular classes were very different from what they have become. At the time, the third world's share did not exceed half of the global urban population (then on the order of a billion individuals) versus two-thirds today. Megacities, like those that we know today in practically all countries of the South, did not yet exist. There were only a few large cities, notably in China, India, and Latin America. In the centers, the popular classes benefited, during the postwar period, from an exceptional situation based on the historic compromise imposed on capital by the working classes. This compromise permitted the stabilization of the majority of workers in forms of a work organization known as the Fordist factory system. In the peripheries, the proportion of the precarious—which was, as always, larger than in the centers—did not exceed half of the urban popular classes (versus more than 70 percent today). The other half still consisted, in part, of stabilized wage-earners in the forms of the new colonial economy and of the modernized society and, in part, in old forms of craft

The other side of the challenge: the new agrarian question

Modern capitalist agriculture—encompassing both rich, large-scale family farming and agribusiness corporations—is now engaged in a massive attack on third world peasant production. The green light for this was given by the World Trade Organization (WTO). There are many victims of this attack—mainly third world peasants, who still make up half of humankind.

Capitalist agriculture governed by the principle of return on capital, which is localized almost exclusively in North America, Europe, Australia, and in the Southern Cone of Latin America employs only a few tens of millions of farmers who are no longer peasants. Because of the degree of mechanization and the extensive size of the farms managed by one farmer, their productivity generally ranges between 2 and 4.5 million pounds (1 to 2 million kilograms) of cereals per farmer. In sharp contrast, three billion farmers are engaged in peasant farming. Their farms can be grouped into two distinct sectors, with greatly different scales of production, economic and social characteristics, and levels of efficiency. One sector, able to benefit from the green revolution, obtained fertilizers, pesticides, and improved seeds and has some degree of mechanization. The productivity of these peasants ranges between 20,000 and 110,000 pounds (10,000 and 50,000 kilograms) of cereals per year. However, the annual productivity of peasants excluded from new technologies is estimated to be around 2,000 pounds (1,000 kilograms) of cereals per farmer.

Indeed, what would happen if agriculture and food production were treated as any other form of production submitted to the rules of competition in an open and deregulated market, as decided in principle by WTO ? Would such principles foster the acceleration of production?

One can imagine that the food brought to market by today's three billion peasants, after they ensure their own subsistences, would instead be produced by twenty million new modern farmers. The conditions for the success of such an alternative would include the transfer of important pieces of good land to the new agriculturalists (and these lands would have to be taken out of the hands of present peasant societies), capital (to buy supplies and equipment), and access to the consumer markets. Such agriculturalists would indeed compete successfully with the billions of present peasants. But what would happen to those billions of people? Under the circumstances, agreeing to the general principle of competition for agricultural products and foodstuffs, as imposed by WTO, means accepting the elimination of billions of noncompetitive producers within the short historic time of a few decades. What will become of these billions of human beings, the majority of whom are already poor among the poor, who feed themselves with great difficulty. In fifty years' time, industrial development, even in

the fanciful hypothesis of a continued growth rate of 7 percent annually, could not absorb even one-third of this reserve.

The major argument presented to legitimate the WTO's competition doctrine is that such development did happen in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and the United States where it produced a modern, wealthy, urban-industrial and post-industrial society with modern agriculture able to feed the nation and even export food. Why should not this pattern be repeated in the contemporary third world countries? The argument fails to consider two major factors that make the reproduction of the pattern in third world countries almost impossible. The first is that the European model developed throughout a century and a half along with labor-intensive industrial technologies. Modern technologies use far less labor and the newcomers of the third world have to adopt them if their industrial exports are to be competitive in global markets. The second is that, during that long transition, Europe benefited from the massive migration of its surplus population to the Americas.

The contention that capitalism has indeed solved the agrarian question in its developed centers has always been accepted by large sections of the left, an example being Karl Kautsky's famous book, *The Agrarian Question*, written before the First World War. Soviet ideology inherited that view and on its basis undertook modernization through the Stalinist collectivization, with poor results. What was always overlooked was that capitalism, while it solved the question in its centers, did it through generating a gigantic agrarian question in the peripheries, which it can only solve through the genocide of half of humankind. Within the Marxist tradition only Maoism understood the magnitude of the challenge. Therefore, those who accused Maoism of a "peasant deviation" show by this very criticism that they lack the analytical capacity to understand imperialist capitalism, which they reduce to an abstract discourse on capitalism in general.

Can we imagine other alternatives and have them widely debated? Ones in which peasant agriculture would be maintained throughout the visible future of the twenty-first century, but, which simultaneously engage in a process of continuous technological and social progress? In this way, changes could happen at a rate that would allow a progressive transfer of the peasants into non-rural and non-agricultural employment.

Global pauperisation and the disempowerment of the labouring classes

The main social transformation that characterizes our time can be summarized in a single statistic: the proportion of the precarious popular classes rose from less than one-quarter to more than one-half of the global urban population, and this phenomenon of pauperization has reappeared on a significant scale in the developed centers themselves. This destabilized urban population has increased in a half-century from less than a quarter of a billion to more than a billion-and-a-half individuals, registering a growth rate which surpasses those that characterize economic expansion, population growth, or the process of urbanization itself.

Modern pauperization is a phenomenon inseparable from polarization at a world scale—an inherent product of the expansion of real-existing capitalism, which for this reason we must call imperialist by nature. Pauperization in the urban popular classes is closely linked to the developments which victimize third world peasant societies. The submission of these societies to the demands of capitalist market expansion supports new forms of social polarization which exclude a growing proportion of farmers from access to use of the land. These peasants who have been impoverished or become landless feed—even more than population growth—the migration to the shantytowns. Yet all these phenomena are destined to get worse as long as liberal dogmas are not challenged, and no corrective policy within this liberal framework can check their spread.

Pauperization calls into question both economic theory and the strategies of social struggles.

Conventional vulgar economic theory avoids the real questions that the expansion of capitalism poses. This is because it substitutes for an analysis of really-existing capitalism a theory of an imaginary capitalism, conceived as a simple and continuous extension of exchange relations (the market), whereas the system functions and reproduces itself on the basis of capitalist production and exchange relations (not simple market relations). This substitution is easily coupled with the a priori notion, which neither history nor rational argument confirm, that the market is self-regulating and produces a social optimum. Poverty can then only be explained by causes decreed to be outside of economic logic, such as population growth or policy errors. Its relation to the actual logic of capitalist accumulation is emptied of theoretical reflection. Yet this veritable liberal virus, which pollutes contemporary social thought and annihilates the capacity to understand the world, let alone transform it, has deeply penetrated the various lefts constituted since the Second World War. The movements currently engaged in social struggles for “another world” and an alternative globalization will only be able to produce significant social advances if they get rid of this virus in order to construct an authentic theoretical debate. As long as they have not gotten rid of this virus, social movements, even the best intentioned, will remain locked in the shackles of conventional thought and therefore prisoners of ineffective corrective propositions—those which are fed by the rhetoric concerning poverty reduction.

The analysis sketched above should contribute to opening this debate. This is because it reestablishes the pertinence of the link between capital accumulation on the one hand and the phenomenon of social pauperization on the other. One hundred and fifty years ago, Marx initiated an analysis of the mechanisms behind this link, which has hardly been pursued since then—and scarcely at all on a global scale.

The response: unity of labour, peasants-workers alliances, internationalism

La réponse au défi implique certainement une réflexion sur les politiques alternatives positives que les mouvements populaires pourraient formuler comme objectifs de leurs luttes. Mais le succès de ces réponses dépendra moins de la qualité intrinsèque des propositions que de leur mise en œuvre effective à travers les luttes, seules capables d'inverser les rapports de force sociaux en faveur des classes populaires.

Le défi présente de multiples aspects complémentaires les uns des autres. Il interpelle les syndicats et les autres organisations populaires auxquels incombe la responsabilité principale dans la reconstruction du front uni rassemblant les travailleurs “stabilisés” et ceux qui ne le sont pas (chômeurs, précaires, informels) dans les zones urbaines des centres et des périphéries. Il interpelle les mouvements paysans et les organisations sociales et politiques des sociétés des périphéries confrontés à la lourde responsabilité de mettre en œuvre non seulement des politiques de développement paysannes, mais encore de concevoir des politiques nationales macro qui rendent les revendications des travailleurs urbains cohérentes avec les exigences du monde rural. Il interpelle toutes les forces politiques soucieuses de répondre aux stratégies globalisées du capital par la reconstitution d'un internationalisme des peuples.

Ce livre analyse le “défi urbain” à partir de 17 études de cas et de situations diverses concernant les centres et les périphéries du système. Il amorce des réponses aux questions suivantes:

- (i) How the challenge of the “new labour question” should be formulated in the specific concrete conditions of the country studied.
- (ii) How the involved segments of the popular classes are responding to these challenges: through passive adjustment or through struggles? Do these struggles obey to

some strategic vision ? Or are simply day to day responses ? What are the lessons from the experiences of organised trade unionism ? What are the reasons for their eventual weakening in the present conjuncture : lack of democracy, pressure on the labour market from the growing mass of unemployed, other reasons? Are there some experiences of struggles of the informal workers ? What are the lessons which can be drawn from these experiences ?

(iii) What more effective alternative strategy could be suggested ?

Le complément à ces études, concernant l'autre volet du défi (les luttes paysannes), constitue l'objet d'un autre programme du Forum mondial des alternatives. Ce programme pose quelques questions et avance quelques propositions concernant les objectifs des luttes et les politiques alternatives de développement des sociétés paysannes.

Such a strategic set of targets involves complex policy mixes at national, regional, and global levels. At the national levels it implies macro policies protecting peasant food production from the unequal competition of modernized agriculturalists—local and international agribusiness. This should help guaranteeing acceptable internal food prices—disconnected from international market prices, which, additionally are biased by the agricultural subsidies of the wealthy North. Such policy targets also question the patterns of industrial and urban development, which should be based less on export-oriented priorities (e.g., keeping wages low which implies low prices for food) and more attentive to a socially-balanced expansion of the internal market. Simultaneously, this involves an overall pattern of policies to ensure national food security—an indispensable condition for a country to be an active member of the global community, enjoying the indispensable margin of autonomy and negotiating capacity. At regional and global levels it implies international agreements and policies that move away from the doctrinaire liberal principles ruling the WTO—replacing them with imaginative and specific solutions for different areas, taking into consideration the specific issues and concrete historical and social conditions.