

A summary of ‘*Putting Labor on the Global Justice Agenda*’
Based on my lecture 19 – 20 November 2009

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1.

In surveying the domain of the admirable research and scientific communication efforts, and reflecting upon the worldwide ‘global ethics’ movement from the last two decades of the 20th century up till now, it seems to me that labor and work conditions issues were and are somewhat underrated. It is beyond doubt that human rights are crucial to what one scholar recently has called “the work of global justice” (Fuyuki Kurasawa).

Conferences such as this one are taken on with two approaches mainly. The first: an inventory of questions and issues cc. labor and employment, exploitation, work conditions, gender, trafficking, and bondage systems, all of them in relationship with economic globalization and the institutionalization of ‘global governance’. The second: the search for a reasonable, realistic, general theory of decent work and fair trade, in relationship with the UN Millennium Development Goals and the related UN Development Programs, with the UN Global Compact. In fact, it was the UN Global Compact, announced by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan — remarkably enough— in an address to the *World Economic Forum*, January 1999, which led to the international efforts to encourage capitalist economic players (corporations, business sectors, industries, etc.) to commit themselves to normative principles such as: sustainability, social responsibility, respect for human rights in work and employment situations, environmental awareness, and anti-corruption. Concerning labor four principles are mentioned (the principles 3, 4, 5, and 6):

1. Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining
2. The elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labor
3. The effective abolition of child labor
4. The elimination of discrimination in employment and occupation

Right from the start it was acknowledged that these principles couldn’t have any regulatory force. They were meant to be advice giving and consultative, lacking a legal framework to support the enforced application of them.

Nevertheless, in affirming these principles it was recognized that world capitalism, going through its new globalization processes, was marked by the old problems of the relationships between labor power and capital. I shall come back to this semantic formula later on in my lecture, as I will insist upon a more radical outlook on the social power relationships worldwide, which lie at the bottom of what I consider to be a typical moralistic move in the globalization narratives.

In advising the elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labor, one was affirming the existence of forms of forced and compulsory labor worldwide. In recommending the effective abolition —and mark the epitheton: effective— of child labor, the Global Compact designers had confirmed the continuing existence of child labor in different regions of the capitalist world-system. In counseling the freedom of association and the effective recognition —again the same adjective has been taken up— of the right to collective bargaining, the writers of the Global Compact admitted both the partial non existence of a bargaining system, and the current dispensing with existent bargaining systems.

Could it more clearly be stated? Something endemically is going wrong in the capitalist world system, now that it entered a new period of globalization. May not the question be raised whether a global ethical research can leave it with justice discourses based on the defense of human rights? Though unmistakably theoretical efforts in terms of Global Resources Dividend (GRD; Thomas Pogge e.a.), Global Distributive Justice (Pogge & Fofolesdal, Beitz), Tobin Tax, Fair

Trade for all (Stiglitz), Citizenship, and the like, have great value for us, yet it might be doubted whether they are conclusive for a critical and constructive view on the normative approach of a fair world order. Indirectly, the designers of the Global Compact admitted that this would not be sufficient. “If another world is possible” (cf. Joseph Stiglitz in 2006), it will neither be reached by theoretical reflection on global distributive justice, nor by armchair proposals coming from academics and international organization officials considering the subjects of corporate social responsibility and Global Compact. Again, though I am supportive with the moral sense underneath these endeavors, it seems to me that the most important issue is left out of the picture: labor exploitation under the conditions of recent globalization processes in world capitalism. I agree with Jeroen Beirnaert, when yesterday he said that it is not labor migration that is the problem, but the exploitation of workers. I would like to borrow his prescription whilst reformulating it. It is not the respect for human rights and the defense of citizenship that is the main issue, but it is the duty to ban —by all legal means— degrading labor exploitation mechanisms, set in motion by globalization processes. Poverty is the consequence of these degrading labor exploitation mechanisms. To eradicate poverty means to deal with them, or stated otherwise: to eradicate the one-sidedness in the social power relationships of labor and capital, what led to the almost exclusively defensive semantics of rights and fairness. I come up to this point in the second part of my brief lecture.

2.

Earlier this month the North-South Movement Belgium —11.11.11— started an action program ‘Work in Dignity’. The organizers didn’t use the ‘fairness’ concept. They preferred to speak in terms of dignity instead. This is an interesting semantic shift.

As you will recall, yesterday we heard different speakers, among whom Christien van den Anker and Steve French, requesting concept change. As a matter of fact, concept change in global justice discourse is part of methodological and epistemological changes. The same shift in approaching justice issues related to labor exploitation is brought forward by the substitution of duties for rights. Businesses have duties, and decent work expectations shouldn’t be formulated in terms of rights of the workers only, but instead in terms of the duties of corporations, of big business, of multinationals, and of governments acting on behalf of big business. Undoubtedly to make these duties compulsory will be a matter of political and social power relationships. But by stating them unequivocally and straightforwardly, will help to bring forward coordinated social action: on a national, transnational, and local scale.

Defending dignity before fairness, and duties before rights, might prompt a big change in action and policy of trade unions and local community organizations. The rights and fairness discourses have a too pronounced ‘defensive’ meaning, so it seems to me. It is begging for little pieces of bread, whereas people should petition for their full part of growth and development.

The dignity and duties centered discourses will lead to more ‘offensive’ (or assaulting) meaning, which on its turn will lead to divergent action research perspectives. On this subject, I easily join Christien’s claim for a big change in both content and method in global ethics, though I would like to go even further than she already asked us to do.

Let it be understood that I am not suggesting that a semantic of human rights is worthless. But I assert that the almost exclusive emphasis on rights instead of duties —and hereby is meant: duties of corporation and policy actors— is obstructive for the restatement of the global ethics agenda, in which global justice issues are simply a part.

When the writers of the ‘Work in Dignity’ program of the North-South movement stand up for decency, they grasped the significance of a conceptual change. Collective bargaining, social dialogue, recognition of the self-organization of the workers, recognition of the democratic representation in trade unions and local community action groups, social protection in cases of illness, unemployment: they are the duties to be fulfilled by what we rightly can call the buyers of labor power, in what might be considered as the worldwide labor power market. Corporations

and the political institutions, which are more or less acting on behalf of big business, have the duty—we must urge officials to agree about—to stop the ‘race to the bottom’. The ‘race to the bottom’ of which we know that it has blocked the way to the effective execution and accomplishment of a ill conceived program of the Millennium Development Goals.

Global Justice, if this means anything comprehensible, obvious and appealing, should be linked with an ‘offensive’—assailing—labor agenda. The ‘wealth of nations’ unquestionably is meaningless without the wealth of labor. The set of 8 aims to eradicate poverty is from this point of view a big lie. I know that I am not exaggerating, for the UN itself took another direction in 2005, after seeing that the Millennium Development Goals couldn’t be fulfilled. Officials at that time recognized the importance of labor issues for the goals.

3.

Only briefly I would like to get on another subject matter that has already been discussed yesterday, and which seems tremendously central for a redirection of global ethics and global justice talk: the world’s failure to get rid once and for all of forced labor, bondage, and informal work processes. Here is my question: can world capitalism do without these primary—and primitive—forms of capital accumulation (to state it in concepts too easily forgotten)? My answer is: no. All along the history of world capitalism, forms of improper profit realization have reappeared. The fight against them is an endless one. It will go on as long as world capitalism is alive. This is not pessimistic point of view. On the contrary, it is meant to be realistic, and I put it at the heart of my thinking ethics globally: “The things respected are relative and contradictory, but the fact of respecting is not...”

Listen for example to what good Vladimer Papava, a Senior Fellow of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in T’bilisi (Georgia), has to say on the question of transitional economy in a post-state-communist country (I quote):

The corruption is a secondary phenomenon, because there are economic preconditions causing it. Unless the achievement of macroeconomic stability and the formation of the institutions appropriate to a market economy reach their logical ending, both of them may become the cause of corruption in the post-Communist transformation of the economy. In order to restrict corruption and establish the institution of private property, it is necessary to legalize the existing results of primary accumulation of capital, which will let it “act” in the public interest. Such an approach does not exclude the punishment of all the lawbreakers according to the law. (end quote)

Ah, history repeats itself. Regulating (and legitimating) primitive (or primary) mechanisms of profit making!

For the idea of the ever-ongoing processes of primitive (or primary) accumulation of capital—what refers to rude profit realization and improper reproduction of capital—I rely on the insights of Ernest Mandel. Following his view—explained in *Der Spätkapitalismus*, one of his major contributions to Marxist political economy—primitive accumulation is part of the ‘uneven and combined development’ of world capitalism. Even in the core of the capitalist system, phenomena of improper profit making are all the time reappearing, whereas they play their terrific role in the so-called developing countries. By such mechanisms of capital reproduction and the phenomena linked with it—bribery, corruption, unashamed privatization, land confiscation, robbery of local agricultural means and areas, and last but not least: forced labor, bondage, child labor, women exploitation (both in domestic work and sex work)—by such mechanisms, I said, the proper profit realization can continue without being put in danger. The idea is that the proper profit realization in world capitalism cannot go on by its own, being short of the assistance—so to speak—of the improper one.

Yesterday, more or less, the same idea has been put forward, each time when speakers obliged us to admit that free labor goes hand in hand with forced labor, not only there, but also here, in our own western countries. It is an illusion to think that we, in the rich West, have set ourselves free

from what quite wrongly is considered as a transitory phase of so called ‘primitive’ profit realization. I leave it to people such as Papava to dream the dreams they have set up for themselves. It is but mere ideology. Ideology is a lie.

As Mandel learned me to see —and David Harvey took up the idea quite recently—: the forcible —violent, aggressive— expansion of capitalist profit making, is going on all the time, going hand in hand with the free and seemingly legitimated profit making. Primitive accumulation is a process, which happens all the time. It is here with us. It is Dracula, accompanying the naïve vampire killer who exultantly rides the coach from the woodland to London town. It is Mephistopheles, monitoring poor Faust.

Who says forcible expansion of capitalist markets, says: forced labor, slavery, bondage, debt bondage, child labor, migratory labor, etc.

4.

To end my short intervention in this conference, again thanking you all for your valuable contributions, I would like to refer to a distrustful testimony.

Somewhere in the mid 19th century a man wrote that labor power is a commodity, which is the very expression —so to speak— of the worker’s own life. A life activity sold to anyone who can and will come up with the money for it. Someone who will use in the way he or she likes. For the worker, it is said, this life activity is but a means of securing his own existence. What he brings forth —a service or a product— is for him not the aim of the activity. The aim is securing his life. After he has done so, time and again, the worker goes free.

This is what makes the difference between the worker as an owner of labor power, and the slave who belongs to the person who makes use of the slave’s labor power. The 19th century author develops this idea as follows (I quote):

The worker leaves the capitalist to whom he has sold himself —understood as: his life activity— as often as he chooses, and the capitalist discharges him as often as he sees fit, as soon as he no longer gets any use...

But the worker, whose only source of income is the sale of his labor power, cannot leave the whole class of buyers,..., unless he gives up his own existence. He does not belong to this or that buyer, but belongs to a group, a class. (end quote)

Such is the relationship between wage labor and capital. This relationship, from a general point of view, is a socially embedded power relationship. In particular situations and contexts of power distribution, the relationship varies over time and place. Depending on supply and demand, the price of the labor power will vary. Within the limits of the fluctuations, the price of labor power will be determined by the cost of producing the labor power. And what is the cost of producing it, other than the cost required for the maintenance of the worker as a worker, including the cost for his training and instruction as a laborer.

Our author, remarkably, adds something dreadfully clear, I quote:

... the shorter the time required for training up to a particular sort of work, the smaller is the cost of production of the worker, the lower is the price of his labor power, his wages. In those branches of economic activity and business in which hardly any period of apprenticeship is necessary and the mere bodily existence of the worker is sufficient, the cost of his production is limited almost exclusively to what is necessary for keeping him in working condition,... the necessary means of subsistence. (end quote)

This is true each time the conditions determining the relationship between wage labor and capital is so that there is plethora of labor power. Whenever scarcity of labor power or when the power relationship between wage labor and capital is at the advantage of the bargaining position of labor power, capital can benefit in seeking new reservoirs of labor power.

And here again, the author, amazingly, comes up with a lucid observation (I quote):

The minimum price for labor power —the minimum wage— ... does not hold good for the single individual, but only for the species. Individual workers, indeed, millions of

workers, do not receive enough to be able to exist and to propagate themselves; but the prices for the labor power of the whole working class adjust themselves, ... , to this minimum.

In fact, this is what is meant by the expression: power relationships between wage labor and capital.

The author, Karl Marx —as you correctly guessed— has given this sharp analysis of the dominant socio-economic power relationship of our times early in his 1847 lectures for the *Association des ouvriers allemands de Bruxelles*, afterwards brought out as articles in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (dated 1848). His close collaborator and friend, Friedrich Engels, published the collected articles in a booklet, *Lohnarbeit und Kapital*, and he translated the text in English.

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¹ Research and education domain: Ethics, Value Inquiry, Social Philosophy, Global Ethics, History of Moral Philosophy