

Global Political Activism

Chapter 19 is a highly original and compelling discussion of global political activism. It is conceptually well informed and empirically rich. Its analysis of the 'Arab spring' is both original and timely. It is very conscious that the transnational is not a geographical given but is, rather, socially constructed. It avoids the Western ethnocentrism that marks much of this field. It is, finally, nicely open-ended, asking questions of itself and never preaches to the reader. In that context I will make a couple of comments in areas where I see an additional angle as it were:

1. The term 'global civil society' is deployed by the authors in a quite prominent position and is used to situate the role of the international NGOs in particular. The authors are clearly aware of the critique of this concept from what we might call a critical subaltern perspective (see Munck 2007) yet they work within the dominant Western liberal conception of it as a 'good thing'. They do wonder about where to situate uncivil organisation such as the Mafia within this cosy world given that it qualifies according to most definitions. I got into trouble at a major international conference on global civil society when I suggested that Al Qaeda was as much part of this domain as Amnesty International was if we went by the definitions being deployed. We can also consider the critique in countries such as South Africa and Brazil of the international NGOs regarded practically as agents of imperialism. As we can see, then, there is much more conceptual and political clarification needed here.
2. In their 'pause to reflect' box on page 345 the authors ask whether we have been writing off the labour movement prematurely in our concern with the 'new' social movements. Today, after twenty-five years or so of what we have called globalization, we can (re)consider whether trade unions and the labor movement are as obsolete as some believe. For one, the number of workers has increased exponentially in this dynamic phase of capitalist growth from around 1.8 billion in 1980 to an estimated 3.6 billion in 2020 (ILO: LABORSTA). While national trade unions have declined in membership in most countries, international trade unionism is

more united politically than at any time since its origins. My own analysis (see [Munck 2010](#).) points me in the same direction as Peter Evans who has recently argued that we are seeing “an ascendant arc of transnational mobilization rather than the sort of precipitous decline predicted in the nemesis thesis” ([Evans 2010](#), 367). That there has been a time lag of 25 years between the capitalist offensive and labor's recomposition is not surprising and it fits the pattern of nineteenth- and twentieth-century waves of labor recomposition. We now see clear movements toward trade union revitalization more or less across the world. There is a clear understanding that globalization and its impacts are the key issue for trade unions everywhere. New linkages across national frontiers are proliferating both at global and regional (e.g., North American Free Trade Agreement, European Union, *Mercado Común del Sur*, or MERCOSUR, and so on) levels. Much greater interaction with the social movements and also the nongovernmental organizations—for example around labor rights—is now evident. The growing academic literature on trade union revitalization has found advances in the strategic areas of organizing new sectors, greater political actions, reform of trade union structures, coalition building, and, last but not least, international solidarity ([Frege and Kelly 2004](#)). Much as the New Unionism of the late nineteenth century, which reached out to unskilled and semiskilled workers rather than the skilled elite, women workers and not just men, today's new unionism is reconstructing itself to save itself from obsolescence.

3. Finally, what do we mean by global sociology and the lingering categories of North and South that the authors still deploy, seemingly because we are keen to stress global power and poverty differentials. We have now moved beyond a conception of North and South as though they were separate universes with forms of capitalist development that were fundamentally different or subject to different laws of motion (see [Munck 2011](#)). The last 25 year's growth spurt of global capitalism has, for good or for ill, produced a clearly unified system albeit one subject to uneven development. This fact is corroborated by the global recession of 2008–2009 where there was literally no place to hide for capital or workers alike. What we see today is

a pattern beyond the formal/informal- or North/South-divide with a continuum reaching deep into the increasingly casualized workforce of the global South and the recession-ridden Northern economies. In terms of developing a labour movement perspective in relation to this new global informal working class, we need to move beyond even lingering North Atlanticist notions that this is purely a phenomenon of the South. In 2004, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) carried out a global study of economic security and found that three-quarters of the world's population lived in circumstances of economic insecurity ([ILO 2004](#)). The term “precariat” – an amalgam of the classic notion of proletariat with the adjective of precarization, which is creating a more precarious life – is essentially designed to capture the growing norm of insecure work. There is little security in terms of job tenure, working conditions, labour rights, and, indeed, for life itself for increasing numbers of the world's workers. Today, as the impact of the 2008–2009 Great Recession and the “shakeout” it is leading to becomes clearer, we can expect the precariat and labor insecurity to grow in ways which might make obsolete the old North/South divide.

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