

Workers of the World

Studies in Global Social History

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Workers of the World

Essays toward a Global Labor History

By

Marcel van der Linden



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Amsterdam/Vienna, March 2008

Chapter One

Introduction

Thinking is not building cathedrals or composing symphonies. If the symphony exists, it is the reader who must create it in his own ears.

Cornelius Castoriadis

At the beginning of the 21st century, historical research about the toil, troubles and achievements of workers and labor movements is undergoing an exciting transition to a truly *Global* Labor History. To understand what is changing, one only needs to compare the recent perspectives with traditional ones.

Previously, historians of the working classes pre-occupied themselves almost exclusively with the developed capitalist countries and Eastern Europe/Russia. They interpreted the object of their study in a very narrow – ultimately Eurocentric – way. A one-sided paradigm therefore predominated in the great stream of publications appearing since the discipline's pioneering days in the 1840s. The typical worker studied by the traditional labor historian was a "doubly free" individual (in the Marxian sense of "free" to choose one's employer, and "freed" from the ownership of capital). This worker was usually male, and employed in the transport sector (docks or railways), mines, industry or large-scale agriculture. In the background, his (or sometimes her) family

seemed to have mainly a consumptive or reproductive function: wages were spent on it, and children were raised by it. Labor protests were taken seriously, and analyzed, mainly if they took the form of strikes, trade union activity or party-political action by left-wing movements.

From the 1950s onwards, many more contributions were made to the labor history of colonies or former colonies. But initially they fell victim to the same Eurocentric biases.¹ They too concentrated on mineworkers, dockers, plantation workers etc., neglecting families and household labor. Their main focus was also on strikes, trade unions and political parties, although the authors were inspired by many different political perspectives. For example, J. Norman Parmer's thorough *Colonial Labor Policy and Administration* (1960) on the Malaysian rubber plantation industry (through several decades preceding the Second World War) looked at workers through the eyes of entrepreneurs and state authorities. Jean Chesneaux's classic *Le mouvement ouvrier en Chine de 1919 à 1927* (1962) was written from an official Communist position. Guillermo Lora's *Historia del movimiento obrero boliviana* (1967–1970) was a Trotskyist work.

Later studies often tried to develop a less Eurocentric approach. Pathbreaking works in this regard include Charles van Onselen's *Chibaro* (1976) on mine labor in Southern Rhodesia and Ranajit Das Gupta's *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India* (1994) on plantation workers, miners and textile workers in Assam, Bengal and elsewhere.² In the last twenty years or so, labor history enjoys growing interest in parts of the Global South. In Latin America and the Caribbean, John French concluded a few years ago, "the field first gained visibility in the early to mid-1980s and has now won recognition as an estab-

¹ Already prior to the Second World War, a few important contributions to labor history in de Global South were published. See for example Das, *Factory Labor in India*; idem, *Factory Legislation in India*; idem, *Labor Movement in India*; Clark, *Organized Labor in Mexico*.

² These new developments have been covered over the years by a series of collections of essays. Sandbrook and Cohen, *Development of an African Working Class*; Gutkind, Cohen, and Copans, *African Labor History*; Cohen, Gutkind, and Brazier, *Peasants and Proletarians*; Munslow and Finch, *Proletarianisation in the Third World*; Agier, Copans, and Morice, *Classes ouvrières d'Afrique noire*; Amin and van der Linden, "Peripheral" Labour?.

lished specialization among scholars of many disciplines.”³ In South Asia and Southern Africa similar trends are visible.⁴

Nowadays the field of labor history is developing into a truly *global* project, as shown by the number of professional conferences, associations, etc. organized internationally. After a pioneering South African initiative in 1978 – the History Workshop on “Labour, Townships, and Protest” of that year⁵ –, the real “take-off” occurred in 1996 with the founding of the Association of Indian Labour Historians, a dynamic organization staging a series of important conferences along with many other scholarly activities. Soon afterwards “Mundos do Trabalho” was established – a network of labor historians within the Brazilian Historical association ANPUH (Associação Nacional de História). Founding conferences were also held in Pakistan (Karachi, 1999), South Korea (Seoul, 2001), Indonesia (Jogjakarta, 2005); a second South African conference was staged in Johannesburg in 2006. The vast geographic expansion of the discipline – and the substantial new reflections it stimulates – has prompted a re-evaluation of the older labor history everywhere.

When it emerged in the 19th century in Europe and North America, labor history combined “methodological nationalism” with “Eurocentrism”. That approach has become controversial in recent years. *Methodological nationalism* conflates society and the state, and in effect treats different nation states as ‘Leibnizean Monads’ for historical research. *Eurocentrism* can be thought of as the mental ordering of the world from the standpoint of the North-Atlantic region – the “modern” period is perceived to begin in Europe and North-America, extending step by step to the rest of the world; the temporality of the “core region” determines the periodization of developments in the rest of the world. So historians reconstructed the history of the working classes and workers’ movements in France, Britain, the United States, etc. as *separate* developments, and if they paid attention to social classes and movements in Latin America, Africa or Asia, these were interpreted according to ‘North-Atlantic’ schemas.

³ French, “Latin American and International Working Class History,” p. 137; see also French, “Latin American Labor Studies Boom.”

⁴ See for example Freund, “Labor and Labor History in Africa,” and Behal and van der Linden, *India’s Labouring Poor*.

⁵ Bonner, “New Nation, New History,” pp. 978–9.

Does this mean that labor historians never looked beyond national borders? Of course they did, and already early on too. The point however is that their approach remained “monadologic” nevertheless. The “civilized” European world was treated as if it consisted of peoples all developing in more or less the same direction, according to the same principles, be it in a different tempo. One nation was regarded as ‘more advanced’ than another, so that the more “backward” nations could see their future reflected in the leading nations. At first this thought was simplistically interpreted. Labor movements in other countries were studied, for example, to discover new policy ideas for everyday politics in one’s own country. Such an approach is evident in the writings of a German pioneer of cross-border labor movement history, Lorenz Stein. In his 1842 study of socialist and communist currents in the French proletariat, he assumed from the outset that history develops via separate nations. In this way, he placed himself firmly on the terrain of monadologic thinking. But he thought that every “profound movement” in one nation would sooner or later repeat itself in another nation. For this reason, a study of developments in France seemed an urgent task – he felt the radical movement appearing there would soon beset Germany, and so he queried rhetorically: “Can we passively stand by and watch, how [the movement] grows among us, and remains rudderless, because it is not understood?”⁶

This kind of motivation created strong interest in apparently “highly developed” peoples who “showed the way of the future”. Soon, however, it became apparent just how difficult it actually was to derive useful political recipes from elsewhere. When Werner Sombart reconstructed the history of the Italian proletariat, half a century after Stein, he concluded that such comparative studies provided hardly any useful policy advice for everyday politics at home. Sombart did believe that nations can learn from each other, but he argued for a more fundamental approach that would focus purely on important theoretical questions (“from where?,” “to where?”). This new methodology straightaway expanded the terrain for research, because it meant that studying more advanced countries would no longer suffice. One also had to immerse oneself in less developed countries, “insofar as they belong to the same cultural areas [*Kulturkreise*].” After all: “If regularities in social development can be identified at all, these must recur in the late starters; it is there that

⁶ Stein, *Socialismus und Communismus*, pp. iv, ix.

the correctness of the hypotheses, formulated on the basis of earlier experiences in other countries, must be confirmed.”⁷

In this way, Sombart raised “monadologic” labor history to scientific status. But gradually the monads gained windows. Sombart himself acknowledged “the influence of the example of the advanced countries on the lands that follow them.”⁸ In the course of the twentieth century, attention for reciprocal influences between separate peoples increased, even if those separate peoples still remained the fundamental units of analysis. From James Guillaume to Julius Braunthal, international organizations of the labor movement were, for example, interpreted as collaborative ties between workers who represented different countries, “ties among patriots with different fatherlands” – a perception which, of course, also lived in the movement itself. And in studies of international labor migration, the migrants were seen as people who either preserved the culture of their country of origin, or else assimilated in the culture of the country to which they emigrated.

Only in the last decades has the “Eurocentric monadology” been questioned *as a whole*. On the one hand, Sombart’s idea that only peoples belonging to the same “cultural area” can be meaningfully compared has come under fire. On the other hand, the nation-state is increasingly historicized, and thereby relativized. These two “subversive” tendencies should be clearly distinguished, but they run more or less parallel to each other. Their emergence is linked to important intellectual transformations occurring particularly since the Second World War, but sometimes even earlier, namely:

- Decolonization led to many new independent countries, especially in Africa and Asia, whose citizens began to investigate their own social histories. In this way, labor history acquired not only an increasingly important “peripheral” component (the number of “monads” expanded), but it also quickly became clear that the peripheral history obviously could not be written without constantly referring to the metropolitan history.⁹
- Transcontinental “imagined communities” developed, such as Pan-Africanism.

⁷ Sombart, “Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte,” p. 178.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See for example Walter Rodney’s *History of the Upper Guinea Coast* and *History of the Guyanese Working People*.

- In historical migration research, the insight dawned that the perspective of “nation-to-ethnic-enclave” misinterpreted the reality of migrant life, because migrants often live transculturally.
- Border cultures were “discovered” which did not fit in the monadologic schema.
- The same applied to transnational cycles of workers’ protests and strikes.

All these new developments (plus much greater contact between the historians of different countries and continents) create a situation in which the pitfalls of Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism in traditional labor history are now clearly visible, and therefore become a topic of controversy.

To what, then, should the term “Global Labor History” properly refer? Everyone is entitled to their own concept, but I mean the following. As regards *methodology*, an “area of concern” is involved, rather than a well-defined theoretical paradigm to which everyone must closely adhere. Our conceptions of research and interpretative frameworks can and will differ. Intellectual pluralism is not just an inevitable reality; it is also stimulating and fruitful for research – provided we are prepared to enter into a serious discussion of our disparate views. Notwithstanding different approaches, we should strive to collaborate productively in the same subject areas. Indeed, the more we share a professional literature which has in reality become an international resource, the more this collaboration also becomes a necessity.

As regards *themes*, Global Labor History focuses on the transnational – and indeed the transcontinental – study of labor relations and workers’ social movements in the broadest sense of the word. By “continent” I mean placing all historical processes in a larger context, no matter how geographically “small” those processes are – by means of comparison with processes elsewhere, the study of international interactions, or a combination of the two. The study of labor relations encompasses *both* free labor and unfree labor, both paid *and* unpaid. Workers’ social movements involve *both* formal organizations *and* informal activities. The study of both labor relations and social movements further requires that equally serious attention is devoted to “the other side” (employers, public authorities). Labor relations involve not only the *individual* worker, but also his or her *family* where applicable. Gender relations play an important part *both* within the family, *and* in labor relations involving individual family members.

As regards the *historical period* studied, Global Labor History places no limits on temporal perspective, although in practice the emphasis is usually on the study of the labor relations and workers' social movements that emerged with the expansion of the world market from the fourteenth century. Studies of earlier epochs should by no means be excluded, for instance for comparative purposes.

Global Labor History is an extremely ambitious new venture. Many of its research objectives remain controversial, or need further clarification. Its further development will need to overcome many obstacles in order to flourish. Technical problems will need to be solved.¹⁰ But the greatest obstacle, I believe, remains our own mentality, burdened as it is by traditional theories and interpretations. I mentioned the two most important pitfalls already: methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism.

Methodological nationalists, I argue, are the victims of two important intellectual errors. Firstly, they "naturalize" the nation state. By this I mean that they consider the nation state as the basic, self-evident analytical unit for historical research. Even if they recognize that nation states only flourished in the 19th and 20th century, they still interpret older history as the *prehistory* of the later nation-state. Cross-border or border-subverting processes are perceived as distractions from the "pure" model. We are dealing here with a false teleology which ought to be abandoned radically. In a global perspective, the existence of nation-states obviously remains an essential aspect of the world system. But it is an aspect which needs to be thoroughly historicized and relativized vis-a-vis sub-national, supra-national and trans-national aspects.

Secondly, methodological nationalists conflate *society* with *the state* and a *national territory*. That is to say: they assume that 'societies' (social formations) are geographically identical with nation states. The United States have their own society, Mexico has its own society, China has its own society, and so on. Here, too, a totally new approach is called for. Perhaps we should think more profoundly about Michael Mann's assertion that societies are "multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of [ideological, economic, military and political] power." By implication, "Societies are not unitary. They

¹⁰ Such as the fact that in many countries of the Global South well-climatized, actively collecting archival institutions are absent. It is possible to build a well-functioning archive with modest financial means, as proved by the example of the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute in Noida, India.

are not social systems (closed or open); they are not totalities. We can never find a single bounded society in geographical or social space."¹¹

Three variants of *Eurocentrism* should be mentioned specifically here. The first variant consists simply of *neglect*: there is only attention for part of the world; the author assumes that the history of "his piece of the world" can be portrayed without giving any attention to the rest. This attitude is well expressed by the distinction commonly made between "the West and the Rest."

The second variant is explicit *prejudice*: the authors do consider global connections, but nevertheless believe Greater Europe (including in this North America and Australasia) "shows the way." This kind of Eurocentrism is especially evident among modernization theorists. Robert Nisbet characterized this development theory as follows: "Mankind is likened to a vast procession, with all, or at least a very large number of peoples made into the members of the procession. [...] Naturally, Western Europe and its specific, historically acquired pattern of economic, political, moral, and religious values was regarded as being at the head, in the vanguard, of the procession. All other peoples, however rich in their own civilization, such as China and India, were regarded as, so to speak, 'steps' in a procession that would some day bring them too into the fulfillment of development that was the sacred West."¹²

The third variant consists of *implicit assumptions* orienting research. This variant is the most difficult one to recognize and combat. We are dealing here

¹¹ Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, I, pp. 1–2.

¹² Nisbet, "Ethnocentrism," p. 101. Nisbet notes that Eurocentrism (at that time still called Ethnocentrism) is symbolized according to a biological metaphor of growth and development: societies are a bit like plants, emerging from seed and then developing into mature organisms. This growth metaphor is based on at least five additional assumptions: "This meant, in the first place, that change is normally *continuous*. That is, each identifiable condition of a thing, be it a tree, a man, or a culture, is to be understood as having grown out of a preceding condition of that same thing. Second, large changes are to be understood as the *cumulative*, as well as incremental consequence of a host of small changes. Third, social change is characterized by *differentiation*. Precisely as the seed or fertilized germ cell is marked by differentiation and variegation of function and form in its history, so is the human culture or institution similarly marked by this kind of manifestation over time. Fourth, change of a developmental sort is regarded as caused for the most part by some persisting, *uniform* property or set of properties. From the doctrine of uniformity came the belief that social conflict, cooperation, geographic location, race, or any of the other alleged causes so richly strewn across the pages of social history, is the prime and continuing cause of all development. Fifth, it is clear that in all of these theories of social development a kind of *teleology* is present. Always there is some 'end' in view." The "end" is conceived "in purely Western terms." Nisbet, "Ethnocentrism," p. 100.

with general beliefs about historical experience which, allegedly, have been confirmed time and again by previous scientific research, and therefore can be taken for granted. So “Empirical Eurocentrists” make assertions as if they are based on self-evident *facts*. They simply assume, for example, that trade unions are always most effective if they concentrate on some or other form of collective bargaining. This, they think, has been definitely proved by historical experience. They will often deny emphatically that a *Eurocentric* view of the evidence is involved in defending such an interpretation, and few of them are consciously aware that a regional prejudice is involved here. As the late Jim Blaut observed: “Eurocentrism, [...] is a very complex thing. We can banish all the value meanings of the word, all the prejudices, and we still have Eurocentrism as a set of empirical beliefs.”¹³

Countering the first two variants (neglect and prejudice) is relatively straightforward, but the third variant presents a much bigger obstacle. Lucien Febvre already formulated the problem half a century ago: “Any intellectual category we may forge in the workshops of the mind is able to impose itself with the same force and the same tyranny – and holds even more stubbornly to its existence than the machines made in our factories.”¹⁴

With the studies offered in this volume, I want to contribute to a Global Labor History freed from Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism. Using literature from diverse regions, epochs and disciplines, I provide arguments and conceptual tools for a different interpretation of history – a labor history which integrates the history of slavery and indentured labor, and which pays serious attention to diverging yet interconnected developments in different parts of the world. Three questions are central to my inquiry:

- What is the nature of the world working class, on which Global Labor History focuses? How can we define and demarcate that class, and which factors determine its composition?
- Which forms of collective action did this working class develop in the course of time, and what is the logic in that development?

¹³ Blaut, *Colonizer's Model*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Febvre, “How Jules Michelet Invented the Renaissance,” p. 258.

- What can we learn from adjacent disciplines? Which insights from anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists are useful in the development of Global Labor History?

In pursuing these questions, my essays do not pretend to provide complete and final answers. I aim rather to show what is at issue for labor historians, and to mark out a direction that could usefully orient future research. All the chapters can be read separately from each other, but they form one connected whole which I think is consistent.

The book's shape resembles a classic hourglass. It begins with a broad perspective. Then, the focus narrows. Finally, the viewpoint widens again. The essays in the first part discuss the concept of the "working class", so central in all labor history. It looks like the notion was invented in the nineteenth century to identify a group of so-called "respectable" workers in contrast to slaves and other unfree laborers, the self-employed (part of the "petty bourgeoisie") and poor outcasts (the "lumpen-proletariat"). Here I show that, for many reasons, such a classification simply *does not apply* in the Global South. The social groups which in the eyes of the older labor history are quantitatively not significant – exceptions which prove the rule – *are* the rule in large parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. We therefore need a new conceptualization less oriented to the *exclusion* than to the *inclusion* of various dependent or marginalized groups of workers. We have to recognize, that the "real" wage-workers with whom Karl Marx was centrally concerned, i.e. workers who as free individuals can dispose of their own labor-power as their own commodity, and have no other commodity for sale, represent *only one way among others* in which capitalism transforms labor power into a commodity. There are many other forms which demand equal attention, such as chattel slaves, indentured laborers, share-croppers, etc. Chapter 2 elaborates this thesis empirically and theoretically, while chapters 3 and 4 probe more deeply the historical logic of the two extremes along the spectrum of labor relations, namely so-called "free" wage labor and chattel slavery.¹⁵

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek rightly pointed out, that the concept of the "working class," however defined, denotes "a group that is in itself", "a group within the social edifice, a nongroup, in other words, one whose position is in itself contradictory; they are a productive force. Society (and those in power) needs them in order to reproduce themselves and their rule, but nonetheless, they cannot find a proper place for them."

The essays in the second and third parts are the “narrow” middle piece. Drawing on historical and contemporary case studies, they seek to unravel the historical logic in working-class collective action. I am very aware there is nothing really new about that kind of inquiry. Others before me have made similar efforts, the best known of which is probably Selig Perlman’s *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928), a somewhat dated work nowadays, but one which contains insights that remain of interest. However, my approach differs from previous contributions in important respects. I interpret the concept of a “worker” more broadly than was customary in the past; I do not restrict myself to trade unions; and I try to include experiences from all continents.

Workers’ collective action can be defined as *more or less coordinated action by a group of workers (and, perhaps, allies) to attain a specified objective, which they would be unable to achieve individually within the same time frame with the means available to them.* This description is obviously very general, because it covers both *organizations* (e.g. the establishment of a funeral fund) and *group activities* (e.g. protest marches). Organizations are therefore a form of collective action by their very nature.¹⁶ In addition, the definition covers not just conflicts of interest or policy, but also different kinds of collective activities (e.g. social events).

The field of research which this interpretation opens up is unmanageably large for one author. I therefore focus primarily on *somewhat formal* types of workers’ collective action about *economic* matters.¹⁷ This restriction means that especially the activities of those workers who have significant *autonomy* (as defined in chapter 2) are discussed. Obviously, the amount of personal

Žižek, “Against the Populist Temptation,” p. 565. The “working class” in that sense does not designate a subjective position. For debate on this interpretation, see Laclau, “Why Constructing a People is the Main Task,” p. 660, and Žižek, “Schlagend, aber nicht treffend!,” p. 188.

¹⁶ This idea is elaborated in: Friedberg, “Les quatre dimensions de l’action organisée.”

¹⁷ The distinction between formal and informal organizations is not always entirely clear. Some scholars think that an organization needs written rules to be “formal”, but this would imply illiterates cannot constitute a formal organization. We might say that an organization becomes more formal, when it defines more specifically who is a member, and who is not; which *activities* are appropriate (useful and legitimate), and which are not; which *resources* are appropriate (useful and legitimate), and which are not; which *motives and purposes* are appropriate for actors to have, and which are not; which *outcomes* are appropriate, and which are not; in which specific *contexts* (when, where) the organizations’ activities are or are not to take place. I have derived these six domains from Burns and Flam, *Shaping of Social Organization*, p. 107.

freedom which subaltern workers happen to have strongly influences their ability to build elaborate, durable organizational structures of their own, such as producer and consumer cooperatives, or trade unions.¹⁸ That is why plantation slaves and other groups of very unfree workers are not discussed much in these chapters, and why my focus is more on wage earners, indentured laborers en self-employed workers.

Collective action need not involve or presume protest at all, and in several important areas they are not regarded as protests by the workers involved, the employers and state authorities.¹⁹ Such *non-confrontational* activities are analyzed in chapters 5–8. Chapters 9–12 by contrast focus on *confrontational* activities in which workers fight out a dispute with employers or state authorities. Chapters 5, 6, 8 and 10 discuss mainly relatively *small-scale* forms of collective action in which the participants have great influence on day-to-day affairs. In some parts of the world, small-scale organizations belong largely to a bygone era (for example in the North Atlantic region), while in other parts they are still found in large numbers. Chapters 7, 11 and 12 by contrast also give attention to the *transition* from small-scale to large-scale forms of collective action.

In the last part of this book, a broad palette of questions passes the review. Because Global Labor History is driven beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries by redefining core concepts, much can and should be learnt from adjacent disciplines. That is true both theoretically and conceptually (I discuss the “world systems approach” and the “Bielefeld School”), as well as

¹⁸ The dividing line is of course not absolute. Some of the collective activities analyzed, such as rotating labor and rotating credit, also occur sometimes among chattel slaves. Peter Kolchin rightly points out that chattel slaves in the Caribbean (in contrast to the American South) were not infrequently “economically self-supporting”: “they raise their own food on plots of land allotted to them for the purpose and sometimes engaged in substantial commercial activity by selling their agricultural surplus as well as their various handicraft products.” Kolchin, “Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community,” pp. 588–9. That autonomy made simple forms of mutualism possible.

¹⁹ Some historians label all forms of workers’ collective action as acts of protest, even when the workers involved do not intend them as such. I regard this practice as “one of the subtler forms of condescension in historical writing” that John Stevenson has described. See his *Popular Disturbances in England*, p. 4. Whether an action is a violation of existing legal and extra-legal rules depends entirely on the specific historical context. Due partly to the pressure of collective action, state authorities keep redefining the rules; as a consequence, actions that may be serious violations at one moment may at another time be entirely legal. History abounds with cases of such shifts from a more repressive to a less repressive stance, or vice versa.

empirically. Thus, for example, the boundary between the historiographies of slavery and wage labor will necessarily become vaguer in the future. But we can also find inspiration elsewhere. The fourth part of the book aims to demonstrate that much can be learnt from the social sciences, even when they are not explicitly concerned with labor issues. Because of the exploratory nature of the studies bundled in this volume, the final chapter does not pretend to draw any general conclusions, but instead specifies the tasks of Global Labor History more closely in the light of what has been said.

The Austrian polymath Otto Neurath once wrote that scholars are like sailors, “who, traversing the high seas, want to change the shape of the frame and hull of their unwieldy ships. As well as using timber from the old construction, they pick up driftwood with which to transform the ship’s structure. But they are unable to put their ship in the dock so that they can begin at the beginning. They have to stay on board while they are at work, defying heavy storms and thundering waves. In rebuilding their ship, they take care to ensure that no dangerous leaks appear. A new ship thus emerges out of the old, step by step.”²⁰

Global Labor Historians face the same predicament; we cannot build our new ship without the old one, and somehow we have to transform the old one into the new. For that reason, the essays I present here are still “trapped” in the legacy of the old labor history to a great extent. In addition, whereas I do go beyond traditional conceptual and territorial boundaries, I am limited by my own knowledge and the material available at present – the latter which is exceptionally unevenly developed, both regionally, temporally and thematically. The reality is that we simply know much more about “free” wage earners in Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th century, than about unfree laborers in China or South Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This book therefore admittedly contains an unwanted but inevitable *bias*, especially in chapters 6–9, where the emphasis is disproportionately on the North Atlantic region and on “free” wage earners, indentured laborers and self-employed workers. I can only hope that by explicitly acknowledging this limitation I will, in the not too distant future, stimulate more attention by researchers for the less-studied worlds of subaltern workers.

²⁰ Neurath, “Grundlagen der Sozialwissenschaften,” p. 918.

I furthermore hope that my ideas will challenge other scholars not only to critique, but especially to researching the new terrain much more themselves. The newly emerging Global Labor History is – even just because of the many languages which researchers have to know, the vast size of the existing literature, and the many conceptual “translation” problems – a field in which collaboration between scholars from different cultures and regions is of vital importance. In doing so, we can – as I will demonstrate in this book – also profit from the work of earlier labor historians. Although the significance of their studies is reframed in a new perspective, they remain a valuable source of insights and data.

Conceptualizations



Chapter Two

Who are the workers?

The “working class” concept, originating in 19th-century Europe, has been questioned more and more in recent decades. Historians and sociologists point out that the borderline between “free” wage-labor, self-employment and unfree labor is in reality not clear-cut, and that the differences between urban and rural labor should not be made absolute.¹ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, for example, reveal how a multiform proletariat of “hewers of wood and drawers of water” developed in the early-modern North Atlantic region, with various sites of struggle: “the commons, the plantation, the ship, and the factory.” They make a plausible case for the view that slaves and maroons from Africa, indentured laborers from Europe, native Americans, and “free” wage earners and artisans together constituted a complex, but also socially and culturally interconnected, amorphous “multitude,” which was also perceived as “one great mass” (a “many-headed Hydra”) by those in power. Linebaugh and Rediker refer to the 1791 rebellion of Haitian slaves as “the first successful workers’ revolt in modern history.” They suggest that this revolution contributed to the segmentation

¹ V.L. Allen was one of the first to initiate this discussion in “Meaning of the Working Class in Africa.” See also Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, especially chapters 1 and 6; Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation; Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers; Beyond Patronage and Exploitation; Footloose Labour*; Gooptu, *Politics of the Urban Poor*.

of that rebellious “multitude” afterwards: “What was left behind was national and partial: the *English* working class, the *black* Haitian, the *Irish* diaspora.”² The narrow nineteenth-century concept of the proletariat we find in Marx and others was, they suggest, a result of this segmentation.

What might a more realistic, broadened concept of the working class look like? To find an answer to this question, I will start off with a constructive critique of Marx’ definition of the working class. I use Marx as a starting point for two reasons: he is still an important source of inspiration for scholars around the world, and, in spite of several weaknesses, his analysis is still the best we have.

The complexity of labor power commodification

The opening lines of Marx’ *Capital* are famous: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity.”³ Marx regarded the capitalist mode of production as the consequence of the *commodification* of (i) labor power, (ii) means of production and raw materials, and (iii) labor products. The first element is crucial for my argument. Marx assumed that labor power can become a commodity, an object of trade, in only *one* way that is “truly” capitalist, namely through *free wage labor*, in which the worker “as a free individual can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity” and “has no other commodity for sale.”⁴ He

² Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, pp. 286, 319, 327.

³ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 125. These opening lines were almost the same as in Marx’s previous work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political economy* (1859), which Marx himself deliberately acknowledges in a footnote. This earlier work, which first sketched out the circuits of commodity trade and capital accumulation in the distinctive Marxian way, was largely ignored by his intended audience and failed to sell well upon publication. Only the preface, in which Marx briefly indicated his interpretation of human history, was later widely cited.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 272. Admittedly Marx does explicitly recognize in *Capital* that “Wages themselves again take many forms” which he intended to analyze in a “special study of wage-labour” (*ibid.*, p. 683). But he never did so; a theoretical analysis of the institutions of labor markets is conspicuous for its absence in his writings. He also emphasizes in a supplementary text his view that “Above all, [capital] overturns all the legal or traditional barriers that would prevent it from buying this or that kind of labour-power as it sees fit, or from appropriating this or that kind of labour” (*ibid.*,

emphasized that “labour-power can appear on the market as a commodity only if, and so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale or sells it as a commodity.”⁵

The narrow concept of the working class is based on this idea. If only the labor power of *free* wage laborers is commodified, it implies the “real” working class in capitalism can only consist of such workers. But Marx’ hypothesis has, as far as I know, never been supported by proper reasoning or hard facts. For a long while, it probably seemed self-evident; it seemed to correspond to the process by which a proletariat was formed in the North Atlantic region. Yet Marx’ hypothesis in truth presumes two highly questionable ideas, namely that labor power should be offered for sale by the worker who is the *carrier* and *possessor* of this labor power, and that the worker who sells his or her own labor power *sells nothing else*.⁶ But why should that be so? Why can’t labor power be sold by someone *other* than the carrier? Why can the person who offers (his or her own, or someone else’s) labor power for sale not sell it conditionally, together with means of production? And why can a slave not

p. 1013). Nevertheless he assumes throughout that capitalism has the tendency to universalize free wage labor involving the kind of labor relationship just described, i.e. that *this* form of commodification is *the essential, fundamental one* characteristic of the capitalist mode of production as it develops, grows and displaces other ways of producing. Even if one interprets Marx’s study as one of capitalism only in its “pure form” or in its “ideal average”, minus its variations and gradations, his idea is clearly that through historical developments the “pure form” will be approximated more and more closely, precisely by clearing away all obstacles in its path. This implies that all other kinds of labor relations would tend to disappear, because they are ultimately all dysfunctional to capital accumulation and market expansion. If in fact those labor relations persisted, the question is why. The most obvious answer is that they are, commercially or in historical reality, at least quite compatible with capitalist markets, mesh with them, or even *are necessary* for their further development.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

⁶ Several authors have argued that the term “selling” is not really appropriate in the case of wage labor, because it always involves only a *temporary* sale of labor (the “use” of labor power), and usually we would not call such a transaction “selling,” but “hiring out” (or “leasing”). This may seem a futile or trivial point of linguistic nuance – once labor effort has been made, we can never turn the clock back so that the appropriated labor effort is itself returned to the wage laborer (the legal owner of labor power) who hired or leased it out, in contrast to other kinds of hired, rented or leased “economic goods” which can be so returned – but the theoretical and practical implications can be great. See for example Oppenheimer, *soziale Frage und der Sozialismus*, pp. 119–22; Eldred and Hanlon, “Reconstructing Value-Form Analysis,” p. 44; Lundkvist, “Kritik af Marx’ lønteori,” pp. 16–18; Burkhardt, “Kritik der Marxschen Mehrwerttheorie,” pp. 125–7; Ruben, “Ist die Arbeitskraft eine Ware?”; and Kuczynski, “Was wird auf dem Arbeitsmarkt verkauft?.”

perform hired labor for a third party for the benefit of his owner? Just taking the distinction between a “carrier” and an “possessor” of labor power as such, we can already distinguish four different types of possible labor commodification, namely *autonomous* commodification, in which the carrier of labor power is also its possessor, and *heteronomous* commodification, in which the carrier of labor power is not its possessor; in both cases, the carrier’s labor power can be offered by the carrier him- or herself or by another person (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1
Some forms of labor commodification

	Autonomous (the carrier is the possessor)	Heteronomous (the carrier is not the possessor)
The carrier sells his or her own labor power	Free wage labor (Marx) Share-cropping Labor by self-employed artisans	Wage labor by slaves
The carrier does not sell his or her own labor power	Subcontracted wage labor	Labor by chattel slaves Wage labor by children

It seems more reasonable to admit that *in reality* labor commodification takes *many different forms*, of which the free wage-earner only selling his or her own labor power is only *one* example.⁷ I explore these multiple forms below, both by pointing at the transitional forms between Marx’ subaltern classes, and also by uncovering some implicit false assumptions. I hope this “deconstruction” will prepare the ground for a conceptualization which corresponds much better to the historical facts.

Gradual transitions

In addition to capitalists and landlords, Marxian orthodoxy distinguished five main subaltern classes or semi-classes in capitalism: the *free wage laborers*, who only own their own labor power and sell this; the *petty bourgeoisie*,

⁷ John Hicks already reaches the conclusion that there are several forms of labor power commodification: “Either the labourer may be sold outright, which is slavery; or his services only may be hired, which is wage-payment.” Hicks, *Theory of Economic History*, p. 123. A first elaboration of this view can be found in Rohwer, “Kapitalismus und ‘freie Lohnarbeit’.” See also Banaji, “Fictions of Free Labour”; Bhandari, “Slavery and Wage Labor in History.”

consisting of small-scale commodity producers and distributors employing a small number of workers; the *self-employed*, who own their labor power and means of production and sell their own labor products or services (the “self-employing labourer is his own wage labourer, his own means of production appear to him as capital. As his own capitalist, he employs himself as his own wage labourer”);⁸ the *slaves*, who neither own their labor power nor their tools and *are* sold (in slavery “the worker is nothing but a living labour-machine, which therefore has a value for others, or rather is a value”);⁹ and the *lumpenproletarians*, who fall outside the legalized labor market altogether. The last group usually remains outside the analysis, and is mainly used as a “residual” category. The class struggle is seen to be waged mainly between capitalists, landowners and wage earners. The other, intermediate classes are historically less important and play no independent political role; they “decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry.”¹⁰ In this interpretation,

- Slavery is “an anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself,” which is “possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production,” but “only because it does not exist at other points.”¹¹
- Self-employed workers represent “embryonic forms” of capitalist wage-labor.¹²
- The petty bourgeoisie, “the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and *rentiers*, the handicraftsmen and peasants “all these sink gradually into the proletariat.”¹³
- The lumpenproletariat is the “‘dangerous class’, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society,”¹⁴ which includes “vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes.”¹⁵

⁸ Marx, “Ökonomische Manuskripte 1863–1867,” p. 111.

⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 465.

¹⁰ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” p. 77.

¹¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 464.

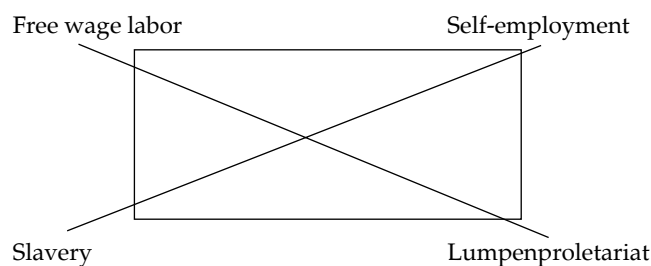
¹² Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, III, pp. 422–3.

¹³ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” p. 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77. On Marx’ conceptualization of small commodity producers see also the appendix in Jaeger, *Artisanat et capitalisme*, pp. 297–314, and Leppert-Fögen, *Die deklassierte Klasse*, passim.

¹⁵ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 797. Compare “Class Struggles in France,” p. 62: “a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite

This Marxian scheme postulates a social distance between the free wage laborers and the other subaltern groups. But does this scheme at all match historical reality? Do Marx' "free wage laborers" in fact exist? In reality, there is an almost endless variety of producers in capitalism, and the intermediate forms between the different categories are fluid rather than sharply defined.



For that reason, we ought to examine some of these intermediate forms more closely – between wage labor and slavery; between wage labor and self-employment; between slavery and self-employment; and between wage labor, slavery and self-employment on the one hand, and the lumpenproletariat on the other.

Intermediate forms between wage labor and slavery

There are various labor relations in which the wage earner is physically forced to do his or her work, whereas the wages are paid, or have to be handed over, to a third person. Child labor, in which case the parents or guardians of the

trade, vagabonds, *gens sans feu et sans aveu*." See also Draper, "Concept of the 'Lumpenproletariat'"; Bovenkerk, "Rehabilitation of the Rabble"; Hayes, "Utopia and the Lumpenproletariat."

Different views on the position of prostitutes in the class system can be found in Marx' writings. When he discusses the relative surplus population in *Capital*, he regards prostitutes as an important part of the "actual lumpenproletariat" (*Capital*, I, p. 797) Elsewhere, especially in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, I, pp. 166 and 186, Marx says that prostitutes, if they work for a brothel keeper, perform (unproductive) wage labor, like actors or musicians, and thus are, by implication, part of the proletariat in the narrow sense of the word. This shows once again how the ways in which social class is defined can be full of false considerations, which often remain implicit, precisely because they are moralistic, and characteristic of their time. This is probably what Resnick and Wolff refer to as the "discursive device" inspired by "an urgent polemical intent." Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge and Class*, pp. 161–2.

child receive the wages, is a good example. Young Japanese girls hired out as *geishas* in exchange for a sum of money were an example of this.¹⁶

Many instances are known of slaves who performed wage labor for their masters. In Buenos Aires at the end of the eighteenth century, for example, this phenomenon was so common, that many slave owners were completely dependent on the wages of their slaves. The notary's accounts of that time suggest that "in long labor contracts, wages, minus estimated living expenses, were commonly paid directly to slave owners by employers of hired slave labor."¹⁷ Three main varieties can be distinguished:

- The slave owner compels the slave to perform wage labor for another employer, and collects all or part of the wages. Often, "the slave-owners and slave employers arranged the rate of hire over the slave's head," but "the situation of a slave actively seeking and negotiating his or her own hire" occurred as well.¹⁸
- The slave owner pays his or her slaves in cash for an extra effort, either by means of "bonuses, either as gifts or as incentives," or as a "payment made for extra work in task systems or for working overtime."¹⁹
- The slave works voluntarily for his wages, either for an employer or for a fellow slave. The Blue Mountain estate in Jamaica in the late eighteenth century is an example of the latter case: "The slaves paid each other wages. Sunday work on the provision grounds, for example, could earn 1s.8d per day plus breakfast."²⁰

Conversely, wage laborers are often less "free" than the classical view suggests. Employers have often restricted their employees' freedom to leave in situations of labor scarcity. An employee can be tied to an employer in many ways:

¹⁶ Ramseyer, "Indentured Prostitution in Imperial Japan," p. 101.

¹⁷ Johnson, "Competition of Slave and Free Labor," p. 273.

¹⁸ Bolland, "Proto-Proletarians?," p. 128.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 127.

²⁰ Turner, "Chattel Slaves into Wage Slaves," p. 39.

- *Debt bondage* is a method that occurred on all continents, from the Scottish coal mines in the eighteenth century to contemporary agriculture in Latin America and South Asia.²¹
- *Indentured labor* is of course closely related to debt bondage. The Indian, Indonesian, and Chinese coolies who were employed in South Africa, Latin America or other parts of Asia are a well-known example of this.²²
- The mobility of workers could also be limited by *certificates of leave*. Without these means of identification, workers could not be hired by any employer. It was a characteristic feature of this practice that the employer took possession of the certificate at the start of the employment and gave it back to the worker only when he or she had, in the employer's view, satisfied all his or her obligations.²³
- *Physical compulsion* was another option for employers. Sometimes employers went as far as physically locking up their wage-earning employees, to prevent them from being "tempted" by their business rivals. In the Japanese textile industry of the 1920s, female workers were locked up in dormitories for that reason. Sometimes, they were not permitted to leave the premises at all for more than four months at a time.²⁴
- *Social security provisions and other special benefits* offered a less aggressive way of binding employees. Around 1900, Argentinean companies, for example, created mutual aid and friendly societies administered by the company, and designed to make the workers dependent on the firm.²⁵ Garden plots provided by the company could have the same effect, because they made

²¹ Ashton, "Coal-Miners of the Eighteenth Century," p. 308; Breman, *Labour Bondage in West India*.

²² See the surveys in Tinker, *New System of Slavery*; Potts, *World Labour Market*; Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact*, pp. 366–404.

²³ See the example of Cuban cigar makers in the 1850s in Casanovas, *Bread, or Bullets!*, p. 60, or the cases of plantation workers in Harries, "Plantations, Passes and Proletarians," pp. 389–90, and Peebles, *Plantation Tamils*, p. 60.

²⁴ Orchard, *Japan's Economic Position*, p. 343. A somewhat different variant existed in the pre-revolutionary French glass industry, where glassmakers sometimes "were forbidden to wander more than a league's distance from the factory without written permission from their employers, and under no circumstances could they resign from their position without having first demanded *two years in advance* a written discharge!" – Scoville, "Labor and Labor Conditions," p. 290.

²⁵ Thompson, "Trade Union Organisation," p. 161.

a supplement to the wages possible, either because the home-made vegetables, poultry, etc. reduced the living expenses, or because this garden produce was bought up by the employer.²⁶

- Finally, the *social or economic connections* between an employer and an employee outside the immediate employment relationship could have a binding effect. (I expand on this below.)

Intermediate forms between wage labor and self-employment

In the classical view, the worker only disposes of his (or her) own labor power, and not of any other means of production. But in reality there were many exceptions to this rule. One example is that of the worker who takes his or her own tools to the workshop, as was – and still is – customary in many places. Already in the 1880s, the German economist August Sartorius von Waltershausen observed in the United States that “[u]nlike their European counterparts, American factory workers commonly own their own tools. [...] Tools often constitute a sizable proportion of a worker’s wealth.”²⁷

A second possibility is that workers *borrow* their means of production from the employer. In that case, they pay a deposit, and are formally independent. The rickshaw pullers in Changsha, Hunan Province, China, around 1918 are an example of this practice. Their rickshaws were the property of “garages” (*che-zhan*), and had to be hired every day. The garage owner paid the rickshaw tax, and the puller had to make a deposit of ten Mexican (silver) dollars. “Each cart had a number and was assigned to a certain puller who was always responsible for it. If the rickshaw was broken and laid up for repairs, the daily rent still had to be paid.”²⁸ The puller’s income consisted of the difference between his earnings and his payments to the garage owner.

²⁶ The buying up of produce by the employer occurred according to Parpart, *Labor and Capital on the African Copperbelt*, p. 42, in the copper mines of Northern Rhodesia in the 1930s.

²⁷ Sartorius von Waltershausen, *Workers’ Movement in the United States*, p. 216.

²⁸ McDonald, *Urban Origins of Rural Revolution*, p. 147. Nowadays, a very similar arrangement still exists in the case of *jeepney* drivers and taxi drivers in Manila. See Pinches, ““All that we have is our muscle and sweat’,” p. 118.

It also happened that an employee was allowed to keep part of his labor product (output), and sell it independently. Silver miners in Pachuca (Mexico) in the mid-eighteenth century received a sum of money (wages) for a specified basic amount of silver ore, and everything they produced in excess of that amount was divided in two parts: “from his half, the pickman gave a certain proportion to the porters, timber-men and to the other mine workers who had helped him.”²⁹ Similar arrangements existed in farming, in Java as well as in many other places.³⁰

Intermediate forms between slavery and self-employment

The story of Simon Gray is of interest here, because it illustrates just how complicated capitalist reality can be. Gray was a slave from the south of the United States, who served as the chief boatman of the Natchez lumber company from 1845 until 1862. His crews usually numbered between ten and twenty men, and included both African-American slaves and white rivermen. “Some of the slaves were the property of the company, while others, like Gray himself, were hired from their owners by the firm. The white crewmen, on the other hand, were employed by the Negro, who kept their records, paid their expenses, lent them money, and sometimes paid their wages. Consequently, they looked upon Gray as their employer.” Gray and his men were often away from home for two to three weeks. During these trips, Gray performed a great many managerial tasks. “In addition to making deliveries he also solicited orders for the mill, quoted prices, extended credit to customers, and collected money owed to the lumber company.”³¹ So here we have a *slave* who functioned as a *manager*, *free wage laborers* who were employed *by a slave*, and *other slaves* who had to obey an employer who was himself a slave! Not all of the slaves were owned by the Natchez Co., but some, including Gray, were hired from other slave owners. This situation is, no doubt, unusual in labor history, but it alerts us to the variety of possible permutations in labor relations. Slaves have also been known to work as share-croppers. Indeed, in late eighteenth-century Jamaica, the situation sometimes occurred “that the

²⁹ Velasco Avila, “Labour Relations in Mining,” p. 57.

³⁰ See for instance Hart, *Power, Labor, and Livelihood*, pp. 180–2; Hüsken, “Landlords, Sharecroppers and Agricultural Labourers.”

³¹ Moore, “Simon Gray, Riverman,” pp. 158–9.

'better sort' of slaves had established grounds and were using the 'poorer sort' to work them in return for the share of the produce."³²

Intermediate forms between wage labor/slavery/self-employment and lumpenproletariat

The transition from wage labor, slavery and self-employment to the "non-class" of the lumpenproletariat also shows many gradations. V.L. Allen claims that "[in] societies in which bare subsistence is the norm for a high proportion of all the working class, and where men, women, and children are compelled to seek alternative means of subsistence, as distinct from their traditional ones, the *lumpenproletariat* is barely distinguishable from much of the rest of the working class."³³

- When driven to destitution, "respectable" workers also felt compelled to steal. Organized looting of food by workers was "a nation-wide phenomenon" in the United States by 1932.³⁴ Such looting reappeared in Italy in the early 1970s.³⁵
- Scavenging occurred frequently in hard times, and could even become an accepted custom. Louis Adamic noted in 1935 that "[e]ver since anyone in the Pennsylvania anthracite field can remember, it has been customary for miners and their families to go with sacks or pails to the culm dumps surrounding their bleak towns and pick coal from among the rock and slate thrown out in the breaking and cleaning processes at the big collieries. The pickers usually were the poorer families."³⁶
- Theft, embezzlement and pilfering have traditionally been "normal" activities for some groups of workers. It is common among dockers in many countries to steal part of a shipment, but in factories and offices, such thefts by lower employees also occur frequently.³⁷

³² Turner, "Chattel Slaves into Wage Slaves," p. 34.

³³ Allen, "Meaning of the Working Class in Africa," p. 188.

³⁴ Bernstein, *Lean Years*, p. 422.

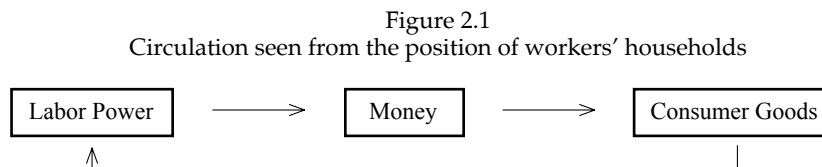
³⁵ Collonges and Randal, *autoréductions*, Chapter 4.

³⁶ Adamic, "Great 'Bootleg' Coal Industry." A description of concurrent developments in Upper Silesia appears in: Machtan, "Elendsschächte' in Oberschlesien."

³⁷ "Embezzlement, it must be stressed, was nearly universal aboard ship." Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p. 129. See also Ditton, "Perks, Pilferage, and the Fiddle." Case studies include: Mars, "Dock Pilferage"; Nair, *Miners and Millhands*,

Implicit assumptions

The dominant view of the identity of social classes doesn't just make sharp distinctions between phenomena which are in reality not separate entities. The distinctions *themselves* rest on important assumptions which ought to be critically scrutinized. A number of these assumptions arise from the idea that workers exchange their labor power with an employer for money, and then buy life's necessities with that money. When they consume them, they reproduce their labor power, which they can then sell again to the employer. Thus, at the level of circulation, a cyclical process occurs, as shown in the following diagram:



This circulation schema is an abstraction, suggesting a self-evident, distinct process. But appearances are deceptive. Firstly, it is assumed that the consumption of the items purchased with the employee's wage *does not involve labor*. The purchase of consumer items, and the effort to make them suitable for consumption (for instance buying and preparing food, or hiring and cleaning a living space) are ignored. Feminists however have pointed out for decades that wage labor could not even exist without a large amount of (often unpaid or voluntary) subsistence labor and cooperation. Sporadically, there are employees who reproduce their labor power without performing subsistence labor themselves, but these are typically people with a high income.³⁸ In most cases, subsistence labor is done by one or more women in the household, the wife (or wives) and sometimes the daughters of the *pater*

Chapter 2; Grüttner, "Working-Class Crime"; d'Sena, "Perquisites"; Randall, "Peculiar Perquisites and Pernicious Practices"; Green, "Spelling, Go-Slows, Gliding Away and Theft"; Smyth and Grijns, "*Unjuk Rasa* or Conscious Protest?," p. 21. William Freund reveals the possibility of a smooth transition to theft as a collective act in "Theft and Social Protest."

³⁸ See also Chapter 14 on the Bielefeld School in the sociology of development.

familias. It is also possible that the wage earner himself employs one or more wage earners who do domestic work. Many white working-class families in South Africa in the early twentieth century, for instance, had a black domestic servant, who, among other things, was responsible for “the making of fires, cleaning stoves, sweeping, washing dishes, preparing morning and afternoon tea, keeping the yard clean, and doing such routine garden work as weeding and watering.”³⁹

Secondly, the above diagram suggests that the relationship between employer and employee is *limited to the exchange of money for labor power*. Possible ties between both parties outside the circulation process are disregarded. But, of course, such ties may and do exist. The employer can bind the employee economically to his business, for instance by providing accommodation owned by the company, or by making it obligatory for the employee to buy with his wage-income those consumer goods which the employer offers for sale (the so-called “truck system”).⁴⁰ But the relationship between the employer and the employee need not be economic, if for instance they are related by kinship, or both belong to the same religious community. Instances of company housing and other similar forms of material bonds can be found especially, but certainly not exclusively, in large companies, for example the United Fruit Company, which housed its *campesinos* in Central America on the plantations, or the steel firm Krupp in Germany.⁴¹ Non-economic bonds are probably relatively more common in small companies.

Thirdly, the cyclical diagram suggests that an employee has only *one* employer, and that he or she is only involved in *one* labor relation at any time. Admittedly this set-up often occurs, also among artisans and skilled laborers.

³⁹ Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand*, pp. 30–1.

⁴⁰ Because they were locked in behind factory gates, the female Japanese textile workers mentioned previously had to “make all their purchases at company stores; patronize company hairdressers, an important part of the Japanese girl’s toilet; bathe at the company baths; be attended by the company doctor; in fact, supply all their necessities and pleasures from the company sources.” Orchard, “Analysis of Japan’s Cheap Labor,” p. 231. See also Hilton, *Truck System*.

⁴¹ Studies on company housing include: Aggarwal, *Industrial Housing in India*; Bonner and Shapiro, “Company Town, Company Estate”; Crinson, “Abadan”; Honhart, “Company Housing”; Melling, “Employers, Industrial Housing”; Tipple, “Colonial Housing Policy.”

But it does not apply to a large part of the world's working population dependent on wages, neither in the past, nor at present. People with *several* jobs are very common in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The same was true for Europe in the days before the emergence of the welfare state. It is again true in contemporary Russia, where at least around 15 to 20 percent of the employed population had supplementary employment in the mid-1990s.⁴² It is of course also perfectly possible that the employee has different kinds of income. André Gunder Frank rightly spoke of "fluidity in owner-worker relations." He gives the example of "a single worker who is simultaneously (i) owner of his own land and house, (ii) share-cropper on another's land (sometimes for half, sometimes for a third of the crop), (iii) tenant on a third person's land, (iv) wage laborer during harvest time on one of these lands, and (v) independent trader of his own home-made commodities."⁴³ The relative importance of the different sources of income can change repeatedly in the course of time, as Adam Smith already knew.⁴⁴

Fourthly, the circulation diagram focuses on the relationship between *one* employee and his or her employer. But it is also possible that laborers are employed *as a group* by an employer. Sometimes this is done by means of a subcontractor, who recruits workers in the surrounding area, and subsequently hands them over to an employer. In the Shanghai textile industry of the early twentieth century, for example, there was the *pao-kung* system in which the subcontractor "hired" girls from neighboring villages for three years from their parents, and then "hired them out" to British and Japanese cotton mills in the city during that period.⁴⁵ In another arrangement, the subcontractor supervises the workers recruited by him, and is thus working for his client as well. This was, for example, the case in many Indian and Chinese coal mines.⁴⁶ It could also happen that a group of laborers hired themselves out to an employer, without the mediation of a subcontractor, as in the case

⁴² Hussey, "Low Pay"; Klopov, "Secondary Employment."

⁴³ Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment*, pp. 271–2.

⁴⁴ "In years of plenty, servants frequently leave their masters, and trust their subsistence to what they can make by their own industry. [...] In years of scarcity, the difficulty and uncertainty of subsistence make all such people eager to return to service." Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 74.

⁴⁵ Chesneaux, *Chinese Labor Movement*, p. 57.

⁴⁶ Simeon, *Politics of Labour*, pp. 25–6; Wright, "'A Method of Evading Management'."

of harvest workers operating in the European part of Russia in the nineteenth century, who were organized in *artels* (“cooperatives”).⁴⁷

Lastly, according to the diagram, the cycle is broken if a laborer no longer offers his or her labor power for sale, and stops working. In turn, this suggests that strikes are a form of collective action associated especially with *free* wage laborers, and also, that this is the *only* possible form of protest action. But if we examine empirically the ways in which protest is expressed and pressure is exerted by the different groups of subaltern workers (i.e. the slaves, the self-employed, the lumpenproletarians, and the “free” wage laborers), these turn out to overlap considerably. In the past, all kinds of subaltern workers went on strike. The share-cropping silver miners in Chihuahua, for instance, protested as early as the 1730s against the termination of their work contacts by the owners of the mine, by entrenching themselves in the nearby hills. “There they built a makeshift stone parapet, unfurled a banner proclaiming their defiance, and vowed to storm the villa of San Felipe, kill San Juan y Santa Cruz, and burn his house to the ground. For the next several weeks they refused to budge from their mountain redoubt, where they passed time by composing and singing songs of protest.”⁴⁸ The miners returned only after mediation by a priest sent by the bishop. Serfs in Russia regularly refused “to recognize their owners’s authority over them”; they stopped working for him, and decided “to go on strike.”⁴⁹ Slaves sometimes downed tools as well. On plantations in the British Caribbean in the early nineteenth century, for example, there were one-sided walkouts. The slave rebellion in Jamaica of 1831 appears to have been intended as a “simple strike action backed up by merely the threat of force”; that the plan did not succeed, was due to the fact that “absolute control and rigid discipline were lacking” and because there was a “violent regime” which “was ready to die rather than concede.”⁵⁰ Conversely, free wage laborers used methods of action which are usually associated with other groups of subaltern workers, such as lynching, rioting, arson, and bombing.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Mixer, “Hiring Market as Workers’ Turf.”

⁴⁸ English Martin, *Governance and Society in Colonial Mexico*, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, p. 258.

⁵⁰ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, p. 301; Schuler, “Akan Slave Rebellions,” pp. 382–3.

⁵¹ Cloward and Fox Piven rightly remark: “[Some] forms of protest are more or less universally available. Arson, whether in the fields of the preindustrial world or in the streets of the urbanized world, requires technological rather than organization resources, and not much of the former, either. Riots require little more by way of

Moreover, different segments of the subaltern classes often performed approximately the same kind of work, and therefore shared essential interests. At the waterfront of mid-eighteenth century New York, “Slaves toiled alongside unskilled white workers as teamsters, wagoners, dockers, stockmen, ropewalkers, and cartmen.”⁵² In this complex mosaic, the conspiracy of 1741 emerged, “organized by soldiers, sailors, and slaves from Ireland, the Caribbean, and Africa,” with the goal of urban insurrection.⁵³

Toward new concepts

The analysis so far indicates that the boundaries between “free” wage laborers and other kinds of subaltern workers in capitalist society are in reality rather finely graded or vague. Firstly, there are extensive and complicated “grey areas” replete with transitional locations between the “free” wage laborers and the slaves, the self-employed and the lumpenproletarians. Secondly, almost all subaltern workers belong to households that combine *several* modes of labor.⁵⁴ Thirdly, *individual* subaltern workers can also combine different modes of labor, both synchronically and diachronically. And finally, the distinction between the different kinds of subaltern workers is not clear-cut.

The implications are far-reaching, if one thinks it through. In truth, there is a large class of people within capitalist society, whose labor power is commodified in many *different* ways. That is why I refer to the class as a whole as the *subaltern workers*. They make up a variegated group, including chattel slaves, share-croppers, small artisans and wage earners. It is the historical dynamics of this “multitude” that I think labor historians should try to understand.

But in that case the question arises of what all these different subaltern workers actually have *in common*. Where is the dividing line, the *fundamentum*

organization than numbers, propinquity, and some communication. Most patterns of human settlement, whether the preindustrial village or modern metropolis, supply these structural requirements.” Fox Piven and Cloward, “Collective Protest,” p. 148.

⁵² Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p. 68.

⁵³ Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, pp. 174–210, quote on p. 176.

⁵⁴ For a full argumentation see my “Introduction” and “Conclusion” in *Kok, Rebellious Families*.

divisionis, between them and the other party, of those who have more power? Using Cornelius Castoriadis' concepts as a first guide, we could say that all subaltern workers exist in a state of "instituted heteronomy." For Castoriadis, *instituted heteronomy* is the opposite of *social autonomy*; it manifests itself as "a mass of conditions of privation and oppression, as a solidified global, material and institutional structure of the economy, of power and of ideology, as induction, mystification, manipulation and violence." Instituted heteronomy expresses and sanctions "an antagonistic division of society and, concurrent with this, the power of one determined social category over the whole. [...] In this way, the capitalist economy – production, distribution, market, etc. – is alienating inasmuch as it goes along with the division of society into proletariat and capitalists."⁵⁵

We can make the definition more specific with the aid of an insight by the philosopher Gerald Cohen. He argues that "lack of means of production is not as essential to proletarian status as is traditionally maintained. It is better to say that *a proletarian must sell his labour power in order to obtain his means of life*. He may own means of production, but he cannot use them to support himself save by contracting with a capitalist."⁵⁶ Following Marx, Cohen understands the phrase "must sell his labor power" in this context as an economic compulsion, but if we add physical coercion, we come closer to a clear demarcation criterion. *Every carrier of labor power whose labor power is sold (or hired out) to another person under economic (or non-economic) compulsion belongs to the class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether the carrier of labor power is him- or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him- or herself owns means of production*. Each element in this provisional definition requires further reflection.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 109.

⁵⁶ Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 72.

⁵⁷ Those whose labor power is not commodified, although they possess no other means of livelihood than labor power (all jobless in the broad sense), are obviously also part of the subaltern working class, as well as family members of subaltern workers who perform subsistence labor (see Chapter 14) or who because of age or state of health cannot work. The concept of "economic compulsion" to work for pay deserves further attention, because it involves an important collective dimension. Even if every individual "free" laborer can, in theory, escape her fate by upward mobility, there can still be collective compulsion and lack of freedom, because "each [laborer] is free only on condition that the others do not exercise their similarly conditional freedom." Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, p. 263.

Nevertheless this demarcation indicates the common class-basis of all subaltern workers: the *coerced* commodification of their labor power.⁵⁸

The next question is: how can we conceptualize the internal differentiation of the subaltern class? As is well-known, the classical Marxian analysis focused on power in the production process. That process of production is of course characterized by a combination of three elements: “purposeful activity, that is work itself, the object on which that work is performed, and the instruments of that work.”⁵⁹ The product of labor is the fourth element of this analysis. Together they define the most important dimensions of the classical analyses which should be retained in a modified approach:

- The relationship between the subaltern worker and his or her *labor power* (is the subaltern worker in control of his or her body, or is the controller the employer or a third party?);
- The relationship between the subaltern worker and his or her *means of production* (to what extent does the subaltern worker own his or her objects and instruments of work, and to what extent are these objects and instruments owned by the employer or by a third party?);
- The relationship between the subaltern worker and his or her *labor product* (to what extent does the output of his or her effort belong to the subaltern worker, and to what extent does it belong to the employer or to a third party?).

My preceding observations suggest however that, added to these classical dimensions, three other dimensions are also relevant:

- The relationship between the subaltern worker and the other members of his or her *household* (what kind of social and economic dependencies exist between the subaltern worker and the other household members?);

⁵⁸ In refining the analysis, we should bear in mind that “there are positions in the social division of labour which are *objectively contradictory*.” Wright, “Class Boundaries,” p. 25. Simon Gray, the slave-employer, could be said to occupy such a contradictory class location, just like self-employed workers with various customers.

⁵⁹ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 284. See also Wittfogel, “Geopolitik,” pp. 506–22, and Balibar, “Sur les concepts fondamentaux,” p. 98.

- The relationship between the subaltern worker and his or her *employer outside the immediate production process* (to what extent is the subaltern worker through debts, housing, practical necessity, obligations etc. tied to the employer?);
- The relationship between the subaltern worker and *other subaltern workers* within the labor relationship (what kind of social and economic dependencies do exist between the subaltern worker and his or her immediate colleagues?).⁶⁰

These six dimensions allow us to develop a more subtle range of variations with which we can describe the class position of an individual subaltern worker *vis-à-vis* one employer. Looking at subaltern workers as instituted heteronomy, we can specify that *the degree of heteronomy is larger* (or: the degree of autonomy is smaller) *to the extent that the subaltern worker has less power over* (i) *his or her own labor capacity*, (ii) *means of labor*, (iii) *labor product*, (iv) *fellow members of his or her own household*, (v) *the relationship with the employer outside the immediate labor process*, and (vi) *possible fellow workers in the labor process*. In this sense women generally have less autonomy than men, and the autonomy of wage earners is larger than the autonomy of slaves, but smaller than the autonomy of self-employed workers.

If a subaltern worker combines several jobs, then we have to carry out several of these class specifications. Moreover, because a subaltern worker usually belongs to a larger unit (household), it seems advisable to extend the analysis further, and include the class positions of the other household members. This may lead to interesting incongruencies, if one household unites diverging class positions.⁶¹ Finally, these analyses should be carried out longitudinally as much as possible, because all household members can change their “jobs” during the course of their lives – that is, if they have a certain

⁶⁰ Naturally, dimensions may overlap. In the services sector, for instance, the means of labor and the labor product can be identical, and in sub-contracting the work team may consist of household members.

⁶¹ For a discussion of the problem of “cross-class families” see: Graetz, “Class Location of Families.” Graetz proposes a “generic model for the joint classification of family class locations.”

degree of freedom.⁶² A new typology could further differentiate the varieties distinguished in Table 2.1. We could, for example, distinguish three kinds of selling/hiring transactions of labor power, according to whether they exclusively concern labor power, or also part of the means of production or all means of production.⁶³

However we tackle these problems, several methodological principles seem pertinent. Firstly, we should resist the temptation of an “empirically empty Grand Theory” (to borrow C. Wright Mills’s expression); instead, we need to derive more accurate typologies from careful empirical study of labor relations. Secondly, we should not study the different kinds of subaltern workers separately, but consider the connections between them as much as possible. Sidney Mintz, for example, has cautioned us not to define “slave” and “proletarian” in isolation: “[These] two vast categories of toiler were actually intimately linked by the world economy that had, as it were, given birth to them both, in their modern form.” We should take into account such links, since “a purely definitional approach leaves something to be desired.”⁶⁴ Thirdly, we should not regard subalterns as isolated individual employees in the analysis, because, in reality, they are human beings who participate in families, kinship systems, and many other social and cultural networks. And finally, we

⁶² For subjective reasons, not everybody changes his or her type of labor relationship easily. When the US-American social scientist E. Wight Bakke lived in the working-class neighborhood of Greenwich (London) in the early 1930s, he observed an “unwillingness to launch out into some sort of independent enterprise.” He explained this by “the inability of one who has been born and bred in the tradition of a wage-earner to visualize himself as an independent worker, his own boss.” This “lack of imagination” resulted from the wage earner’s work socialization: “The work routine, the regularity and simplicity of the routine outside working hours, the plodding necessities of the household economy – all of these enforce a discipline which trains for stability as a wage-earner but not for the independence and adaptability and personality necessary for success in an independent enterprise.” Bakke, *Unemployed Man*, pp. 126–7.

⁶³ The work of political economists Robert W. Cox and Jeffrey Harrod might also prove stimulating. See Cox’s programmatic article, “Approaches to a Futurology of Industrial Relations,” and the elaboration of their work in two books: Cox, *Production, Power and World Order*, and Harrod, *Power, Production, and the Unprotected Worker*. Reflecting this perspective is: Davies and Ryner, *Poverty and the Production of World Politics*.

⁶⁴ Mintz, “Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?,” pp. 97–8.

should not classify subalterns primarily from the point of view of the nation state (as in “the Indian working class,” etc.); it is better to regard the meaning of the “national” aspect as something which has to be put into context, and explained in itself.

Chapter Three

Why “free” wage labor?

Human labor power can be transformed into a commodity in different ways. Two of the most important forms are chattel slavery and wage labor. As I argued in the previous chapter, *both* modes of exploitation are fundamentally compatible with capitalism. In some cases, capital prefers slavery; in other cases wage labor. There is no good theoretical reason for treating the one mode of exploitation as the ‘true’ capitalist form, and the other as just an anomalous (though perhaps historically necessary) variation.¹ The real question is rather why in some epochs and in some geographic areas, wage labor became predominant, while in other epochs and areas it was

¹ Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour*. The resistance of orthodox Marxism against the idea that slavery is a ‘normal’ form of commodification is a direct consequence of the presumption that the contradiction between capital and wage labor is the most essential characteristic of capitalism. Contrary to this viewpoint, I follow those authors who give the *value form*, and not class contradictions, central place in their analysis of capitalism. The contradiction between capital and “free” wage earners is in that perspective nothing other than a conflict between different groups of commodity owners. See Kurz and Lohoff, “Der Klassenkampf-Fetisch”; Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. The orthodox class-analysis approach tends to become tautological rather quickly, i.e. it makes true by definition precisely that which needs to be investigated and explained. A striking example is offered by W.G. Runciman, who states the following definition: “By ‘capitalism’ I mean a mode of production in which formally free labour is recruited for regular employment by ongoing enterprises competing in the market for profit.” So far, so good. But then he also argues: “However difficult it may be to say precisely when the transition to a capitalist mode of production occurs in any given society, it is only complete when it can be agreed by observers of all theoretical persuasions that formally free wage labour is dominant in the economy as a whole.” – Runciman, “‘Triumph’ of Capitalism,” pp. 33–4.

not. To find an answer this question, however, we have to reach back into the depths of historical time.

Origins

Moses Finley, a wellknown historian of Antiquity, has defended the thesis that the institution of wage labor was a “sophisticated latecomer,” because it involved two difficult conceptual steps:

First it requires the abstraction of a man’s labour from both his person and the product of his work. When one purchases an object from an independent craftsman, whether he is free or a slave with a *peculium*, one has not bought his labour but the object, which he had produced in his own time and under his own conditions of work. But when one hires labour, one purchases an abstraction, labour power, which the purchaser then uses at a time and under conditions which he, the purchaser, not the ‘owner’ of the labour power, determines (and for which he normally pays after he has consumed it). Second, the wage labour system requires the establishment of a method of measuring the labour one has purchased, for purposes of payment, commonly by introducing a second abstraction, labour-time.

We should not underestimate the magnitude, speaking socially rather than intellectually, of these two conceptual steps; even the Roman jurists found them difficult.²

This interpretation is empirically difficult to sustain – among other things because, in the Antique period, the wage laborer was regarded as a “hireling” who did not so much “hire out” (or, if one prefers, temporarily sell) his labor power, but who placed himself temporarily with his whole person in a dependent position.³ The idea of wage labor as a form of *personal hire* is impressed upon us by the ancient sources. Take, for example, the Greek *misthós* (wage, soldier’s pay)⁴ that via its Indo-European root *mizdho-* is related

² Finley, *Ancient Economy*, pp. 65–6.

³ Dreizehnter, “Entstehung der Lohnarbeit,” pp. 272–3.

⁴ *Misthós* can also have other meanings, but “wage” is the most important; see the relevant section in *Paulys Realencyclopädie*, cols 2078–2095. Edouard Will has stressed that *misthós* can only be translated literally as “wage” when it is a question of paying

to the Northern High German *Miete* (rent, hire).⁵ *Misthós* was not a wage in the modern sense of the word, but a "personal hire which was finely tuned to the regeneration of labor power, and which hence could be considered equivalent to *trophè* (maintenance)." Labor as such was understood by the ancient Greeks not as "abstract labor," to borrow Karl Marx's term, but as "concrete labor."⁶ Wage labor was therefore conceptualized differently than we do today: not as the hire of labor power, but as self-hire of a worker plus his or her labor performance. The person and labor performance were, to be sure, distinguished⁷ but the hire was simultaneously applied to both aspects. The precise terminological development has not been completely clarified, but the most important conclusion is that wage labor existed *before* it was conceptualized in the 'modern' way.⁸

"the laborer *misthotos*." See his "Notes sur ΜΙΣΘΟΣ"; for additional commentary see Garlan, "Le travail libre," pp. 13–5.

⁵ Benveniste refers to the difference with the other Indo-European word which is relevant in this connection, namely *laun[om]*, from which the German *Lohn* and the Dutch *loon* are derived. "*Laun* is always something different from a salary; it is an act of favour or an advantage obtained by an activity which is not work in the ordinary sense (in which case *mizdo* would be the appropriate term), essentially an 'honorarium' granted or a prize that is won." Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire*, volume 1, p. 168. Mauss, "Essai sur le don," p. 155: "Our own word *gage* is derived from the same source, from *wadium* (cf. the English 'wage', salary). Huvelin has already demonstrated that the German *wadium* provides a way to understand the nature of the contracts made, which comes close to the Roman nexus."

⁶ Röbfler, "Handwerk und Lohnarbeit," p. 76. A more extensive treatment is presented by Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, pp. 183–247. In Babylonia, "The free hired laborer is designated by the term *agru*, derived from the verb *agaru*, 'to hire.'" – Dandamaev, *Slavery in Babylonia*, pp. 121–2. In Judea, the connection between hire and wage is evident: the Hebrew term for wage labor is *šékér*, derived from *škr* ("hire," "working for wages"). From this root the term *šakír* ("wage laborer") also is derived. – Kreifig, *Sozialökonomische Situation in Juda*, p. 91; Ben-David, *Talmudische Ökonomie*, volume 1, pp. 65–6. The Hittite *kuššaniya-* means "to hire," "to take as a day laborer" and is related to *kuššan-*, which means "wage," "pay," "price." – Haase, "Dienstleistungsverträge."

⁷ The distinction between the working person and his or her activities developed at an early stage. Kaufmann suggests that the distinction was already present in the Indo-European root **op-* (compare Latin *opus*). Kaufmann, *Das altrömische Mietrecht*, p. 200.

⁸ Francine Michaud, "Apprentissage et salariat," p. 8, points out that, as late as the beginning of the fourteenth century A.D., contracts were made in Marseille in which wage workers hired out themselves and their labor (*loco me et operas meas*). Deschamps, "Sur l'expression 'locare operas'," has argued that the expression *locatio operarum* ("labor hire") could only be invented, because slavery dominated in Rome, and wage labor was viewed legally as a parallel working arrangement: not the slaveholder hired out a slave to a client, but the "slave" hired himself out. A similar argument is advanced by Weber, "Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum," pp. 12, 56. Kaufmann,

The ultimate historical origin of wage labor is shrouded in obscurity. We can imagine that wage labor was already performed on a casual basis among hunter-gatherers, such as among the Inuit (eskimos) described by Siegel where “a man with a strong team of dogs can make a somewhat larger catch, [...] and allot some work to a less fortunate neighbor.”⁹ The first documented indications of wage labor are provided by historians in the ancient period. From their work, it can be established that there were, in fact, at least four basic variants.

The first variant is *casual labor*, especially in agriculture, but also in building, lumbering, etc. The forms in which this casual labor was organized varied a great deal. In old Babylonian scripts we encounter, for example, the following formula: “X shekels of silver for x harvest laborers have been received by the hireling from the hirer. [...] In the harvest season x harvest laborers will come. If they do not come, then the royal decrees [apply].” At issue here, however, is a wage paid in advance to “harvest laborers, who are demanded seasonally, necessitating this satisfaction beforehand. As a rule it would be the case that larger enterprises are involved here, who could not be conquered with their relatives and family [...]. These harvest laborers were organized in groups under supervisors, leading hands (*waklum*), with whom the contracts were settled.”¹⁰

In other cases, laborers were allocated through a daily market. In Athens, a space existed known as *kolonos agoraios* (or *ergatikos* or *misthios*), probably on the West end of the agora, where those who wanted to hire themselves out as land laborer offered their services daily.¹¹ The New Testament provides a good example of such a daily market:

Das altrömische Mietrecht, p. 155, strongly criticizes this viewpoint, and tries to show that the term *mercenarius* (“hired worker”) was *first* applied to free laborers and only *afterwards* was generalized to hired slaves.

⁹ Siegel, “Methodological Considerations,” pp. 360–1.

¹⁰ Koschaker, Review article, pp. 388–9. The standard work on this material remains Lautner, *Altbabylonische Personenmiete*. See also Klengel, “Soziale Aspekte der altbabylonischen Dienstmiete,” p. 41: “The seasonally expanding labor demand, as well as urgent activities in other branches of industry, could often not be satisfied with the regular supply. Since it was not possible to resort to foreign labor on the ground of external economic pressures [...] [an important insight! – MvdL], not only the labor performed by those in debt but also hired services became significant.”

¹¹ Fuks, “κολωνος μισθιος.”

For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; and then he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.'¹²

Not always would such casual labor be offered voluntarily. There are many examples in Asian and European history of landlords obliging their servants to work for a previously determined wage.

The social groups from which casual laborers were recruited could vary greatly. In his study of the neo-Babylonian age, Muhammed Dandamaev notes that "Sometimes even persons who owned one or two slaves worked as hired laborers."¹³ In the Roman period, the agricultural hired laborers in Italy included both "cultivators of small farms [...] taking work to supplement a meagre income" as well as "unemployed and under-employed residents of cities and towns."¹⁴ And for Egypt in late Antiquity (the fourth and fifth century A.D.) Roger Bagnall concludes: "At harvest time [...] all hands turned out. It is likely that large numbers of men who did something else normally earned spare cash by helping out at the peak season. Monks poured out of their desert monasteries into the Delta fields to work for a daily wage."¹⁵

A second form of early wage labor consists of *artisanal* labor, i.e. skilled work carried out now and then, but not continuously (metalwork, carpentry). In the case of antique Greece, Alois Dreizehnter suggests that because of the small extent of urbanization, "the artisans were for economic reasons initially forced to migrate from farm to farm. Later, when the cities had grown

¹² *Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 1197 (Matthew 20). See also de Churruca, "Der gerechte Lohn."

¹³ Dandamaev, *Slavery in Babylonia*, p. 121, note.

¹⁴ Garnsey, "Non-Slave Labour in the Roman World," p. 42.

¹⁵ Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, p. 123.

somewhat, the artisans could settle permanently somewhere and begin their own workplace."¹⁶ The boundary between artisanal and casual labor was therefore initially not sharply drawn, all the more so because certain activities of e.g. harvest labor were also considered skilled labor.¹⁷ In medieval Europe this applied, for example, to the mowers:

They were the first and most important activity of waged land laborers, which is explained by the significance of harvest labor, primarily grain and hay-cutting, for the agricultural economy. Even for mowing and cutting, the land laborer required a definite ability and work experience. A work team had to be specialized exclusively in this area. [...] The wages of mowers and cutters were generally higher than those of other wage workers.¹⁸

A third form of early wage labor is found among the ancient armed forces, in the shape of *military service*: "Already in the late Ancient Empire (around 2290 B.C.) hirelings were drafted from Nubia and Libya. In the New Empire (1551–1080 B.C.) there existed settlements of hirelings and forcibly settled foreigners, who likewise were engaged as mercenaries. In the new Syrian legion (in first half of the tenth century B.C.) hirelings – partly drawn from the agricultural sphere – played a growing role. In achaimenidic Iran, hirelings are in evidence from the beginning of the fifth century B.C. Greek mercenaries played a decisive military role from the Kyros Revolt of 401 B.C. (retreat of the ten thousand) onwards and, subsequently, in the Revolt of the Satraps, the Secession of Egypt and the war against Philip II of Macedonia and Alexander the Great. The services of hirelings were also used in the later Iranian dynasties. In China, the employment of hirelings probably dates back to the period

¹⁶ Dreizehnter, "Entstehung der Lohnarbeit."

¹⁷ Heinz Kreißig gives the example of the brickmakers in Trans-Jordan in the Hellenistic Age: "They carry out any work offered by anyone who can pay, whether a magistrate, or a private customer, or a workshop-owner who receives orders from a third party. These brickmakers may work as hired labourers for a contractor one day, on another day perform services as day-labourers for a private house owner. The contracts might be written or verbal and run for one day, for days, for weeks or until a specific project is complete. The contract might or might not tie the worker to the workshop. Thus the difference between a paid workman and a one-man contractor or entrepreneur can be illusory." Kreißig, "Free Labour in the Hellenistic Age," p. 31. A more extensive analysis is presented in Kreißig's "Versuch über den Status der Lohnarbeiter."

¹⁸ Hon-Firnberg, *Lohnarbeiter und freie Lohnarbeit im Mittelalter*, pp. 67–8.

of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.).¹⁹ Mercenaries formed the first *large* group of wage earners, as G.E.M. De Sainte Croix has correctly pointed out.²⁰ The wage normally consisted of a basic package of foodstuffs and suchlike, money, or a portion of the war booty.²¹ In the Egyptian New Empire, the troops in part consisted of professional soldiers ("nowadays often but incorrectly referred to as hirelings") and reservists deployed temporarily.²²

Artisans' *apprenticeships* represent a fourth, probably later, form of wage labor. Apprenticeship contracts differed from other types of contracts because, beyond the employment relationship, a training course was also involved in which the employer took on the obligation to train, and the wage laborer had the duty to learn specific skills.²³

If we consider these four variants together, one common characteristic stands out: free wage labor was engaged especially where the activities were of a *temporary* nature: temporary either in the sense of being carried out during part of the year only, or during a part of the worker's life (in the case of apprentices). It is worth noting in this regard that, on dairy farms, not wage labor but slavery was the rule, because the activities had a continuous character. This norm is noted e.g. for ancient Greece by Zimmermann: "For seasonal labor on the land, such as the harvesting of olives, free workers were often hired as well. For such short-term activities, buying slaves was not a commercial proposition. [...] The shepherds however were mostly slaves."²⁴

¹⁹ Anon., "Söldner," p. 269.

²⁰ "The first appearance in antiquity of hired labour on a large scale was in the military field, in the shape of mercenary service." Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, p. 182.

²¹ See among others Corbier, "Salaires et salariat," pp. 68, 84–85.

²² Anon., "Krieg," col. 776. Very interesting are the origins of the Nubian divisions. Initially prisoners of war were simply put to death on a mass scale (in one such episode of slaughter, this meant the loss of 49,000 lives). Only when "acute labor shortages" occurred in Egypt (during the period of the Old Empire) the policy changed. Then *razzias* were organized in Nubia (lasting until the end of the Old Empire). "A counter-trend however emerged in the Nubian nations, with which treaties were apparently made requiring them to supply inhabitants as soldiers, who were organized in special ethnically separated units." Later, in the New Empire, predominantly prisoners of war were drafted into the army. Anon., "Fremdarbeit."

²³ Only in recent years has the early history of apprenticeship received more attention. An overview is given by Epstein, *Wage Labor and Guilds*.

²⁴ Zimmermann, "Die freie Arbeit in Griechenland," p. 341. Compare Audring, "Zur sozialen Stellung der Hirten," p. 16: "[Shepherd slavery] indeed can be considered, despite its probably limited occurrence, as the first form of economically significant slavery in Greece. [...] In contrast to arable farming and horticulture, [livestock

But the reverse situation did not hold: by no means all temporary labor was carried out for wages. In thirteenth century England, seasonal operations were most often performed “by means of labor dues of customary tenants.”²⁵ Of importance therefore, is also the extent to which there were other, perhaps cheaper, alternatives to wage labor, such as fatigue-labor.²⁶

Spread

Free wage labor in pre-capitalist societies generally remained a “spasmodic, casual, marginal” phenomenon.²⁷ Free wage labor often (but not always) was “an adjunct to other forms of labor and surplus appropriation, often as a means of supplementing the incomes of smallholders whose land – whether owned or held conditionally – has been insufficient for subsistence.”²⁸

For a long time, free wage labor occurred only sporadically. But in at least one area of the world it became important already *before* the rise of capitalism.

farming] was an area of economic activity in which the amount of labor required remained relatively constant. This created the demand, and favored the deployment of, a constant number of workers. ‘Serfs’, but also slaves certainly fitted better into this regime than impoverished free migrants, who in all probability would only consent to contract out their services for a limited period.” John Morris (“Slaves and Serfs,” p. 49) observes: “The great drawback of slave production is that the slave must be maintained all the year round, whatever his productivity.”

²⁵ Postan, *Famulus*, p. 2.

²⁶ For all that, it is thirteenth century England which demonstrates that “free” wage labor was very much related to seasonality. Because apart from serfs who already received a wage (the so-called *famuli* and *famulae*) there existed at that time two groups of ‘real’ wage laborers: skilled artisans (masons, carpenters) and day laborers. See Middleton, “Familiar Fate of the *Famulae*,” pp. 28–9. See also Postan, *Famulus*, p. 18; Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, pp. 37–8; Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England*, pp. 305–6. Other European case studies include Perroy, “Wage Labour,” and van Bavel, “Rural Wage Labour in the 16th Century.” Actually, whether the day laborers were better or worse off than personnel employed on a long-term basis depended heavily on the state of the labor market. After the Plague, which caused major labor shortages and sharply rising food prices, many English laborers “would reject the respectable status of a ploughman, a carter, or a shepherd employed at a yearly wage, for that of a common labourer working by the day, in view of the fact that by such casual labour they could earn far larger sums and yet work entirely where and when they pleased.” Kenyon, “Labour Conditions in Essex,” p. 431.

²⁷ Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, p. 68. This does not exclude the possibility that sometimes small nuclei of permanent wage laborers appeared, but these were usually found among a larger group of seasonal or casual laborers. See for example the analysis of large Byzantine estates in late antiquity, in Banaji, “Agrarian History,” pp. 198–202.

²⁸ Wood, *Peasant-Citizen and Slave*, p. 65.

I refer here to the manorial wage laborers, who were essentially nothing but "serf[s] to whom law denied that freedom of contract and movement which it allows to the twentieth-century laborer[s]." ²⁹ Charles Tilly estimates that, in 1500, about 94 percent of all European proletarians were "rural"; even in 1800, it still amounted to 90 percent. ³⁰ The great majority of this group probably consisted initially of unfree wage laborers, and not of more or less 'modern' workers. ³¹ Their existence signals the rapid expansion of the cash economy in Europe since the high Middle Ages ³² – a process which first became clearly visible in England. ³³

The question then arises how and why extensive, more or less free wage labor emerged out of this episodic free wage labor and extensive unfree wage labor. The first group of wage workers with steady employment probably existed in ancient Egypt. Already early on, a small group of artisans emerged there who performed wage labor on a permanent basis for the state: the workers at the necropolis. They lived in small, purpose-built towns (Kahun, Deir-el-Medina, Tell el-Amarna), where they worked, often generation after generation, on the construction of the tombs of successive pharaohs. About the workers in Deir-el-Medina (from the eighteenth to the twentieth dynasty) much information is available, thanks to archeological research, papyri and ostraka. So we know not only many details about their daily lives, but are also well-informed about their wages:

The payments were made on the 28th day of the month, for the following month. The basic payment was in grain [...]. The grain included emmer wheat which was ground into flour, and barley which was made into beer.

²⁹ Postan, *Famulus*, p. 23.

³⁰ Tilly, "Demographic Origins."

³¹ Alan Macfarlane suggests this was the case in England. See *Origins of English Individualism*, pp. 148–50.

³² Ricardo Duchesne attempts to explain this monetization process in "French Revolution as a Bourgeois Revolution." See also Mayhew, "Modelling Medieval Monetisation."

³³ Postan estimates that in thirteenth century England "perhaps as much as a third of the total rural population was available for whole or part-time employment as wage labour." Postan, "England," p. 568. Some scholars interpret this as a reason "for shifting the beginning of capitalism in England back to the thirteenth century." Gerstenberger, *Impersonal Power*, pp. 50–1. See further: Weber, "Studie zur spätmittelalterlichen Arbeitsmarkt- und Wirtschaftsordnung"; Lütge, *Die mitteldeutsche Grundherrschaft*, pp. 216–38; idem, "Das 14./15. Jahrhundert," esp. pp. 314–23; and Brown, "Introduction: Wage-labour: 1500–1800," in his *English Labour Movement*, pp. 1–27.

Other payments supplied by the government included fish, vegetables and water; and, for domestic use, wood for fuel and pottery. Less regular deliveries were also made of cakes, ready-made beer and dates, and on festival days or other special occasions, the workforce received bonuses which included salt, natron, sesame oil and meat.³⁴

In the twenty-ninth year of the reign of Rameses III (about 1158 B.C.), these workers staged the first recorded strike in world history, the occasion being that their wages were not paid on time.³⁵

So why were these artisans employed as *wage laborers*, rather than slaves? We can only guess at the answer. One possibility is that the activities of these early artisans were originally only of a temporary nature (in an historically still earlier stage) and that, when their employment became permanent, the traditional wage contract continued. Whether this is the correct explanation cannot be proved from the available sources however. Nevertheless this example does already demonstrate that, beyond economic causes in the strict sense, all kinds of non-economic (cultural, political) factors must be taken into account.

The explanation of the trend towards permanent wage labor is, to an important extent, bound up with the question of how wage labor could establish itself gradually in increasingly larger economic sectors. Because that expansion had as its inexorable consequence that wage labor no longer comprised mainly temporary activities. In the literature, various causal factors are proposed. I will briefly discuss three of them: technological innovation, centralization of states and the growing supply of labor. None of these factors, in my view, are sufficient to answer the question satisfactorily.

As regards *technological innovation*, an argument frequently cited is that modern technology was no longer compatible with unfree labor. This interpretation dates back at least to the nineteenth-century political economist J.E. Cairnes, who, in his influential book *Slave Power*, contended that slave labor was always necessarily *unskilled* labor. The slave, Cairnes wrote, is “unsuited for all branches of industry which require the slightest care, forethought, or

³⁴ Davis, *Pyramid Builders*, pp. 72–73. Also see Allam, *Verfahrensrecht*; Černý, *Community of Workmen*; Della Monica, *La classe ouvrière sous les pharaons*; Allam, “Familie und Besitzverhältnisse”; Gutgesell, *Arbeiter und Pharaonen*.

³⁵ Edgerton, “Strikes”; Janssen, “Background Information.”

dexterity. He cannot be made to co-operate with machinery; he can only be trusted with the coarsest implements; he is incapable of all but the rudest forms of labour."³⁶ Other authors, including Marx, adopted this interpretation, and accordingly advanced a *technological* explanation of the decline of slavery: the increasingly complex and subtle labor processes supposedly could not be combined with slave labor.³⁷ Further research however has meanwhile revealed that this argument cannot be sustained – neither for Antiquity, nor for modern capitalism.³⁸

In the American South before the Civil War, skilled labor was most definitely performed by slaves, be it with a greater degree of autonomy than slaves had e.g. on cotton plantations. Eugene Genovese quotes a South Carolina planter from 1849 as follows: "Whenever a slave is made a mechanic, he is more than half freed, and soon becomes, as we too well know, and all history attests, with rare exceptions, the most corrupt and turbulent of his class."³⁹ The underlying logic is made clear by Charles Dew's study of an iron foundry in the Valley of Virginia, at the beginning of the Civil War. Dew describes in detail the reasons why the owner (Weaver) granted his slave-artisans a considerable amount of freedom in their work. Because of the clarity of Dew's description, I will quote him at length:

Weaver, of course, had considerable coercive power at his disposal. He could punish any recalcitrant or troublesome slave, but if he had relied on the whip to achieve satisfactory levels of production, his career as a Virginia ironmaker would have been very short-lived indeed. Excessive use of force certainly would have backfired, and a whipping administered to a skilled slave would, at minimum, leave the man sore and incapable of work. It would probably leave him seething with anger as well and looking for ways to get back at the master. Acts of industrial sabotage could be accomplished with relative ease around a forge. To cite only one example, the huge wooden beams that supported the 500- to 600-pound cast-iron hammerheads in the forge – 'helves' was the name given to these beams – occasionally broke in the normal course of operations and had to

³⁶ Cairnes, *Slave Power*, p. 46.

³⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 1, pp. 303–4.

³⁸ Kiechle, *Sklavenarbeit*.

³⁹ Genovese, "Slave Labor or Free," p. 225.

be replaced. The forge would shut down for at least a day, sometimes more, while the forge carpenter installed a new helve. Weaver's foremen could break these helves intentionally whenever they wished, and who could say whether it was or was not deliberate? Another alternative would be for the slave to burn the forge down. On any working day, live charcoal was there to do the job. The slaves, in short, were in a position to do considerable physical and financial damage to Weaver's interests, even if they limited their activities to passive forms of resistance like work slowdowns or slipshod performance of their duties. Not surprisingly, there is no indication that Weaver ever whipped one of his slave forge workers at any time during his forty years in the Valley.

A far greater threat to the slaves was the possibility of sale. Even skilled slaves who tried to run away or who carried their resistance beyond Weaver's level of toleration could be turned over to slave traders and readily sold. Yet no ironmaster would want to part with a trained slave ironworker [...]. Buying or training an immediate replacement would be difficult, if not impossible, and trying to hire skilled slave forge workers was, as Weaver well knew, both uncertain and expensive. It was far better, from Weaver's point of view, to avoid the use of physical coercion to the fullest extent possible and to turn to a weapon like the sale of a slave only in the most extreme circumstances.

The alternative to force was positive incentive. From his earliest days in Virginia, Weaver paid slaves who did extra work. Weaver's artisans had a daily or weekly task to perform, but he compensated them, either in cash or in goods from his store at Buffalo Forge, for anything they turned out over and above the required amount. Payment of 'overwork,' as this system was called, was a common practice at slave-manned manufacturing establishments throughout the antebellum South, and it was a feature of the labor regime at southern ironworks as early as the mid-eighteenth century.⁴⁰

This commentary clarifies that slave labor is quite compatible with modern labor processes, if the mechanism for extracting labor effort is modified. Technological innovations, while implying the need to offer unfree workers

⁴⁰ Dew, *Bond of Iron*, pp. 107–8.

a degree of independence in their work, do *not* logically or practically entail the abolition of the unfree labor relation as such.

A second factor mentioned in the literature is the emergence of *modern centralized states*, to begin with in England, and afterwards in parts of Western Europe. Robin Blackburn eloquently expresses the relevant point: "In England and France slavery had withered away without ever becoming illegal [...]. It is difficult to believe that the powerful were naturally more gentle and humane in England and France than in other parts of Christendom; in the English case the ferocious Statute of Labourers of 1349–51 certainly suggests otherwise. Therefore it is the possession of other 'means' to the same end (presumably, labour control) that must bear the main weight in explaining the eclipse of serfdom and slavery."⁴¹ A similar view is also advanced by Robert Brenner.⁴² While undoubtedly containing a kernel of truth, the base of empirical evidence for this interpretation remains rather weak. A centralized state created only the *possibility* of "free" wage labor on a mass scale, but no more. In logical terms, it is a case of a necessary, but not a sufficient condition.

A third factor often introduced in the explanation is the presence of a *sufficient supply of labor*. Along these lines, Maurice Dobb for example wrote that "the transition from coercive extraction of surplus labour by estate-owners to the use of free hired labour must have depended upon the existence of cheap labour for hire (i.e., of proletarian or semi-proletarian elements)."⁴³ Implied here is that – apparently – the presence of "cheap labour for hire" is sufficient to make the transition from coerced labor to "free" labor possible. But such an inference is far too simplistic. Because the potential employers of this "cheap labor" must, from their side, be prepared to employ the available labor force *as wage laborers*. In principle at least, however, they could deploy

⁴¹ Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, pp. 39–40.

⁴² "An increasingly centralized state, rooted ever more firmly in broad landed layers, could [...] more effectively undermine the disruptive behaviour of those decreasing numbers of landed elements whose economies still depended upon the application of extra-economic methods [...]. The state which emerged during the Tudor period was, however, no absolutism. Able to profit from rising land rents, through presiding over a newly emerging tripartite capitalist hierarchy of commercial landlord, capitalist tenant and hired wage labourer, the English landed classes had no need to revert to direct, extra-economic compulsion to extract a surplus. Nor did they require the state to serve them indirectly as an engine of surplus appropriation by political means (tax/office and war)." Brenner, "Agrarian Roots," pp. 297–8.

⁴³ Dobb, "Reply," p. 61.

“cheap labor” just as well in a different way; for example, they could contract into e.g. share-cropping arrangements, or introduce a form of slavery (e.g. debt-slavery). That these options are overlooked, rather than systematically researched, indicates an unacceptable functionalism. With justice, Joel Kahn remarks that “Clearly the benefits to capitalism of particular economic forms are on their own no explanation for their existence. One ought to ask instead whether other forms of economic organization would be equally beneficial to capitalism, whether particular forms benefit capitalism as a whole, or only fractions of the dominant class, and, finally, whether there is a possibility of conflict and contradiction within capitalism.”⁴⁴ Again, an abundance of workers seeking employment logically only makes “free” labor on a mass scale possible, but not a necessary, inevitable development.

If we now consider these three causal factors as operating in concert, then we have one factor which – in Michael Burawoy’s terminology – promotes greater freedom in relations *in* production (technological innovation) and two factors which make greater freedom in relations *of* production possible (centralized state power, and an abundant labor supply).⁴⁵ But that still does not tell us very much about the specific factors which led to the spread of “free” wage labor. Major lacunae in the analysis remain.⁴⁶

Where then should the answer be sought? Under what circumstances is the *possibility* of ‘free’ wage labor transformed into a *reality*? In my view, any attempt to address this question must take account of the interests and choices of both the “employers” and subaltern workers. On both sides of the labor relation, economic and non-economic factors play a role. Quite likely it will be useful to distinguish between two kinds of cognitive mechanisms. Firstly, there are *strategic considerations*, i.e. cost-benefit assessments by individuals (or households) of the likely consequences of alternative choices. Secondly, there are also *behavioral norms*, i.e. the application of normative principles to one’s own behavior, and to the behavior of others.⁴⁷ These two mechanisms can operate in concert, and in fact they often do. If an employer decides not to

⁴⁴ Kahn, “Mercantilism,” p. 202.

⁴⁵ Burawoy, *Politics of Production*, pp. 13–14.

⁴⁶ There have been some cautious attempts in this direction in recent times. See for example the micro-historical analysis in Fox, “Servants.”

⁴⁷ These two motivations are described in a somewhat different context in: Burawoy and Wright, “Coercion and Consent.”

use the services of slaves, but of wage laborers, then he or she is conceivably motivated both by strategic considerations ("it is cheaper") and normative considerations ("it is more civilized," etc.).

The critical point is that the combination of these cognitive mechanisms does not simply – "automatically" as it were – have the same effect in every situation. The same norms and cost-benefit assessments can, in different historical contexts, produce different outcomes. So if we wanted to explain why, in a given place and time, free wage labor became dominant, we will have to study the situation in detail, and unravel the specific motives of employers and subaltern workers.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ In the literature, the question of why a specific mode of exploitation is chosen in a given time and place has been dealt with mostly with an *economistic* approach, focusing almost exclusively on employers' motives and interests. Take, for example, the – incidentally very interesting – discussion about the existence and temporal-spatial variation of various types of agricultural firms: share-tenancy, 'hired-manager' arrangements, etc. Setting out from the implicit assumption that landowners cannot resort to unfree labor, agricultural economists have developed various models which are supposed to explain the choice for a specific labor regime. An important role is assigned to the 'moral hazard' problem of shirking (which is less prevalent with share-cropping than with wage labor) and the corresponding costs of labor supervision. See Eswaran and Kotwal, "Theory of Contractual Structure," p. 361. Keijiro Otsuka, Hiroyuki Chuma and Yujiro Hayami have developed a model in which permanent wage labor in the agricultural sector is, because of the monitoring problem (the difficulty of supervising personnel and prevent shirking), a sort of 'last resort' when other options (such as land tenancy) are impossible for legal or social reasons. In line with this hypothesis, the authors explain the frequent occurrence of permanent wage labor in contemporary India, Pakistan and Nepal with reference to the caste system: the lower castes are prevented from owning or leasing land, and wage labor was the last option for this reason. The reverse would apply to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. Here "there are no class barriers to becoming tenant or owner cultivators. In such an environment, the land tenancy contract predominates and permanent labor contracts are seldom observed, even though there are many large landowners who could operate sufficiently large farms with permanent workers." (Otsuka, Chuma and Hayami, "Land and Labor Contracts," pp. 2003–4.) This contrast between South and Southeast Asia has, according to Otsuka *et al.* its counterpart in the history of Japan's agriculture: "In Japan, permanent [wage] labor was preponderant in the early Tokugawa period (the 16th and 17th centuries) under agrarian laws that commanded direct attachment of all tillers to feudal lords and, hence, prohibited landlord-tenant relations to develop below legal peasants (*honbyakusho*) who were granted usufruct rights on land. This rule was gradually breached by *de facto* tenancy contracts between the legal peasants and their permanent laborers. The conversion of permanent laborers to tenants was accelerated in the later Tokugawa period (the 18th to 19th centuries) when the feudal lords became less eager to enforce the tenancy regulations as land taxation shifted from the system of variable levy based on crop yield (*kemi*) to the fixed levy in kind (*jomen*). The conversion progressed further in the modern era as the Meiji government (1868–1912) granted modern property rights on land, including the right of renting it out, to those who used to have feudal usufruct rights on the land. This

I will limit myself here to a few possible relevant motives – without pretending to give an exhaustive list. For the *employers* three strategic considerations would appear to be of key importance: the immediate costs of the subaltern worker – which are analyzed in more detail in the next chapter –, the flexibility of the supply of labor,⁴⁹ and the (effectiveness of) relevant legislation.⁵⁰ The behavioral norms probably relate especially to considerations of humanity and decency, which I will elaborate on below.

For the *subaltern workers* – in so far as they have a genuine choice in the matter, and are not forced with violence to slavery – two strategic considerations are essential: on the one hand, the stability and quality of their living standard, in other words, material security, and on the other side (in the case of a weak state) the degree of physical protection which an employer can offer. Normative considerations relate especially to questions of personal dignity (whether the proposed employment relation is honorable, or an affront to one's status) and distributional justice.⁵¹

process was supported by the development of more intensive cropping systems that required more intensive care and judgment of farm workers and, therefore, could be operated more efficiently by small tenant cultivators who could claim residual profits." (Ibid., p. 2005.) Economistic approaches of this kind certainly make sense, when the existence or absence of a specific mode of exploitation is at issue. Actually, the model of Otsuka *et al.* makes it clear that even an economistic explanation cannot do without reference to normative (cultural) factors: the existence or absence of caste-norms among the subaltern population is, after all, an important consideration in the definition of the possible options open to the employer. But a comprehensive explanation must go further, and also explicitly integrate the *normative* aspects.

⁴⁹ Flexibility is of importance in cases of unpredictable activities. This is very clear in the case of plowing and harvesting: as soon as the weather (not easily predictable) gives cause for it, resolute action is called for. There is then no time anymore for complicated negotiations with potential employees. Hence precautionary measures are required. Already in Mesopotamia, attempts at such advance arrangements existed, as previously noted in the case of harvest labor contracts. See on this issue also Kenyon, "Labour Conditions in Essex," p. 438.

⁵⁰ A factor which relates both to direct costs and flexibility, and which in most economic analyses only appears in disguise (as the "shirking problem"), is the degree of organization of potential employees. If the workforce in a given branch belongs to a powerful and militant trade union, it becomes attractive for a capitalist to look for alternatives to wage labor, including "unfree" labor.

⁵¹ van der Linden, "Connecting Household History and Labour History." Neither strategic considerations, nor behavioral norms imply automatically that unfree workers want to become free wage laborers. A study of serfs in Russian nineteenth-century metallurgical industry states: "There is no evidence that the serf workers yearned for some condition of 'freedom' or were even aware of the Western concept of freedom. On the contrary, while they at times complained of harsh discipline, they considered the assurance of their basic security to have been an inalienable right, an inherent

Figure 3.1
Some motives determining the choice of employment relations

	Strategic considerations	Behavioral norms
Employer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • direct cost • flexibility • effective law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • humanity • decency
Subaltern worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stability and quality of standard of living • protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dignity • justice

Normalization

Even if we succeeded in developing a coherent general theory which describes why employers sometimes do and sometimes do not employ free wage labor, the question still remains as to why wage labor has become the normal form of dependent labor in advanced capitalist societies (leaving domestic subsistence labor out of consideration for the moment). With the term "normal," I mean in this context both that "free" wage labor has become the dominant form of labor commodification, and that all forms of unfree labor are regarded as objectionable and illegal, even if they still occur. Once again a purely economic explanation seems insufficient; beyond the immediate materialistic aspects related to calculations of economic advantage, considerations of morality and legality also play a role.

aspect of the social-economic system in which they lived. [...] The workers so valued this security that some of them received their emancipation in 1861 with dismay at the loss of their 'rights.'" Esper, "Condition of the Serf Workers," p. 671. A somewhat different variant appears to have occurred in West-Africa, where, in the nineteenth century, slaves were rented out by their owners to work for others. The wages earned by the slaves were partly appropriated by their owner and partly retained by the slave. In the first half of the nineteenth century "the slave kept for himself 10 francs per month above and beyond the cost of food and lodging. The free worker of 1903 received 0.45 francs per day with rations of 1 to 1.5 francs per day without rations, thus 11.25 francs a month above and beyond the cost of food. Though we must be cautious about these figures, the slave owners seem to have been more successful in negotiating for their slaves, than the free workers of a triumphant capitalism were in negotiating for themselves. In addition, the latter were not always sure of working, and thus of eating, unlike the slaves. The liberation of the slaves therefore did not lead to the emergence of a free labor market based on wage labor." Mbodj, "Abolition of Slavery in Senegal," p. 208.

From an economic point of view, two factors deserve attention. The first (micro-economic) factor was identified already several decades ago by John Hicks: the more that free wage labor becomes a general phenomenon, unfree labor becomes more expensive, because “they are competing sources: when both are used the availability of one affects the value (wage or capital value) of the other.”⁵² After all, the maintenance cost of a slave increases as the supply of slaves declines, while conversely an increasing number of wage laborers makes this form of labor cheaper.⁵³

The second factor is macro-economic. As is known, capitalism has its roots in the production of luxury goods (textiles, etc.) for the nobility and other wealthy clients. Industrial capitalism took off on this basis, beginning with the textile industry in the eighteenth century; subsequently it spread in the course of the nineteenth century to a variety of other sectors; in the process *manufacture* gave way to *machinofacture*: “The focus of accumulation shifted sharply toward industry, and particularly to the build-up of Department I, including not only factories but also a vast infrastructure of transportation and communications (turnpikes, canals, ports, steamships, railroads, telegraphs).”⁵⁴ Gradually, however, Department II also began to grow, and an increasingly larger part of the output of this sector was purchased by a growing class of wage earners. Thus, a dynamic interaction developed between sectors I and II, which sometimes has been – unjustifiably – theorized as a “Fordist regime of accumulation.”⁵⁵

⁵² Hicks, *Theory of Economic History*, p. 132.

⁵³ “When slaves are cheap and easily obtainable, it will pay to keep the sums invested in their maintenance to a minimum; but when slaves are harder to get and more expensive, so that the loss of a slave, or his inability to work, is a serious matter, it will be profitable to undertake expenditure to diminish the risk of its occurrence. [...] If labour is abundant [the wage] can fall very low, to something which corresponds to no more than the maintenance of the slave – even to the short-period, or nearly short-period maintenance of the slave.” Hicks, *Theory of Economic History*, pp. 127, 132.

⁵⁴ Sweezy, “Contradictions of Capitalism,” p. 37. Department I is Marx’s term for the economic sector producing means of production (equipment goods or capital goods). Department II is the sector producing consumer goods. See Marx, *Capital*, II, chapter 20. The reader may be reminded of Hoffmann’s theory of industrialization stages: Stage One is characterized by the domination of consumer-goods industries; during Stage Two capital goods industries become increasingly important; and during Stage Three there is a balance between consumer-goods industries and capital-goods industries with a tendency for the capital-goods industries to expand more rapidly than the consumer-goods industries. See Hoffmann, *Growth of Industrial Economies*.

⁵⁵ Aglietta, *Theory of Capitalist Regulation*. See also Foster, “Fetish of Fordism,” and Clarke, “Overaccumulation.”

This development is highly important in the context of this analysis, because the growing size of wage earners' consumption showed even in the most abstract and 'theoretical' sense the boundaries of mass slavery in the 'core' countries. Marx characterized the difference between slave and wage worker as follows:

The slave receives the means of subsistence he requires in the form of *naturalia* which are fixed both in kind and quantity – i.e. he receives *use-values*. The free worker receives them in the shape of *money, exchange-value*, the abstract social form of wealth. [...] It is the worker himself who converts the money into whatever use-values he desires; it is he who buys commodities as he wishes and, as the *owner of money*, as the buyer of goods, he stands in precisely the same relationship to the sellers of goods as any other buyer.⁵⁶

Robert Padgug rightly points out that "slaves are to a large degree themselves outside of the commodity system as consumers, and therefore do not permit the full development of an internal market."⁵⁷ Wage earners by contrast could be integrated in an upward spiral of rising wages and increasing mass consumption.⁵⁸ In other words: twentieth century capitalism based on mass consumption was only possible thanks to the growing buying power of wage and salary earners in the metropolises. In fact, wage labor in the metropolises

⁵⁶ Marx, "Results of the Immediate Process of Production," p. 1033.

⁵⁷ Padgug, "Problems in the Theory of Slavery," p. 20. The same point is made in Genovese, "Significance of the Slave Plantation," and Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, II, p. 103. Compare also Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 419: "In production based on slavery, as well as in patriarchal agricultural-industrial production, where the greatest part of the population directly satisfies the greatest part of its needs directly by its labour, the sphere of circulation and exchange is still very narrow; and more particularly in the former, the slave does not come into consideration as *engaged in exchange* at all." Sigrid Meuschel, *Kapitalismus oder Sklaverei*, p. 50, has argued that also plantation economies based on slave labor could be re-oriented to "products that could be sold on the local market." But she assumes that there exists a "class of rural and urban petty commodity producers" outside of the plantations as the driving force of such a development.

⁵⁸ "To each capitalist, the total mass of all workers, with the exception of his own workers, appear not as workers, but as consumers, possessors of exchange values (wages), money, which they exchange for his commodity." Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 419. See also Sulkunen, "Individual Consumption."

was, from this point of view, a *conditio sine qua non* for advanced capitalist prosperity.⁵⁹

These considerations notwithstanding, slave labor remains an economically *conceivable* option in the metropolises as well, if only as a rather marginal phenomenon. That slavery was actually banned in modern capitalist society to a large extent, even where this did not make economic sense from the standpoint of capital accumulation, has less to do with economic contradictions than with the inherently universalistic tendency of bourgeois norms. This brings me to a second, moral aspect of the normalization. In a pathbreaking essay, Thomas Haskell demonstrates an intimate relationship between the rise of modern capitalism and the emergence of a humanitarian sensibility: the market wrought changes in perception or cognitive style that underlay “the new constellation of attitudes and activities that we call humanitarianism.”⁶⁰ According to Haskell, an expansion of the market across more and more areas of the globe had two major consequences. Firstly, a market can only function effectively if market actors keep their promises, i.e. if they honor their contractual obligations:

Historically speaking, capitalism requires conscience and can even be said to be identical with the ascendancy of conscience. This ‘tremendous labor’ of

⁵⁹ Ostensibly this is a *functional* explanation: advanced capitalism demands mass consumption of the working class. But in fact a *causal* argument is involved: those elements of capitalism dominated by wage labor could realize a higher rate of capital accumulation than those parts where “non-economically coerced labor” dominated, and thus it acquired the lead in the mutual competition. The importance of this conclusion must not be underestimated. The dominance of wage labor does not imply that it is essentially a question of *free* wage labor. To the contrary: there also exists a tendency in the advanced capitalist countries for a new form of bonding of labor to enterprises. Tom Brass correctly observes that “when labour begins to act individually or to organize collectively in defence of its own interests, by exercising freedom of movement to secure higher wages, better working conditions, shorter working hours, etc., capitalist employers introduce or reintroduce restrictions on the formation or extension of a labour market with the object of shifting the balance of workplace power in their own direction.” Brass, “Some Observations on Unfree Labour,” p. 74. Employers are continually in search of means to tie staff to the enterprise. One of the old ways was the truck system. But even today attempts at bondage occur. Companies possess all sorts of “devices with which to penalize exit, or what amounts to the same thing, reward continuation”: deferred payment of premium wages, non-wage compensation (pensions, health insurance, company-provided housing, etc.) and internal promotion ladders. Goldberg, “Bridges over Contested Terrain,” pp. 263–4; see also by the same author “Law and Economics of Vertical Restrictions,” and Dovring, “Bondage, Tenure, and Progress,” p. 309.

⁶⁰ Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility,” p. 342.

instinctual renunciation on which promise keeping rests [...] is an absolute prerequisite for the emergence of possessive individualism and market society. [...] Conscience and promise keeping emerged in human history, of course, long before capitalism. [...] But it was not until the eighteenth century, in Western Europe, England, and North America, that societies first appeared whose economic systems depended on the expectation that most people, most of the time, were sufficiently conscience-ridden (and certain of retribution) that they could be trusted to keep their promises. In other words, only then did promise keeping become so widespread that it could be elevated into a general social norm.⁶¹

The second crucial change accompanying the rise of the market economy was that people learnt to take into account the more remote consequences of their actions. "As the prime mover of a promise-keeping form of life, the market established a domain within which human behavior was cut loose from the anchor of tradition, and yet simultaneously rendered as stable and predictable as 'long chains of will' could make it. The combination of changeability and foreseeability created powerful incentives for the development of a manipulative, problem-solving sort of intelligence."⁶²

The combination of these two great cultural changes (promise-keeping and "recipe knowledge") pushed an initially small, but afterwards gradually growing group from the middle classes over a moral threshold, and allowed them "the extension to strangers of levels of care and concern that were previously confined to family, friends, and neighbors."⁶³ It enabled them to "place slavery (and much else) on the agenda of remediable evils, making possible the collective action historians call 'humanitarianism'."⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 552–3.

⁶² Ibid., p. 558.

⁶³ Haskell, "Convention and Hegemonic Interest," p. 864. This is a reply to: Davis, "Reflections on Abolitionism," and Ashworth, "Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism." The importance of promise keeping and a high time-horizon has been stressed before by Gerschenkron in his "Modernization of Entrepreneurship," pp. 129–30.

⁶⁴ Haskell, "Convention and Hegemonic Interest," p. 851. Connected with this problematic is the question why the abolition of slavery occurred in two stages: it begun little by little in feudal Europe, but subsequently slavery was introduced again and on an historically unprecedented scale in the colonial regions and abolished once more in the course of the nineteenth century. For this abolitionism in two stages, no mono-causal explanation exists either. Both for the first phase and for the second phase, a combination of strategic considerations and behavioral norms operated. See for the

The moral, humanitarian impulse was strengthened by a third factor: the fact that capitalism harbors a powerful tendency towards the generalization of formal principles of justice. The cause is to be found in the exchange process, which penetrates increasingly broader sectors of society. The exchange process is a great “equalizer”. If person A and person B want to do business, because A offers a commodity for which B is prepared to pay money, then A and B must recognize each other as contracting parties with equal negotiating rights, as owners of private property, each with their own independent will. Freedom and equality of negotiating status are therefore structural elements in the exchange process between commodity owners. Indeed, these ideas have their material basis in the exchange process: “the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all *equality* and *freedom*. As pure ideas they are merely the idealized expressions of this basis.”⁶⁵

The expansion of exchange relations carries the generalization of these notions in its wake. The concept of human *equality* could only acquire the “permanence of a fixed popular opinion” in a society “where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities.”⁶⁶ Historically, the idea of equality established itself first among the owners of capital and land, and subsequently also among the owners of labor power, the workers. Together with this generalization also emerges the tendency to regard all relations in which producers could *not* assert an independent will (slavery in particular, of course) as unjust.

Even in its phase of generalization, however, “free” wage labor remains trapped in its central contradiction: unlimited “freedom” continues to mean for workers not just freedom from clientship, bondage and servitude, but also dependence on the vagaries of an unpredictable labor market. On the one hand,

first phase: Bonnassie, “Survie et extinction du régime esclavagiste”; Samson, “End of Early Medieval Slavery.” For the second phase: Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*; Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*.

⁶⁵ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 245.

⁶⁶ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 152. A further elaboration of this idea can be found in the classical text of Pashukanis, “General Theory of Law”; see also Stoyanovitch, “La théorie du contrat selon E.B. Pachoukanis”; Edelman, *Le droit saisi par la photographie*; Tuschling, *Rechtsform und Produktionsverhältnisse*; and Balbus, “Commodity Form and Legal Form.” Prototypical for the tendency towards generalization is of course the French Declaration of Rights of 1789; see Van Kley, “From the Lessons of French History.”

this leads time and again to attempts to revive bonded relationships, which in extreme cases are also justified with anti-humanitarian and anti-egalitarian arguments (the clearest example being German National Socialism);⁶⁷ on the other side, the truly "free" wage earners remain very aware of the fact of their lack of rights, and of the uncertainty which their situation brings with it.

⁶⁷ Roth, "Unfree Labour."

Chapter Four

Why chattel slavery?

While “free” wage labor grew quantitatively more and more important in the course of time, the relative proportion of slavery was reduced worldwide. So far, Marx’s diagnosis of the future of capitalism seems correct. But that reduction does not make any less important the historical question of why slavery existed within capitalism anyway, and why it still persists in most countries to some or other extent. Just as we asked which factors brake or promote the growth of “free” wage labor, we should also ask why slavery flourished under capitalist conditions at particular times and places, and why it was absent at other times and places.

This is certainly not an original question of mine; political economists already reflected on it in the eighteenth century. Adam Smith, for example, in *The Wealth of Nations* (Book 3, Chapter 2), claimed that there wasn’t a more inefficient laborer than the slave: “The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any.”¹ Slaves, after all, do not have their own positive incentive to labor: “A person who can acquire no property can have no other interest

¹ Smith, *Inquiry*, p. 345; see also Salter, “Adam Smith on Slavery,” and Lapidus, “Le profit ou la domination.”

but to eat as much and to labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond what is sufficient to purchase his own maintenance, can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by an interest of his own."²

In all circumstances, therefore – Smith opined – it would be more rational for the landowner to employ share-croppers or, even better, simple tenants who pay a fixed rent. From this followed immediately the question of why slavery was nevertheless economically so significant in the New World emerging during his lifetime. Smith himself could only solve this problem by appealing to an anthropological constant: “the pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen.”³ In other words, slavery could in the final analysis be explained only psychologically – by referring to its opposite, a domineering inclination in human nature. Put more simply, there were slaves because there were masters.

Though Smith’s answer may not be an intellectually satisfying explanation of the master-slave relationship, I think the question itself is still of the highest relevance. Over the years, many aspects of the problem have been theorized and debated, by economists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians – without however reaching any unambiguous result. Neither is it possible for me to give a complete and definite answer to this complicated question here. I will nevertheless comment on each of the most important conclusions from earlier discussions in turn, as a stepping stone to future research.

Before coming directly to the point, I should emphasize however that the concept of “slave” itself must be qualified. Among the general public, and also often among less well-informed historians, slavery is directly associated with brutal physical oppression. Or, as Max Weber argued: “Production for the market with unfree labor has never been possible for a long time without the whip.”⁴ Historical research shows that this generalization is misleading. Actually, it is an important analytical question in itself, under which condi-

² Smith, *Inquiry*, p. 345.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Weber, “Die sozialen Gründe,” p. 298.

tions in capitalism the whip played an important role as “labor incentive”, and under which conditions *other* incentives were more important.

I think it is appropriate to distinguish between at least three main types of slavery. Thus, there have been slaves who performed simple and unskilled labors under the supervision of the master (e.g., slaves who harvested sugar cane on a plantation); there have been slaves who performed skilled labors under the supervision of the master (e.g., slaves who operated the sugar cane press on the plantation); and there have been slaves-for-hire who earned money without direct supervision from the master (either as wage worker or as entrepreneur). This last group, despite its analytical significance, is often overlooked.⁵

Selection criteria

Which instrumental considerations are of particular significance for a business owner in the selection of a labor relation? At the beginning, the expected costs are of great significance. These costs include different elements:

⁵ In North America in the nineteenth century there were regularly these types of slaves. Robert Evans, “Economics of American Negro Slavery,” p. 192, speaks of “a reasonably common characteristic of the slave system” with “conditions of hire” that were “generally quite standard.” He names three types of leasing of slaves: “(1) by personal contact between the owner and the lessee or his agent, (2) by personal contact between an agent in a major city to whom the owner had consigned his slaves and the lessee or his agent, and (3) by public auction.” (p. 194). We could add, following the Brazilian model (*ganhadores*), a fourth variant: slaves who themselves took up contact with an employer. In nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, “Slaves-for-hire were sent out to find work that would enable them to provide for themselves and their masters. To do so, they were given autonomy and freedom of movement necessary to find, negotiate, and carry out the work that came their way. Many did not even live in their masters’ homes and only went there to surrender the money required per day or week.” Velasco e Cruz, “Puzzling Out Slave Origins,” p. 218; see also Reis, “Revolution of the *Ganhadores*.” Ordinarily, the relevant slaves had to give up a very large part of their incomes to their owners: “Slaves who hired their own time could expect a wage of 50¢ to \$1.00 or more per day depending on their particular skill or level of industriousness. Allowing slaves to hire their own time, however, was not just a humanitarian or paternalistic gesture on the part of the slave owners. Slaves had to pay dearly for this privilege. If a slave made fifty cents a day for 365 days, his minimal earnings would come to \$182.50; and, the owner might require the slave to pay \$150 of his annual earnings. This left only \$32.50 for the slave. However, if a slave made a dollar a day and worked only 300 days a year, even after paying his owner \$150, the slave would still have the same amount for himself.” Walker, “Pioneer Slave Entrepreneurship,” p. 293. See also Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, pp. 128–37.

Acquisition costs

Before a business owner can really employ a subaltern worker, he must first have him or her at his disposal. Costs are associated with this, which differ greatly according to the type of labor relation. If the worker is a slave, the business owner will probably have to pay a purchase price. For example, Albert House estimated that, in the 1840s, a planter in Georgia (USA) needed more than \$100,000 in order to purchase a plantation of 400 acres (approximately 1.6 km²) and machines for its development, the barns and houses. Included in this price were the costs for 110 to 130 male and female slaves. The price of a male or female slave was between \$300 and \$500; the purchase of slaves altogether thus devoured at least a third of the total investment.⁶

The acquisition of other types of subaltern workers, however, also costs money. William Clarence-Smith reports that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the owners of the cacao plantations on São Tomé and Príncipe had to pay not only the notary's contractual costs for indentured laborers which they obtained from the African mainland, but also the clothing, vaccination, transport to the island, and the placement officers.⁷ Of course, the recruitment of free wage labor also costs the business owner additional money, because he must gather information about potential workers, and induce them to accept a labor relation. But it appears that these recruitment costs are *lower* for free labor, than the recruitment costs for slaves or indentured laborers. Appearances can be deceptive, however. Christopher Hanes pointed out that free wage labor – as the adjective “free” already says – can, in principle, quit their position at any time, in contrast to slaves and indentured laborers. It is therefore obvious that a business owner must bear acquisition costs for free wage labor more often than in other cases – a problem which becomes even greater if workers who desert effectively bring production to a halt, causing big financial losses.⁸

⁶ House, “Labor Management Problems,” p. 150.

⁷ Clarence-Smith, “Hidden Costs of Labour,” p. 155.

⁸ Hanes, “Turnover Costs,” pp. 309, 311. Coase, “Nature of the Firm,” p. 38, had already shown what significance recruitment costs can have for employment policy of business owners. The turnover costs of free wage labor are probably higher to the extent that 1.) the business owner employs less personnel: those looking for work will *ceteris paribus* first try with large employers since the chance of gaining work there is the best – Stigler, “Information in the Labor Market”; 2) the local labor market is “thinner,” e.g. because the company of the employer is further away from urban population

In any case, it is plausible that there are acquisition or recruitment costs for *all* types of labor relations. The relative magnitudes of these costs can only be established by empirical research.⁹

Training costs

For many labor tasks, the worker must first be taught or trained. This is so especially for humans physically coerced to work (notably slaves), and who must find their way in an environment that is for them not only socially and culturally, but also technologically, completely alien. The learning period can last for a long time, as, for example, in agriculture, because the farm worker must fulfill a multiplicity of different tasks in the course of the seasonal cycle. And these tasks are not standardized, because environmental conditions change from year to year. It can thus be a long time before the worker knows exactly what must be done, when and where.¹⁰

Supervision costs

Once the workers are put to work, the business owner must be certain that his inferiors produce enough, that the labor products are of sufficient quality, and that the workers are careful with the means of labor.¹¹ This supervision

concentrations, as in the construction of canals, railways etc and many mines – Hanes, “Turnover Costs,” pp. 318–9; 3) the employment of workforces at particular times, as in agriculture, is more important – Hanes, “Turnover Costs,” p. 321; Shlomowitz, “Plantations and Smallholdings,” p. 4; Reid, “Sharecropping,” p. 125.

⁹ Compare Cheung, *Theory of Share Tenancy*, pp. 67–8. According to Fenoaltea, “Authority, Efficiency, and Agricultural Organization,” p. 696, “negotiation costs, unlike enforcement costs, can be incurred when time is cheap, and amortized over the life of the agreement; they are thus likely to be determining only if the agreement is to last only a very short time (which is why we have ‘casual labor’ but not ‘casual tenants’).” In an earlier article (“Rise and Fall of a Theoretical Model,” pp. 392–3), Fenoaltea had already contested: “Now the costs of negotiation may be incurred in the slack season,” and “hour for hour, negotiation costs would appear closer to negligible than equivalent to supervision costs.”

¹⁰ Fenoaltea, “Authority, Efficiency, and Agricultural Organization,” p. 700.

¹¹ The parallels between “free” wage labor and slavery are greater here than is commonly assumed. Aufhauser, “Slavery and Scientific Management,” has already pointed to essential agreements with management methods. Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, p. 335 has demonstrated that the slave plantations in the new world, “denying the individual producer control over much of the labour process, anticipated some of the features of capitalist industrialism.”

consists mainly in overseeing as well as fines and rewards disciplining the workers.

The less workers are interested in the quantity and quality of the results of their labor, the less intensively and carefully they will normally proceed. Overseeing means in general that the business owner appoints overseers ensuring that workers do their job well. Supervision costs are often difficult to estimate for historians. Cedric Yeo, for example, demonstrated that the overseeing costs for the cultivation of wheat are very high, because it involves an extensive form of cultivation in which a slave can work at least ten times more land than in the growing of tobacco or cotton.¹² This implies an explosively growing number of overseers, since their number depends upon the density of the slaves in the fields.¹³ Stefano Fenoaltea argues on the other hand that even on the great latifundia, groups of slaves did not necessarily need to be “thinned out”; it was equally possible that the workteams cultivated only a small part of the land at any one time.¹⁴

Be that as it may, in principle there are two methods to supervise the workers: overseeing the *effort*, or overseeing the *result*. An example of overseeing the result is the so-called “task system” on early rice plantations in the American South. The normal daily task of a slave involved working 1/4 acre (circa. 1000m²). If the task, according to the opinion of the overseer, had been orderly fulfilled, the working day was over.¹⁵ Overseeing the results becomes easier, the more different workers work independently from each other. Conversely, the greater the interdependence of the tasks, the more difficult it becomes for the overseers to judge the individual result. In overseeing the effort, the overseer makes sure that the worker works hard enough. This type of overseeing presupposes permanent control, and is all the easier the simpler the tasks to be fulfilled are. If additional qualifications and skills are necessary, it becomes more difficult for the overseer to estimate the intensity of labor.¹⁶

¹² Yeo, “Economics of Roman and American Slavery,” pp. 469–70.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

¹⁴ Fenoaltea, “Slavery and Supervision.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–3.

¹⁶ Burawoy and Wright, “Coercion and Consent,” pp. 81–2. Yoram Barzel, *Economic Analysis of Property Rights*, p. 80 says that both forms of overseeing inevitably allow the slaves some room for their own business: “Assuming that the supervision of effort is subject to diminishing marginal productivity, owners would, in their supervision effort, have stopped short of extracting the maximum output of which slaves were capable. The difference between slaves’ maximum output and their actual output became, in

Overseers (or others contracted for this work) can punish or reward workers for their efforts. In principle, they have three means at their disposal: compulsion; material and non-material rewards; and persuasion.¹⁷ Which combination of these incentives happens to be applied, is immediately connected with the type of labor relation. Compulsion includes threat with or without the application of force, including incarceration, tormenting, mutilation, sale (of slaves), dismissal (of wage workers) or even death. Such negative sanctions may indeed lead to the workers working hard, but not to them doing their work well. And negative sanctions encourage resistance and sabotage (which, in turn, are more effective the more complicated and skilled the labor process is). Compulsion is therefore most effective for very simple labor processes which are easy to oversee.¹⁸ Heavy physical punishments can, in addition, have the economic disadvantage that workers become temporarily or permanently unable to work.

There are also cases in which it is hardly possible – or even not at all – to oversee the workers. In these cases, the business owner will normally try to compel the workers to work well with persuasion and rewards. An example is that of herdsmen who cover large distances with their herds; their employment of labor can hardly be measured, while, however, their task demands attentiveness and a sense of responsibility. The business owner is in these circumstances reliant on the good will of the herdsmen, and this good will is often created by making the herdsman into a type of junior partner of the master by means of a *peculium*.¹⁹ More generally, Arthur Stinchcombe shows that an optimal labor contract (in the eyes of the business owner) without

practice, the slaves' property." On the other hand: "Slaves' output supervision also required output quotas, since, left to their own devices, they would have produced as little as they could. Moreover, quotas could not have been set simply by observing past performance, since slaves' incentive to produce little during the demonstration period would have been strong indeed. Since quotas were subject to error, and since too high a quota would have resulted in the destruction of slaves, the quotas owners would have selected to maximize their own wealth were expected to leave their slaves with the difference between the quota and the maximum they could produce, a difference they could take advantage of. Since owners' confiscation of slaves' accumulation would have been equivalent to raising the quota, confiscation would have defeated the purpose for which the quota was set to begin with. In pursuit of their self-interest, owners permitted slaves to own and to accumulate."

¹⁷ Tilly and Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism*, p. 74.

¹⁸ Fenoaltea, "Slavery and Supervision," pp. 639–40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 656.

overseeing consists in laborers handing over a fixed sum to the master, and being able to keep the variable remainder.²⁰ This is in fact the construction we encounter with the slaves-for-hire in Brazil in the nineteenth century.²¹

Maintenance costs

These are costs necessary to guarantee the survival of individual workers so that they remain fit to work. An essential element of maintenance costs is the subsistence wage of the wage-worker, or the daily ration for slaves. The extent of these costs is partially culturally determined, and therefore not exactly measurable. It is a case of more than a merely physiological element. These costs include not only food but also clothing, housing etc. A further essential component is the costs of missed productivity in the case of sickness, old age or pregnancy. Free wage laborers normally bear these costs themselves (directly via insurance, or indirectly via state support), while in the case of slaves, the costs are taken over by the business owner. The property relation is not affected by whether or not the slaves are actually able to work.²²

Replacement costs

An important difference between wage laborers and slaves is that the former do not belong to the fixed capital of the business owner, while the latter do. Marc Bloch has pointed out in this context that the employer who loses a wage worker due to sickness or death doesn't experience any loss, if he can immediately hire a replacement worker. If the master loses a slave, however, he has to buy a new one, and thus loses capital.²³

²⁰ Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery*, p. 147.

²¹ "They could keep any amount in excess of the stipulated payment." (Velasco e Cruz, "Puzzling Out Slave Origins," p. 218.) A somewhat different variant was found at the gold mining frontier in Barbacoas (Colombia) in the seventeenth century, where the enslaved Afro-indigenous mine workers "lived in widely scattered riparian camps, virtually independent of their independent of their owners. Fearful of disease, many slave owners preferred to live with their families in the cool highlands. Production quotas were regularly set or negotiated with these absentee masters, with surplus dust (i.e., that exceeding quotas often collected independently in unclaimed areas on Sundays and feast days) used by the slaves to purchase market goods and even freedom." Lane, "Africans and Natives," p. 169.

²² Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal, and Money*.

²³ Bloch, "Comment et pourquoi finit l'esclavage antique."

"Headaches"

Beyond these economic considerations playing a role in the choice between slavery and wage labor, there are further factors causing the business owner "headaches." Every labor system causes the business owner some ordinary and less ordinary problems. Thus, in principle, free workers can arbitrarily quit their position if something displeases them, or if they get a better offer somewhere else. The business owner must then make sure that he quickly finds a skilled replacement.²⁴ Or, the slaves escape – and sometimes these fugitives [*marrons*] return from their villages in the wilderness to attack the plantation they had left. There are further threats and risks to the master's profitable conduct of business. Both wage-workers and slaves can down tools and go on strike. If frictions in labor relations increase, the threat of individual or collective violence increases (for example, many planters on slave plantations lived in fear of being poisoned by their domestic staff). Finally, outsiders can also interfere in labor policy, for example state authorities who legally limit the room for maneuver of the business owner, or humanitarian campaigns denouncing the labor relations as degrading.

The problem of "headaches" leads us directly to the non-economic considerations of the business owner. Naturally, business owners are just as little pure *homines oeconomici* as workers. They have a certain picture of the world, often based upon a religion. They are guided by more or less stringent moral principles. These subjective aspects can in certain conditions play a role in the choice of labor relations. That role can vary greatly; Christian faith, for example, has both legitimated slavery, as well as justified resistance against this kind of exploitation.²⁵

Finally, there are also the instrumental and normative considerations of the workers. Their scope for decision-making is generally not nearly as large as that of the business owners. But workers can nevertheless exercise pressure in

²⁴ In his study of a Baltimore chemical plant in the late 1820s, where both slaves and non-slaves worked, Stephen Whitman arrives at the conclusion that "perhaps the biggest incentive for acquiring slaves came from the turnover of free laborers, which routinely exceeded 100 percent per year." (Whitman, "Industrial Slavery at the Margin," p. 38) He adds an interesting observation: "To the extent that longer service rendered workers more valuable, the importance of the slaves was heightened." (Ibid., p. 39)

²⁵ See e.g., Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, pp. 61–2.

a definite direction. We can usually assume that at least three aspects play a role: (i) bodily integrity, i.e. resistance against corporal punishment, unhealthy labor relations etc.; (ii) social security, i.e. protection in the case of sickness, old age etc.; and (iii) autonomy, i.e. the possibility of determining one's own fate.²⁶ These three aspects can stand in opposition to each other, and can be assessed very differently. It has also happened that unfree workers regretted their liberation, because while they certainly gained more autonomy, at the same time they lost a large part of their security.²⁷

This overview indicates that the way in which a given labor relation comes about under capitalist conditions is in truth a very complicated affair, and not simple and straightforward. Many different influences play a role, and their relative significance may not be clear at the outset. Naturally, business owners want to keep their costs as low as possible, but they are confronted with great difficulties; the reduction of one type of cost can lead to a rise of other costs. For example: a business owner may prefer to avoid turnover costs, wishing workers to stay on as long as possible, but to attain this, he either has to buy slaves, or to bind "free" wage workers with indirect means such as pensions, wage rises, promotions, or the withholding (of a part) of the wage until the end of a determinate period.

Decision-making in labor policy can be difficult, because the risks are unclear and necessary information is lacking.²⁸ This reality helps explain why business owners, in comparable conditions, choose now one, now another labor relation. Robert Starobin shows that industrial entrepreneurs in the south of the United States were in fact continually thrown back and forth between slavery and free wage labor.²⁹ It is probable that business managers

²⁶ Doyal and Gough, *Theory of Human Need*; Dasgupta, *Inquiry*, pp. 75–103.

²⁷ Thus for example sometimes in the abolition of serfdom in Russia in 1861. See Esper, "Condition of the Serf Workers," p. 671.

²⁸ Hoffman, "Economic Theory of Sharecropping," p. 313.

²⁹ Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, pp. 117–28. See on the so-called "contractual mixes" (without consideration of slavery) Stiglitz, "Incentives and Risk-sharing"; Newberry, "Risk Sharing"; Newberry and Stiglitz, "Sharecropping." On "trial and error" in the introduction of slavery into the Caribbean, see Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, p. 315. "Trial and error" in the introduction of "indentured servitude" by the Virginia Company is described in Galenson, "Rise and Fall of Indentured Servitude," pp. 7–8. History also provides examples of groups of entrepreneurs who allow expert outsiders to judge if their decision to use unfree workers is economically optimal. At the beginning of the 19th century, there was an extensive debate amongst the large landown-

employ algorithms in the decision for a certain labor system, in the sense of abbreviated formulas that correspond to the norms and behavior that one already knows.³⁰

Stability problems

Suppose that business owners decide to introduce slave labor into a certain economic sector in a certain region. Under what conditions will it be a *stable* labor system, able to persist in the long term? Numerous factors must be taken into account:

Stability of the slave population

To define this factor, a simple equation may be useful:

$$P = (S_{in} - S_{out}) + (G - S) + (M_{in} - M_{out}) + e$$

The variables in this equation are the following:

P = net growth (or net negative growth) of the number of slaves in the region in the interval of time between moment t_1 and moment t_2 ;

ers of Austria and Galicia over the pros and cons of Robot, i.e. the legally regulated peasant *corvée*-labor. Numerous calculations were made in which performances in the context of Robot were compared with wage labor. Arguments for wage labor, among others, were that the employer himself could pick out his subaltern workers; that the time of the journey to work is not counted in the number of labor hours; and that the productivity of unfree labor is less. On balance, it was estimated that wage labor is at least doubly as profitable as Robot. Blum, *Noble Landowners*, pp. 192–202.

³⁰ Such algorithms for slave-holders have not yet been, as far as I know, demonstrated. In the case of share-cropping, there is a very logical argument for its establishment. Stiglitz, "Rational Peasants," p. 22, correctly notes: "the range of contract forms seems far more restricted than theory would suggest: most contracts have, for instance, shares of one-half, one-third, or two-thirds. Although there have been several attempts to explain this uniformity, none has gained general acceptance. I suspect that it is here that a broader social/historical theory is required. Individuals are concerned that in their dealings they are treated fairly. Views of fairness are to a large extent conventionally (historically) determined. It does not pay to treat workers unfairly, for this will reduce their work effort. Hence, if in some society a sharing rule of 50 per cent comes to be accepted, it does not pay for a landlord to deviate from this social convention, even if, at that rate, there is an excess supply of tenants."

$S_{in} - S_{out}$ = the net result of social mobility during this interval of time, i.e. the difference inside the region between the number of humans who become slaves, and the number freed from slavery (or who free themselves);

$G - S$ = the natural growth (or natural negative growth) of the slave population in this interval of time, i.e. the difference between the birth and death rate;

$M_{in} - M_{out}$ = net migration in the interval of time, i.e. the difference between the number of slaves in the region who immigrate (or were introduced from outside) and the number of slaves who "emigrate" (that is, were sold on the external market or escaped);

e = error in measurement.

This formula indicates that the demographic stability of a slave population has many determinants, in particular a) social mobility (manumission/enslavement), b) demography in a narrow sense, and c) involuntary migration. If, for example, the immigration of slaves (M_{in}) reduces, because the slave trade is greatly obstructed (as in the Atlantic regions, after the British prohibition of the slave trade in 1807) or because population density in the regions from which slaves are captured significantly declines (as in West Africa), then this – with the same level of social mobility – must be compensated for by a greater "natural" increase of the slave population.

However, there is also another aspect. John Moes advances the thesis that any system supported by slavery disintegrates in the long term, if there is no influx of new slaves from lands outside the region. The reason is not so much demographic (because slave populations can for all intents and purposes "naturally" reproduce themselves), but rather that the labor productivity of slaves who can buy their freedom is significantly higher, than the labor productivity of slaves who cannot improve their position. Slaves who can buy their freedom work better and harder than others. The master therefore has a material interest in enabling his slaves to be able to buy their freedom, and indeed, charge a manumission price higher than the market price of slaves, in order to make a profit when he grants the slaves their freedom. Lacking sufficient immigration of slaves, the slave system would therefore lead more

or less automatically to its own demise. Even in the USA, slavery would have ended of its own accord, according to Moes, if there had not been a civil war, and if the economy had been able to unfold its own logic – a development that, in his view, also occurred in the late Roman Empire.³¹

Solidification

When business owners have opted for slavery, it can in some conditions be economically rational to continue this policy, even if, due to the previously mentioned considerations, it has become more rational to choose another labor relation. The master invests a great deal (buying his slaves signifies a large sum of fixed capital) and he obviously wants to recover his costs. A change in the labor system could lead to large transfer and transaction costs. Stanley Engerman rightly states: “Although the inauguration of the [slave] system might be due to seemingly minor and accidental factors, once created the slave owning class has an incentive to avoid capital losses by perpetuating the system.”³² Moreover, the transition to another system of labor relations always causes uncertainties. In the words of Joseph Stiglitz: “history itself creates an important asymmetry of information: individuals know more about

³¹ Moes, “[Comment],” p. 252. “It was the experience of antiquity that holding slaves under such conditions [with the possibility of manumission by self-purchase] was more profitable than when the outlook was for a man to remain in bondage for life. As a consequence, manumissions by self-purchase were always numerous, and when, because of the establishment of the Pax Romana by Emperor Augustus, slaves ceased to stream into Italy in the form of captives of war, while piracy and banditry, the other major sources of slave supply, were vigorously suppressed, slavery was doomed to virtual extinction. This transition was accomplished in rural areas as well as in the cities. It was by no means a phenomenon restricted to an urban society or to slaves that were particularly talented. On the land, the chained slave gangs (which in the time of the Roman Republic, when slave prices were low and the treatment of slaves accordingly harsh, had worked the latifundia) disappeared. The estates came to be occupied by free tenants, descendants of slaves who against a consideration had been voluntarily emancipated by their masters. And since the times were prosperous, all this occurred in a period in which slave prices were high and rising” Moes, “[Comment],” p. 253. In an empirical study of manumissions in Louisiana during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Shawn Cole (“Capitalism and Freedom,” p. 1025) reaches the conclusion however “that manumission as an incentive scheme would probably not have brought an end to the American system of slavery: manumission was not common, and laws prohibiting it were effective.”

³² Engerman, “Some Considerations,” p. 60. Similar arguments in Gerschenkron, “Agrarian Policies,” p. 141 and Rudolph, “Agricultural Structure,” p. 56, about serfdom in Tsarist Russia.

the institutions and conventions with which they have lived in the recent past than they know of others by which they might live. The consequences of change are thus uncertain, and risk aversion itself provides some impetus to the preservation of current institutions."³³

Normative Changes

Slavery starts with the assumption that slaves are not truly human, but rather, living "means of labor". Slave owners usually try to separate their slaves from the rest of the population – this practice succeeds better when slaves are imported from distant lands, have foreign customs, and do not speak the local language. The longer slavery exists, however, the more likely it becomes that communication between slaves and freemen increases; the slaves are "naturalized," learn the local language and customs, sometimes even take up the faith of the local resident population etc. In that case, the slaves are to some extent "humanized" from their previous sub-human status. Such assimilation can, in the long run, undermine the legitimation of slavery.³⁴

Purchasing power

In the previous chapter, I noted that slaves represent negligible effective demand (in the sense of independent purchasing power in capitalist markets). On this ground, many authors argue that the rate of economic growth was *braked* in regions where slavery was dominant (and in particular, that it braked industrialization oriented to the domestic market). Because of that fact, the competitive position of slave-holding regions was weakened in the long term.

Technological development

Previously I concluded that technological progress and slavery are quite compatible. To be sure, a retarded development in the labor processes performed by the slaves could occur, but most probably the economic considerations of

³³ Stiglitz, "Rational Peasants," p. 26.

³⁴ Bonnassie, "Survie et extinction" and "Le Temps des Wisigoths."

slaveholders were much more responsible for such an eventuality.³⁵ But we have also seen that technological developments increasing the worker's scope for decision-making lead to important changes in the labor relations. In the case of slavery, the application of more advanced technology was only ever possible, *if* the slaves gained more freedom in their work.

Resistance

The social struggles of slaves can not only cause changes within the slave system. Slave revolts can also bring about its total collapse, as shown by the revolution on Santo Domingo in 1791. Such a general uprising was the "ultimate nightmare" of the slaveholders, wherever in the world it might occur.³⁶ The "Haiti experience" sparked off not only the rebellion in Cuba in 1812, in the United States in 1820 and a little later in Jamaica and Brazil; it also inspired the abolitionist campaigns in Great Britain.³⁷ As a corollary, if slave revolts were often put down with extraordinary brutality and at great cost, the intention was to set a clear example that would foreclose the possibility that any "dangerous ideas" might arise among other slaves.

In conclusion

All the mentioned facets can only be correctly understood, if we include the historically changing broader contexts in the analysis. These contexts refer both to the overarching social relations that influence the labor systems of a society – and which, in their turn, are influenced by them – and to relations between labor and the physical environment.

To illustrate the interaction between labor systems and broader social relations, consider the contrast between the South of the USA and Brazil.³⁸ In

³⁵ Aufhauser, "Slavery and Technological Change," shows this with two examples of technological renewal on sugar plantations, the plough and the vacuum vessel. Gemery and Hogendorn, "Technological Change," have further pointed out that merchandizing and the transport of slaves developed in every respect dynamically in the Atlantic region between 1600 and 1800.

³⁶ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, p. 186.

³⁷ See e.g., Geggus, *Impact of the Haitian Revolution*; Munro, "Can't Stand Up for Falling Down."

³⁸ I base my argument here on discussions with Robert W. Slenes (University of Campinas, Brazil).

Brazil, as is well known, racism was never as pervasively institutionalized as in the USA. Why? Essentially, because the slaves in Brazil were in a *stronger position* than in the USA: the number of slaves relative to the total population was much greater in Brazil than in the USA; slaves in Brazil could escape into the forests and organize resistance there (*marronage/quilimbo*); slaves in Brazil – particularly when they came from Angola – could already speak the language of their masters (Portuguese) before their arrival in Brazil; and the Brazilian slaves often originated from Central Africa, where the languages were related to each other, and communication between different groups was therefore easier, whereas in the USA the slaves were more often ethnically divided.

The significance of the physical environment becomes apparent if we consider the social effects of climate constraints. In large parts of Russia, for example, the period during which crops can be sown and harvested is limited to just a few months, while the rest of the year the climate is extremely cold. This co-determined the type of labor mobilization, and therefore the structure of labor relations.³⁹

³⁹ August von Haxthausen compared a manor in Mainz with a manor in Yaroslav. He pointed out that “the most important part of agriculture, the ordering and harvesting of the field” can, in Mainz, be distributed over 7 months due to the long summer, while the same work in Yaroslav must be limited to 4 months. “Thus for what I can achieve there on a field of similar quality and size with 4 men and 4 horses, I require here 7 men and 7 horses.” Furthermore, winter in Mainz is less hard, and therefore “one can employ the available and more expensive to feed men and animals for all types of work,” like the improvement of the field, or earthworks. In Yaroslav, on the other hand, “there is no employment at all for the entire winter.” This explains why a manor in Yaroslav can exist, not with wage-labor, “but only as a tenure economy or in combination with factory-like businesses.” Haxthausen, *Studien*, I, pp. 172–7.

Varieties of mutualism

Chapter Five

The mutualist universe

In diverse circumstances workers have participated in mutualist arrangements to make their lives more livable and less risky. “Mutualism” refers to *all voluntary arrangements, in which people make contributions to a collective fund, which is given, in whole or in part, to one or more of the contributors according to specific rules of allocation.*¹ The rationale of mutualism can be clarified most easily using the terminology of Rational Choice Theory – without, however, accepting this theory as a whole.² Quite simply, some things in everyday life people “desire but cannot provide at all, or as efficiently, for themselves as individuals.”³ These things could be labor, products, or money. They occur for two reasons. Firstly, there are a great number of things in any society which individuals cannot possibly create on their own, within a reasonable period of time; they practically need the help of other people to obtain them. This condition is sometimes referred to as “intrinsic jointness”. Secondly, there are tasks which an individual could well perform himself, but which would have significant

¹ “Mutualism” is a concept which goes back to the nineteenth century. The term was probably coined by the French social anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. See his *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (1865). Also compare with Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*.

² van der Linden, “Old Workers’ Movements and ‘New Political Economy’.”

³ Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*, p. 33.

negative effects (costs) for the person involved, for example because working to obtain a good on one's own is frightening or stultifying, or because it gets in the way of other activities. In both cases, individuals benefit by enlisting the help of others. To compensate for this cooperation from others, they can reciprocate by performing a task in return, or pay for it in cash or with goods.

Mutualist activities not only occur among all kinds of workers, formally or informally, but also among all other social classes. Mutualism in this sense is not class-specific, although it is often an important component of proletarian survival strategies: a wealth of social contacts with people willing to share may compensate for a lack of material wealth.

Typology

Labor mutuals

In mutualist arrangements, different people contribute labor, products or money to a shared project. Let us begin with mutualist institutions in which the fund consists of labor. Such institutions can either rotate labor, or use labor for the production of one good, by which all can benefit. In the first case (rotation), one person first "consumes" the labor of the rest of the group, and after that another, etc. Such forms of labor rotation are known around the world.⁴ Nicolaas van Meeteren describes one such arrangement on Curaçao, which was popular there until the first decades of the twentieth century: "Whenever one needed to weed, plant or harvest, the custom was implemented that was known as 'saam.' All neighbors then agreed to work for each other once or twice in the week in the evening by moonlight. The beneficiary of the work provided rum and refreshments. As the workers encouraged each other by singing in turns in 'guenee' or 'Macamba,' the work went smoothly and everyone benefitted by it."⁵ Van Meeteren thinks that a *saam* had the advantage that the work was done much faster, because workers encouraged each other, which is very important, especially for strenuous labor in the fields.⁶ Other writers confirm this conjecture. David Ames offers

⁴ See e.g., Epstein, *Economic Development*, p. 73; Dawley, *Class and Community*, p. 57; Wong, *Peasants in the Making*, p. 120.

⁵ Van Meeteren, *Volkskunde van Curaçao*, p. 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*

two explanations: working in a group both stimulates friendly competition among workers, and is more agreeable: "Working with one's companions, joking and singing, is obviously less tedious than solitary labor."⁷

Work in the fields is, of course, not the only form of labor that can be rotated. The "barn raisings" common in the United States in the nineteenth century are another example: every first Sunday of the month, a group of farmers built a new barn for one of their members, until every member of the group had had his turn.⁸ In yet another variant, women take care of each other's children in turn, or help each other with other tasks.

In a second form of labor mutualism, the joint effort results in a *shared* product. The members of the collective gather once or several times to work together, for the production of a good from which they all hope to benefit when it is ready.⁹ Collectively building a community centre or a church are good examples.

Labor mutualism often becomes less important when money becomes more central to the local economy. A tendency to buy labor tasks individually with money then usually increases. On Curaçao, the *saam* seems to have disappeared from the 1920s or 1930s onwards. Similar trends are visible in many places.¹⁰ But there are also exceptions to this rule. In the case of the Maka in Southeastern Cameroon, the rise of the cash crop cultivation instead stimulated labor rotation, because the Maka refused to perform wage labor for the other villagers.¹¹

⁷ Ames, "Wolof Co-operative Work Groups," p. 231.

⁸ Besley, Coate and Loury, "Economics of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations," p. 793 (note).

⁹ Apart from rotating labor (which in the literature is also called "cooperative labor" or "exchange labor"), there is also festive labor, i.e. labor which is organized *ad hoc* at the request of one villager, who rewards the workers for their efforts with food and drink (Erasmus, "Culture, Structure and Process"; Moore, "Cooperative Labour in Peasant Agriculture"). Swindell, *Farm Labour*, p. 133, suspects that in tropical Africa festive workgroups "may well form the basis of contemporary hired gang labour, inasmuch as their lack of reciprocity is a means of transferring labour from poorer farmers to 'big-men' and emergent capitalist farmers."

¹⁰ Erasmus, "Culture, Structure and Process"; Brown, "Population Growth."

¹¹ Geschiere, "Working Groups or Wage Labour?."

Rotating savings and credit funds (ROSCAS)

It is a small step from labor mutuals to mutualist institutions in which the shared fund consists partly or wholly of goods or money. Labor rotation corresponds to the simplest variant of the “rotating savings and credit mutual”, the ROSCA, in which, however, the labor input is replaced by a contribution in the form of goods or money. The transaction cycle in the simplest ROSCA operation can be pictured as in Table 5.1.¹²

Table 5.1
A simple ROSCA

Member	Contribution Sum received			Total
	1st meeting	2nd meeting	3rd meeting	
A	10 0	10 30	10 0	30 30
B	10 30	10 0	10 0	30 30
C	10 0	10 0	10 30	30 30

An anthropological study from the early 1960s records that Indian migrants on the island of Mauritius operated a ROSCA called a *cycle* or *cheet*: “A man or a woman calls together a group of friends and neighbours. Suppose there are ten of them, and each puts in Rs. 10. They then draw lots and the winner takes the Rs. 100. (Sometimes the organiser automatically takes the first ‘pool’.) The following month each again puts in Rs. 10, and another member takes the resulting Rs. 100; and so it continues for ten months until each member has had his Rs. 100.”¹³ In other words, sums of money were deposited in the *cheet*, but for the rest the logic was the same as in labor rotation. It is therefore not surprising that some scholars believe ROSCAS originated in rotating labor pools.¹⁴ This explanation seems plausible, but whether it is correct has yet to be proved by empirical research.

¹² Compare Ardener, “Comparative Study of Rotating Credit Associations,” p. 214.

¹³ Benedict, “Capital, Saving and Credit,” p. 341.

¹⁴ We can read, for example, about Ngwaland in the Imo State of Nigeria: “The Ngwa have a tradition of pooling labour to break farm bottlenecks. Transition from labour pools to pooling money resources was easy enough.” (Nwabughuogu, “*Isusu*,” p. 47). And the following comment is made on the *Njangi* (ROSCA) in Cameroon: “The *njangi* is really the monetised form of a traditional method of organising co-operative labour, namely what might be called a ‘rotating land-clearing association’. Several men agree to work as a group, first on the fields of one member, and then in succession

ROSCAS can also be vastly more complex than the very simple case just described. The allocation of the order of rotation is central to ROSCAS, but this order can be determined by agreement among participants in various different ways: allocation by an organizer; by auction; or by drawing lots. In an auction, individual participants can obviously strongly influence the order of allocation, and this method can therefore lead to quite complex relations of debt and credit within the arrangement.¹⁵ In the case of Mauritius, we find that, like the Indian immigrants on the island, the Chinese also had ROSCAS. But these functioned in a different way:

The Chinese on the island – as elsewhere – operate a variant of the cycle in which the ‘lenders’ (late drawers) in effect receive interest payments from the ‘borrowers’ (early drawers). The participants bid for turns; a man in need of quick cash may bid to take Rs. 90 instead of Rs. 100, if permitted to draw first, or he may agree to put in a total of Rs. 110 over the cycle if he can have Rs. 100 immediately. Thus the other members of the cycle receive in due course more than their contributions; the difference is a form of interest paid to them by those with more urgent need of money. If the second and third drawings are bid for as well, the total interest payments to the more patient members increase.¹⁶

The sheer number of different methods invented for allocating resources through ROSCAS is astounding, and the arrangements could indeed become exceedingly complex.¹⁷ Just exactly why some ROSCAS are so much more

on those of everyone else in the group. Indeed, some *njangi* members report that the money they save is used to hire labour to clear their farm land.” (Delancey, “Credit for the Common Man,” p. 319).

¹⁵ Calomiris and Rajaraman, “Role of ROSCAS,” pp. 211–5.

¹⁶ Benedict “Capital, Saving and Credit,” p. 341; see also Freedman, “Handling of Money.”

¹⁷ Here is a complex example from China in the 1930s, the so-called *yao hui* (Fei, *Peasant Life in China*, pp. 270–3):

- An organizer who was in immediate need of money was the starting point. He brought together fourteen other people. Everyone contributed \$10. The organizer paid \$10 on every meeting (that is 14 times in total) plus an interest of \$3 each time. The organizer paid $14 \times \$10 + 14 \times \$3 = \$182$ in total, whereas he received $14 \times \$10 = \140 on the first meeting. In other words, he paid an interest of \$42.
- Every time, all participants received half the contribution of the organizer divided by the number of participants ($[\$13/2]/14 = 0.464$). This was called the “organizer’s surplus.” The order of the players was decided by lot.
- Every session, the fourteen participants received in turn a fixed sum of \$70 ($\$140/2$). Thus, the person who received \$70, actually received $\$70 + \$0.464 = \$70.464$.

complex than others is still largely unknown.¹⁸ It is perhaps no coincidence though that the most complex varieties occur in village communities with a long history. We could therefore hypothesize that starters, such as migrants

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- If a member had received \$70, he would pay $\$70/14 = \5 , plus an interest of (\$1.5) (that is \$6.5 in total) at every subsequent meeting. A person who had received \$70 was called a *debtor*; a person who still had to receive his share was called a *depositor*. As the rotating cycle proceeded, the number of debtors increased and the number of depositors diminished.
 - The first session began when the organizer had received his \$140. During this session, the first debtor appeared. \$70.464 was paid and \$13 was received (from the organizer). A grand total of \$57.464 was spent. There were thirteen depositors and their 'subscription' (whatever that may be) was therefore $\$57.464/13 = \4.420 .
 - In the second session, it was the second debtor's turn to receive \$70.464 while the organizer again paid \$13. In addition, the first debtor paid $\$6.5 \text{ B } \$0.464 = \$6.036$. The society paid a grand total of $\$70.464 \text{ B } \$19.036 = \$51.428$. This amounted to \$4.286 for each of the twelve depositors.
 - In the third session, the third debtor received \$70.464, the two debtors paid $2 \times \$6.036 = \12.072 , and the group as a whole consequently $\$70.464 \text{ B } 25.072 = \45.492 . This amounted to \$4.126 (or actually 4.127) for each of the eleven depositors. And so on.
 - In the tenth session, the tenth debtor received \$70.464, the nine debtors of the preceding sessions paid $9 \times \$6.036 = \54.324 , and the organizer paid \$13. Consequently, the association as a whole paid $\$70.464 \text{ B } \$67.324 = \$3.14$. That amounted to \$0.785 for each of the four depositors.
 - In the eleventh session, the group realized a positive balance. \$70.464 was paid and $\$13 + (10 \times \$6.036 = \$60.360) = \73.360 was received. The remainder was consequently \$2.896. Thus, the three remaining depositors then received a sum of money, namely \$0.965.
 - In the fourteenth and last session \$70.464 was paid and $\$13 + (13 \times \$6.036 = \$78.468) = \91.468 was received. There was a positive balance of \$8.004 and no depositor.

If we consider the individual balance of each player in the course of the entire game, it appears that the organizer (as we already remarked) paid \$182 and received \$140. The person whose turn it was in the first session received \$70.464 and paid $\$10 + (13 \times \$6.036 = \$78.468) = \88.468 . Generally speaking, the later a player became a debtor, the more money he would receive. It is clear that *yao hui* was a rather complicated ROSCA. Thus, Fei, the anthropologist who described this arrangement, remarked that "The complexity of this system is too difficult for every ordinary villager to understand. In fact, very few persons in the village know the system of calculation. They have therefore to invite the village heads to instruct them." Fei, *Peasant Life in China*, p. 273.

¹⁸ In their Mexican case study, Kurtz and Showman, "Tanda," p. 70, make a suggestion that could be taken further: "The fact that participants in the *tanda* do not acquire their position in the rotation order either by bidding or gambling, as is common in some Asian associations, points to the consumer-oriented function of the *tanda*." Anyway, not every member need have exactly one share. Bascom, "Esusu," p. 64, writes on the Esusu: "A single individual may hold more than one 'membership' in a given *esusu* groep by regularly making more than one contribution and receiving the fund more than once during a single cycle. Conversely, a single 'membership' may be shared by two or more individuals who are not able to afford the entire contribution separately."

who only recently know people in the place where they have newly settled, would prefer simple varieties. In contrast, groups with a tightly knit, stable and relatively old community culture would be more likely to experiment with the rules, and sometimes develop very complex systems of reciprocal obligation.

Savings and loan associations (SLAs)

The required sum deposited in every “meeting” in a ROSCA can vary considerably. Quite large sums of money must have circulated in the rotating manumission funds with which Brazilian slaves-for-hire bought their freedom in the nineteenth century, for example.¹⁹ Some goods are obviously too expensive to pay for with ordinary ROSCAs. Houses are a clear example. In general, they are so expensive that households have to save many years to buy them (if indeed they can save this amount of money at all). In such cases, a ROSCA can be employed in which the members do not receive a payment in *every* round, but after *several* rounds. If, for instance, ten families each want a house worth \$10,000 and if these families each deposit \$1,000 every year in a shared fund, then one family can buy a house each year, and after ten years all families have a house. Such “extended” ROSCAs were established in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. Later they were introduced in many other countries. In Germany, they were known as *Bausparkassen*.²⁰ ROSCAs of this type were also referred to as “terminating societies,” discontinued when all the participants had had their turn.

Simultaneous allocation

As the ROSCAs are in a sense homologous to forms of rotating labor, the second form of labor allocation also has its counterpart in the domain of goods and money. In this variant, a group saves a certain amount of money by means of a periodic contribution. They can subsequently do one of three things with this sum. They can buy a common good that remains a collective property (a joint good), they can distribute the saved sum again among the participants

¹⁹ Velasco e Cruz, “Puzzling Out Slave Origins,” p. 223, observes, that “the model of the manumission funds “seems to have been the *esusu* [ROSCA], a Yoruba institution [...] that the African diaspora introduced in several parts of the Americas.”

²⁰ Block, *Bausparen*; Scholten, “Rotating Savings and Credit Associations.”

(individual allocation of money), or they can buy goods with the money that will subsequently be distributed among the participants (individual allocation of goods).

A *joint good* can be anything. In the 1950s, Harry Hoetink gave a very mundane example of “the system that occurred in the Netherlands in which several housewives buy a washing machine together, and use it in turn.”²¹ An important form of joint good allocation is that of cooperatives of small commodity producers (craftsmen, farmers), such as cooperative dairies which, in their original form, “consisted merely of a group of dairymen banded together on the basis of turning the milk into cheese, each man being left with his cheese to dispose of as best as he could.”²² Similar arrangements are found around the world. The *mahaber* is an Ethiopian example: “It usually has the purpose of providing assistance to those who are still in the countryside, not having migrated to an urban area. Thus, the residents of a principal city will meet periodically, and provide funds to support some project back in the home village or in the countryside, such as building a school, hospital, road, community hall, or furnishing one of these facilities, or some other needy purpose.”²³ Bouman and Harteveld provide an example from Western Cameroon, around 1970: “Sometimes all money is pooled for a specific purpose as with the Cornmill Societies, to enable women to buy a cornmill to relieve them of the tedious maize-grinding by hand.”²⁴ A savings association of this type has a structure as pictured in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2
A simple saving association for a joint good

Member	Contribution Sum received			Total
	1st meeting	2nd meeting	3rd meeting	
A	10 0	10 0	10 0	30 0
B	10 0	10 0	10 0	30 0
C	10 0	10 0	10 0	30 0
A+B+C	30 0	30 0	30 0	90 90

²¹ Hoetink, “Curaçao en Thorstein Veblen,” p. 43.

²² Hibbard, “Agricultural Cooperation,” p. 522.

²³ Gerdes, “Precursors of Modern Social Security,” p. 219.

²⁴ Bouman and Harteveld, “Djanggi,” p. 107. Similar arrangements can be found in European history. See Tann, “Co-operative Corn Milling”; Banfield, “Consumer-Owned Community Flour and Bread Societies.”

Such a saving association can already be effective if there is only one round, if that one round is sufficient to purchase the joint good.

A different situation obtains in the case of *individual allocation of money*, an arrangement also known as “Savings Association” (SAVA) in the literature.²⁵ Bähre gives an example from an unofficial settlement near Cape Town: “Each month the members met at a member’s house and deposited R150. One of the members, Nofurniture, saved R300 per month; R150 for her and R150 on the name of a fictive person. The money was deposited in a group account at NedBank. After ten months, she received about R3,000 that she used to rebuild her house in Transkei.”²⁶ In SAVAS, one round is of course never sufficient. The individual contribution would then be equal to the individual payment, and there would be no point in the arrangement.

The last variety is the *individual allocation of goods*. This includes, for example, the simplest consumer cooperatives which are also known as “dividing stores.” To illustrate, Arthur von Studnitz, a German social reformer who travelled across the United States in 1876, reported a conversation with a mule spinner from Fall River. The spinner’s story was as follows:

The seven of us were working in a factory when prices rose so much that we could hardly afford to buy food anymore. So we decided to pool our dollars and cents to buy what we needed more cheaply. Each of us calculated his family’s needs for the next month. We drew up a budget of ninety-eight dollars and appointed a secretary, who footed up everything we needed. Next, we sent someone to purchase the goods. We rented an area, brought the items there, and distributed them. When everything cost less than expected, we would refund the balance. When it cost more, we paid what was due. We called our area the Mule Spinners Cooperative Store. We purchased our clothes the same way, except that we agreed to buy from the dealer that offered us the biggest discount. The dealer gave us stamps entitling us to a discount, thus saving us ten percent on clothes and twelve percent on sewing supplies.²⁷

²⁵ Smets, “Community-Based Finance Systems,” p. 178.

²⁶ Bähre, “Money and Violence,” p. 215 note.

²⁷ Von Studnitz, *Nordamerikanische Arbeiterverhältnisse*, pp. 206–7. A transition from the ROSCA is possible in this case. Here is an example from Western Cameroon: “Other djanggi have taken on a supply function. People preferring zinc roofs to thatched houses for the sake of convenience and status, have started djanggi where all funds

Simultaneous allocation with credit facilities

A fund created to be allocated simultaneously can, in the meantime, also be used as a credit facility. In that case, all members of a group regularly deposit money in the fund, but they can also temporarily take money from it, promising to repay later. Usually, a member who takes out a loan will have to pay interest. Such an arrangement is also referred to as an “Accumulating Savings and Credit Association” (ASCRA).²⁸ Migrant workers in Cameroon have an institution which they call a *family meeting* or *country meeting*. These are associations of people from the same region, or from an area, where the same language is spoken. Delancey describes the arrangement:

The ethnic associations in anglophone Cameroon are a regular feature of the lives of a large proportion of those who live in a migration ‘location’: 80 per cent of those who come from ‘outside’ are members, as well as 40 per cent of those whose origin is in the neighbourhood. The meetings range in size from 10–12 to about 100, and are usually held soon after pay day in a plantation camp or a centrally-located town. [...] The get-together frequently opens with some business transactions. Members contribute money to be held as savings by the associations until the end of the year, and the treasurer deposits these funds in a bank and/or may make interest-payable loans to members – and, occasionally, to non-members. All savings and accumulated interest are returned to the members in November or December, and this enables them to pay their heavy Christmas expenses. But many immediately return a large proportion of the accrued funds to the savings programme for the next year, which opens at the same meeting. [...] During the year as many as 30–60 per cent of the members may take such loans, and although in most meetings these cannot exceed what the borrowers have saved in the society, the amount may sometimes be raised to the extent that other members are willing to pledge their savings as a guarantee of loan repayment. In case of default, the sureties lose their savings.²⁹

are kept by the president who then buys zinc sheets to distribute over the members instead of money. Buying in large quantities he is likely to claim a discount. The same procedure might suit agricultural purposes.” Bouman and Hartevelde, “Djanggi,” p. 114.

²⁸ Bouman, “ROSCA and ASCRA,” pp. 376–7.

²⁹ Delancey, “Credit for the Common Man,” p. 320. See also the case of the *pork societies* in Hong Kong’s New Territories in the 1950s (Topley, “Capital, Saving and Credit,” p. 178).

Producer cooperation

When a group of people establishes a collective fund to buy means of production (instruments etc.) and starts a business on own account, this is actually a combined *buying, production and selling cooperative* employing its members. Such arrangements have a long history. The association which fourteen unemployed piano makers set up in Paris, one and a half century ago, offers a good illustration:

They began [...] by collecting contributions of a few pennies from each member. Since they worked from home, most owned some of the necessary material for their trade: they contributed to the society in kind. On 10 March 1849 they established the society with 2,000 francs worth of inventory and 229.50 francs in cash. Following this major accomplishment, the society was ready for clients. None came for two months. Of course, the members obtained neither profit nor salary; they survived by pawning their personal belongings. The fourth month they found a bit of repair work and earned some money. Dividing it amongst themselves, they obtained 6.60 francs apiece. Each member kept 5 francs from this modest dividend. The surplus (i.e. 1.60 francs per person) was used for a fraternal banquet with their wives and children to celebrate the association's auspicious beginning. [...] In June, a few weeks later, they had a windfall, an order for an entire piano costing 480 francs!³⁰

Mutual insurance

It is also possible that a collective fund is set up on the basis of periodic contributions, paid out in part or as a whole only when a calamity occurs. The savings fund is then used as an insurance scheme. Again, there are two variants: either the money is used to cover collective risks, or it is used to cover individual risks.

A *collective coverage of risks* is relevant when the group is threatened by a common danger – a danger that can only be averted by a joint good. Daniel Defoe provided an example, when he wrote about

³⁰ Gide, *Les obstacles au développement*, pp. 19–20. An account of an eyewitness can be found in Huber, "Skizzen aus dem französischen Genossenschaftsleben," pp. 923–33.

our marshes and fens in Essex, Kent, and the Isle of Ely, where great quantities of land being with much pains and a vast charge recovered out of the seas and rivers, and maintained with banks (which they call walls), the owners of those lands agree to contribute to the keeping up of those walls; and if I have a piece of land in any level or marsh, though it bonds nowhere on the sea or river, yet I pay my proportion to the maintenance of the said wall or bank; and if at any time the sea breaks in, the damage is not laid upon the man in whose land the breach happened, unless it was by his neglect, but it lies on the whole land, and is called a level lot.³¹

An *individual coverage of risks* is appropriate if members of an association are individually threatened by a danger, such as for instance illness, death, or disabilities caused by labor. In that case, all members contribute to a fund periodically, but only those members who require compensation for a specific reason receive a pay-out from the fund. The simplest form of such an arrangement is pictured in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3
A simple mutual-insurance association

Member	Contribution Sum received			Total
	1st meeting	2nd meeting	3rd meeting	
A	10 0	10 0	10 0	30 0
B	10 0	10 0	10 90	30 90
C	10 0	10 0	10 0	30 0

Interactions and transformations

It is not uncommon that different mutualist associations are linked to each other directly or indirectly. Firstly, people sometimes belong to several associations of the same type all at once. Often, these members “repay debts with debts.”³² Such multiple memberships, Bouman and Harteveld note, mean that

³¹ Defoe, “Essay Upon Projects”, section “Of Friendly Societies”.

³² Lont, “Juggling Money in Yogyakarta,” p. 233. See also Bascom, “*Esusu*,” p. 64: “It is also common for a single individual to belong at the same time to several different *esusu* groups, which may have different contributions and varying intervals of payment.”

ROSCAS and ASCRAS are no longer “small, separated societies,” but “emerge as a system of linked credit rings in which money continually flows from one association to another.”³³ Secondly, associations of different types can be connected to each other. In the west of Cameroon, for instance, we find “special fund societies” (a kind of ASCRA) in addition to ROSCAS (*djanggi*). These special funds “sometimes take the form of a trouble fund and are combined with *djanggis*, making the latter all the more flexible and better adapted to the needs of its members. A member, unable to honour his *djanggi*-subscription at a particular meeting, can take a loan from the trouble fund against 5% interest monthly.”³⁴ Thirdly, an association can change from one type into another; a SAVA can, for example, become an ASCRA. A mutualist arrangement can also be transformed into a commercial enterprise, or a game of chance. And fourthly, other forms of organization can be transformed into mutualist associations. In Piedmont, for instance, mutual insurances were formed, which replaced the guilds that had existed earlier but were prohibited in 1844.³⁵

A special kind of transformation occurs when mutualist associations become permanent, or are formally institutionalized. I already noted previously that the life span of rotating societies, which in principle is limited, can be extended by starting again after each cycle. But the rotation principle can also be removed from rotating associations, and they can be institutionalized

³³ Bouman and Hartevelt, “*Djanggi*,” p. 111.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³⁵ Allio, “Welfare and Social Security in Piedmont,” p. 441. The direct transition from guild to mutual insurance was certainly not unusual in European history. Gorsky, “Mutual Aid and Civil Society,” p. 306, for instance reports that “The rulebooks of the earliest Bristol benefit clubs suggest the direct influence of the declining craft guilds on the rules of order that governed their business and social arrangements. There was home-visiting, to ensure observation of guild ordinances, just as friendly society stewards visited members’ homes. Fines, to enforce decorum, the duties of office and attendance at meetings and funerals, were common to both types of association, as was participation in the election of officials, with guilds voting at an annual meeting, and the societies selecting members as stewards and balloting for president from nominees. In both cases democracy was tempered with respect for hierarchy. Other similarities were the use of a box with multiple locks and keys held by separate officials, and the central importance of members receiving a decent funeral. Both set great store on conviviality, with guilds celebrating patron saints’ days and civic ceremonies, and benefit clubs diverting monthly sums for beer on club night and enjoying an annual feast, often around Whitsun.”

in this way. In the past, this happened quite often in the case of Savings and Loan Associations, for instance by allowing persons to become members who did not want to buy a house for themselves, but who regarded the association as a good investment.³⁶ Institutionalized forms of non-rotating arrangements, such as ASCRAS, are well-known. Credit Unions are a good example; like many ASCRAS, their members often share certain characteristics, such as a religion or a profession. They have a corporate structure, and their function is mainly to provide short-term cash credits to members at nominal rates of interest. In the course of the twentieth century, credit unions have spread from North America across large parts of the world.³⁷

Interconnections

My typology indicates that mutualism took a great variety of forms in the past, and still does today. Yet general patterns and relations can be discerned. Two criteria seem especially important: rotation versus non-rotation, and scheduled versus contingent allocation.³⁸

Rotating versus non-rotating allocation

In the case of rotating allocation, a maximum number of participants must always exist, because everyone wants to have his or her turn within a reasonable period of time. In the case of rotating labor, “the number of households comprising the group is relatively small, not usually reaching double figures.”³⁹

³⁶ Block, *Bausparen*, p. 170f.

³⁷ E.g., Shapiro, *Credit Union Development in Wisconsin*; Runcie, *Credit Unions in the South Pacific*.

³⁸ There are, of course, more possible criteria for the classification of arrangements. We could, for instance, further specify the type of payments. Are they made to individuals or groups? Is the payment made in money, kind or labor? Is it possible to borrow from the fund?

³⁹ Moore, “Cooperative Labour in Peasant Agriculture,” p. 272. Swindel, *Farm Labour*, p. 130, speaks in the case of Africa of “rarely above ten [households],” and Epstein, *Economic Development and Social Change*, p. 73, in the case of South India of “about six men.”

The membership of a ROSCA typically varies from two⁴⁰ to several hundred people, but the average is probably somewhere between ten and twenty people.⁴¹ The larger the membership, the more unstable the organization becomes. In contemporary South Africa:

Whenever ROSCAs became large, they tended to fail [...]. For example, a ROSCA in the 1970s in the township Langa had, at that time, up to more than 300 participants. Everybody had to wait their turn and the kitty became very large, up to R53,000. The cycle became very long and some worried that the ROSCA would collapse before they had had their turn, and there were some members who bribed the organizers in order to jump the queue. Corruption led to the expulsion of some members in 1978 and a split in the organization. In 1995, the ROSCA still existed but had sixty-five members and new members were not allowed. Although sixty-five members was still a lot, it offered a denser network with more possibilities for social control and the participants were content with the financial mutual.⁴²

The problem of limited membership can be solved partly by dividing ROSCAs into sub-ROSCAs. In the 1950s, Bascom described the Yoruba-*Esusu*, large ROSCAs with up to two hundred members, who were split in four or more subgroups with different coordinators. Payment was made according to a system of double rotation: on the one hand, the subgroups rotated and, on the other hand, there was rotation within the subgroups.⁴³ Table 5.4 shows in a somewhat simplified manner how this system functioned.

⁴⁰ "A very simple institution known as *chilemba* [...] appears in Northern Rhodesia. In its most common form, two wage-earners agree to give part of their monthly wages to each other in turn, and a man may make several such bilateral agreements. Occasionally three men join together in such an arrangement. [...] It may be argued that where, as is usual here, only two participants are involved, the term 'association' is inappropriate. However the elements of rotation and regularity appear, and the existence of groups of three participants shows that *chilemba* may be regarded as an embryonic form of the institution." Ardener, "Comparative Study of Rotating Credit Associations," p. 207.

⁴¹ Besley, Coate, and Loury, "Economics of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations," p. 796 note.

⁴² Bähre, "Money and Violence," pp. 155–6.

⁴³ Bascom, "*Esusu*," p. 64.

Table 5.4
Double rotation in a ROSCA with twenty members and four subgroups

First subgroup	Second subgroup	Third subgroup	Fourth subgroup
1st turn to receive the kitty	2nd turn	3rd turn	4th turn
5th turn	6th turn	7th turn	8th turn
9th turn	10th turn	11th turn	12th turn
13th turn	14th turn	15th turn	16th turn
17th turn	18th turn	19th turn	20th turn

In all non-rotating mutualist arrangements, like SAVAS, ASCRAS, producer cooperatives, and mutual insurances, the situation is fundamentally different. There is no technical limit to the membership in these cases, and therefore such associations can cater to large groups of people. For instance, there have been mutual insurances involving many thousands or even hundreds of thousands of members. Obviously a growing membership can lead to problems in coordination and management, which usually result in a more formal, more professional and more bureaucratic organization.

A second important difference between rotating and non-rotating arrangements is that rotating arrangements are always limited in time, while non-rotating arrangements are not. Indeed, rotating arrangements come to an end when the cycle is completed. Most known ROSCAs continued up to one or two years, although arrangements are known that went on for five or ten years.⁴⁴ In contrast, non-rotating arrangements can continue indefinitely. Indeed, savings arrangements and mutual insurances have been known to continue for decades. The difference between rotating and non-rotating associations is only relative however. As noted previously, rotating arrangements can also be made permanent by linking several cycles, with the same or with different participants. Finite arrangements can, in other words, be combined indefinitely. In the case of an Ethiopian ROSCA, the *ekub*, it was found that

The *ekub* continues until each member has been a winner, and then a fresh start is often made. However, an *ekub* may last indefinitely, with no person being able to win a second time until each one has done so once. Membership will remain the same throughout the *ekub*, unless a participant is unable

⁴⁴ Of course, the duration of a ROSCA depends on the number of payments (the number of meetings) and the period of time between the meetings. A ROSCA which comes together every week and has thirteen members thus has a term of three months.

to pay the full agreed contribution each period, in which case additional or replacement member(s) may be admitted. In case of death, the deceased heirs, usually his wife or children, may continue in the *ekub*.⁴⁵

On the other hand, quite often non-rotating arrangements initially have quite a short life span. Savings funds were, for instance, often distributed among participants at the end of the calendar year, or on the occasion of a holiday. Sometimes the money was squandered collectively. The limited life span of the arrangement in such cases was not so much a necessary consequence of the “technique” used, but of the unwillingness of participants to save money for any longer period of time.

Contingent versus scheduled allocation

The need for mutualist arrangements can be either contingent or scheduled. A contingent demand arises when a need for money, goods or labor occurs which is not “planned” and mostly unwanted – for instance in the case of death, unemployment, illness, a natural disaster, etc. The mutualist arrangements often useful in this case are accumulating funds (*SAVAS*, *ASCRA*) and, of course, especially mutual insurances. There are two kinds of scheduled demand: one-off and recurring. *Single expenses* may for instance be refunded for ceremonies or parties, on the occasion of rites of passage, such as weddings or funerals. On such occasions, the individuals or households involved are in acute need of a large amount of goods or money which they cannot supply by themselves in a short period of time. Among these single expenses, I include the purchase of durables and investments in capital goods.⁴⁶ In his description of the Nigerian Ngwa, Nwabughuogu gave an example of a mutualist association which responded to a single scheduled demand:

[*Isusu*] existed to provide young men with the cash they needed to get married. In pre-colonial Ngwa society adultery was punishable either by

⁴⁵ Gerdes, “Precursors of Modern Social Security,” p. 214.

⁴⁶ A distinction between ceremonial expenses and consumer expenses recurs frequently in the literature. Kurtz and Showman, “Tanda,” p. 72, for example, wrote that “Blue-collar workers and their wives use the *tanda* primarily in two ways: to purchase consumer items that would otherwise be unobtainable, such as clothing, electric food blenders, radios, phonographs, and the like and to finance ceremonial expenses such as celebrations for a saint’s day, or their children’s birthdays, graduations, or weddings, which are as lavish as possible.”

death or by the sale into slavery of the offending man. Young men tried, therefore, to get their own wives early in life; but they had the problem of raising the money to pay the bridewealth (or ‘dowry’ as it is conventionally called in English throughout southern Nigeria). Those sufficiently astute began to make regular savings from their earnings, keeping them in the custody of reliable elders. [...] From this small beginning the *isusu* expanded to become a club embracing the whole village.⁴⁷

The second variant of scheduled demand applies to *regularly recurring expenses*, such as the periodic strain on household resources at the end of the month. In these cases, mutualist associations can also provide a solution. In the west of Cameroon, for example, people set up *savas* to be able to pay the annual poll tax.⁴⁸

In combination, these two main distinctions generate three “families” of mutualist practices (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1
Three mutualist “families”

Scheduled	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rotating labor • ROSCA • Savings and Loan Association 	Rotating
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simultaneous allocation • ASCRA • Producer Cooperative 	
Contingent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual Insurance 	Non-rotating

Men and women take part in all forms, but it seems that rotating associations are often made up mainly of women, whereas men comprise a relatively large part of contingent associations. A satisfactory explanation of this difference in gender composition has not yet been given.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Nwabughuogu, “*Isusu*,” p. 47.

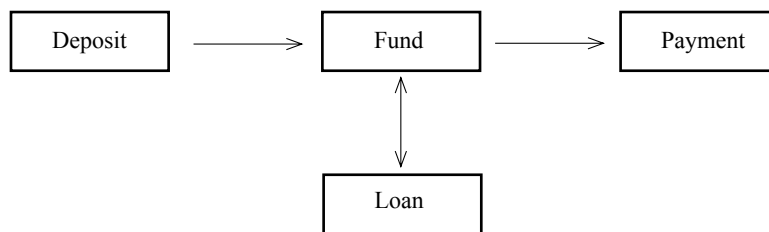
⁴⁸ Bouman and Harteveld, “Djanggi,” p. 114. “[R]otating credit associations are used to save money in order to meet expected and unexpected needs.” Kurtz and Showman, “Tanda,” p. 64.

⁴⁹ See also Ardener and Burman, *Money-Go-Rounds*.

Threats and security

Like any other collective activity, mutualist associations can also fail in many ways. In order to assess the specific nature of these threats, it is useful to remind ourselves of the essence of mutualist funds. In *all* cases, members contribute money, goods or labor to a shared fund, from which subsequently payments are made to some or to all members. In *some* cases, especially in scheduled non-rotating associations, members can also borrow money or goods from the fund for a certain period of time.

Figure 5.2
The basic mutualist structure



We can now distinguish between two fundamentally different kinds of threats. Firstly, there are *external* threats, i.e. threats against which participants in the arrangement can do very little on their own. These threats can take the following forms.⁵⁰

- *Members may no longer be able to deposit* money or goods or pay off a loan, because of changed circumstances. Take for instance mutuals in a working-class area, where families are almost completely dependent on one employer for their income. If the employer goes bankrupt, this will also endanger the mutual arrangements in that working-class neighborhood.
- *The fund of mutuals is threatened* by violence, inflation, and so on. In China at the end of the nineteenth century, “the T’ai-p’ing rebellion, with its long train of sorrows, and the continual famines and floods of later years in

⁵⁰ Compare Ardener, “Women Making Money Go Round,” pp. 5–7.

Northern China, have tended to bring loan societies into discredit, because experience has shown that thousands of persons have put into them what could never be recovered."⁵¹

- Especially in contingent associations, the danger exists that a *natural disaster or economic downturn* can affect an entire population, so that many or all members of a mutual demand payment at the same time, and the fund is quickly exhausted. A friendly society whose members work in the building trade will get into trouble, for example, if a recession occurs in the building industry which causes unemployment among many members of the association at once, causing them all to apply for a benefit from the mutual fund at the same time.

Apart from these external threats, there are also *internal* threats caused by individual imperfections:

- *Individual members do not pay the deposit agreed upon.* The severity of such defaults varies considerably. In rotating societies, it makes a big difference whether a participant failed to pay her contribution before she received her payment, or afterwards. In the first case, the damage is limited; in the second case, the other participants suffer a great loss.
- *The administrator appropriates money illicitly from the fund, or manages it badly.* The person who has the kitty in his home is continually tempted to borrow money from it "just for a short while." Hotze Lont noted that this is not uncommon in Java, where administrators "usually try to repay the loan before the association needs the money." In this way, their actions remain hidden and they continue to have personal access to a convenient source for financial emergencies. Sometimes, however, they lose control, and the fund suffers.⁵²
- Especially in contingent organizations, *members may claim a payment on false pretenses* by simulating illness, unemployment etc.

⁵¹ Smith, *Village Life in China*, p. 157.

⁵² Lont, "Juggling Money in Yogyakarta," p. 188. This risk is absent from ROSCAs in which members periodically come together in person. As the kitty is (re)distributed in each meeting in the presence of all the participants, the problem cannot, in fact, occur. "The fact that each fund, instead of being kept by a treasurer, is immediately handed over to one of the members, excludes the possibility of embezzlement." Bouman and Hartevelde, "Djanggi," p. 112.

- *Members may claim and receive a loan on false grounds, fail to repay a loan in due time, repay only part of it, or fail to repay any of it.*

Mutuals obviously cannot do much about *external* threats (like wars, crises etc.) as such. At best, they can in some cases try to make themselves less vulnerable by spreading the risk. Friendly societies, for example, reduced the likelihood that all members would suffer the same adversity at once by means of supra-regional amalgamation, which ensured that members came from different regions and trades (see also Chapter 6). And some ROSCAs deliberately tried to recruit members with different economic backgrounds.⁵³

Mutuals have many more ways of countering *internal* threats. Mutuals within a very close community will suffer relatively little fraud and default. Shirley Ardener points out just how much people in this situation are prepared to do to save face.⁵⁴ There are known cases of fathers who preferred that their daughters became prostitutes, rather than fail in their obligations to the local mutuals. Sometimes, “technical” factors make fraud more difficult. It is, for instance, no coincidence that many mutual insurance associations initially focused on funerals, because it is very difficult to simulate death.⁵⁵ Verification becomes more difficult if the social bonds between members of a mutual are not so strong or, in an even more extreme case, if members of a group do not even know each other personally. The last case is relatively unusual, although there are several known examples of this variant.⁵⁶ In case of asymmetrical information (when the founder of a mutual has insufficient information about the reliability of a candidate member), precautions become crucial.

In principle, there are three kinds of security measures available. Firstly, there are *rules for selection*: the threat to the arrangement can be reduced by only allowing persons to join who are likely to meet their obligations. Here are some examples.⁵⁷

⁵³ Anon., “Partners,” p. 437.

⁵⁴ Ardener, “Comparative Study of Rotating Credit Associations.”

⁵⁵ See this volume, Chapter 6.

⁵⁶ Kane, “Caméleons de la finance populaire,” pp. 23f.; Bijnaar, “Kasmoni.”

⁵⁷ See also Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*, pp. 110–1.

- *Entry is permitted only for persons with whom members have not just a financial relationship – for instance relatives, or people with the same ethnic background, or people who went to the same school.*⁵⁸
- *Entry is permitted only for persons who are not likely to “disappear” suddenly without trace.* If the mutual has a kitty which is more or less permanent, it is especially important to find an administrator who is firmly tied to a place in one way or another. In ROSCAS in Jamaica, for instance, it was a rule that the administrator should be a person “with real property, such as a home,” and “with a permanent address where he can always be found.”⁵⁹ Similarly, mutual benefit societies often entrusted their kitty to publicans or clergymen – persons who would risk a great deal, if they were found guilty of fraud.
- *Entry of new, unknown members passes through a trial period* or (in the case of rotating arrangements) puts them at the end of a cycle, so that potential deceit does little harm.
- *New members are selected on the basis of their reputation* or their good name, i.e. with probabilistic beliefs the others hold about the potential member’s preferences, or their behavior.⁶⁰
- *Existing members act as guarantors for dubious members.* In the Ethiopian *ekub* (a ROSCA), each member was obliged to supply one or more guarantors, who would pay in case of default, regardless of the reason why a member had failed to meet his obligations.⁶¹
- *New members are required to pay an entrance fee or bond* to encourage their loyalty, and/or are required to provide a security or collateral for the loan.

Monitoring provides a second means of security.⁶² This practice is especially important in mutual insurances. In his study of mutual aid societies in early nineteenth-century Paris, Michael Sibalís shows how closely members kept an eye on each other. On the one hand, *visiteurs* were appointed, who were supposed to visit those who received sick benefits – both in order to check

⁵⁸ Compare Gerdes, “Precursors of Modern Social Security,” p. 215.

⁵⁹ Anon., “Partners,” p. 436.

⁶⁰ Ellis, “Reputation,” pp. 331–2.

⁶¹ Gerdes, “Precursors of Modern Social Security,” p. 214.

⁶² See also the theoretical considerations in: Banerjee, Besley, and Guinnane, “Thy Neighbor’s Keeper,” pp. 492–501.

them out, and as an act of charity. In this context, the articles of association state that “The obligations of the visitors consist of surveillance, benevolence and humanity. The interests of the Society are entrusted to them; they should not make an exception for anyone.” Sometimes, the member of the board responsible for the selection of *visiteurs* was “not allowed to select them either from among his friends, or from among the neighbours who were too close to the sick person.”⁶³ On the other hand, ordinary members often spontaneously scrutinized each other as well, as happened in 1823 when “a society of engravers cancelled the sick benefits of a member named Vialard when someone spotted him drunk in a wineshop.”⁶⁴

Sanctions are a third precaution. We can distinguish between external and internal sanctions. In the case of internal sanctions, members of the mutual meet out punishments themselves. It is important to know in this case in whose direct interest it is that the rules of the mutual are adhered to. If all the members have to pay for a loss together, they all benefit by punishing the offender. But if for example it was agreed that the coordinator of a ROSCA personally would act as guarantor for default or fraud⁶⁵ only that person has an immediate interest in the punishment. In the case of external sanctions, either officials (the state authorities) can administer punishment, or the larger community (such as the entire village). Such sanctions sometimes have a formal character, but they are often informal as well: in that case, the defaulter quite simply loses his reputation, and is therefore unable to join a mutual again. In the case of the Ethiopian mutual insurance *idir*, “any members in arrears for two or more consecutive periods may be expelled – this news quickly spreads, and an ex-member may be barred from joining another *idir*.”⁶⁶

Why mutualism?

Mutualist arrangements were and are operated around the world. However, the frequency of their occurrence varies considerably, depending on the social context. Associations with *scheduled* allocation seem to be especially

⁶³ Sibalis, “Mutual Aid Societies of Paris,” p. 17.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–7.

⁶⁵ As in the *cundina*. See Kurtz, “Rotating Credit Association.”

⁶⁶ Gerdes, “Precursors of Modern Social Security,” pp. 215–6.

common in poor countries, and among migrants in poor *and* rich countries. Associations with *contingent* allocations seem to be universal, but in advanced capitalist countries they lost their small-scale and non-bureaucratic character, insofar as they were not replaced altogether by government provisions. What explains the popularity of mutualism, or the lack of it, in given social and historical circumstances?

There have of course always been alternatives for mutualism.⁶⁷ Indeed, anyone with a certain degree of autonomy who regularly needs money, goods or labor can usually borrow these on an individual, private basis, from other people in his or her direct social environment. In the case of fairly small sums of money, one can often appeal to relatives or acquaintances. In the case of larger amounts of money, approaching a superior and asking for credit would be the obvious thing to do. In all these cases, a relationship of dependence is formed, which can impede personal freedom and, in the case of patronage by a superior, could even result in debt bondage. It is therefore likely that, normally, one would only resort to this kind of solution if, for some reason, other solutions were not possible.⁶⁸

These other solutions fall, broadly speaking, into two categories: mutualism and formal institutions, such as banks and insurance companies. What factors play a part in the choice between these alternatives? No doubt, an important aspect of this choice is that mutualism is usually more than just a form of "micro-finance". Apart from their manifest function of redistribution, mutualist associations usually have a latent function as well: they satisfy a need for company, and a sense of community solidarity. There is, especially among new immigrants, a great need for "clubs" and similar organizations, because they help the newcomers to adjust.⁶⁹ Gorsky argued that in nine-

⁶⁷ See e.g., Smets, "Housing Finance," Chapter 4.

⁶⁸ Perhaps this also explains why the importance of patronage in advanced societies has diminished. See also the discussion on this subject between Theobald and Korovkin (Theobald, "Decline of Patron-Client Relations"; Korovkin, "Exploitation, Cooperation, Collusion"; Theobald, "Survival of Patronage."). The Jewish "soft loans" societies in the early twentieth century which provided, without a surety, money from people who were well-off to poor newcomers were a kind of "transitional phenomenon," between paternalism and self-reliance. See Godley, "Jewish Soft Loan Societies"; Tenenbaum, *Credit to Their Community*.

⁶⁹ ROSCAS are very common among migrants. In Papua New Guinea in the 1970s, ROSCAS were known among migrants in the towns as "sundaying" or "fortnighting." One author comments: "it is a characteristic of the labouring and lower income groups from all parts of Papua New Guinea; it is not typical of public servants or other

teenth-century Britain “the geographic distribution of early friendly societies in areas of in-migration and industrialization suggests a primary appeal to young incomers who had relinquished rural support structures for the higher wages of the town, but lacked a Poor Law settlement or entitlement to charity.”⁷⁰ Most ROSCAS are also embedded in a broader context of sociability.⁷¹ Oscar Lewis’ remarks about the Mexican working-class family Gomez in the 1950s in his famous study *Five Families* are revealing:

The sense of community is strong, particularly among the young people who belong to the same gangs, form lifelong friendships, attend the same schools, meet at the same dances held in the patios and frequently marry within the same *vecindad*. Adults also have friends whom they visit, go out with, and borrow from. Groups of neighbors organize raffles and *tandas* (informal mutual savings and credit plans), participate in religious pilgrimages together, and together celebrate the festivals of the *vecindad* patron saints, the Christmas *Posadas*, and other holidays.⁷²

The sociable character of mutualist arrangements and their roots in communities differs from banks and insurance companies in important respects. In the first place, mutualism offers a solution to people who lack the will to save a certain amount of money or goods on their own. By means of mutualism, an individual may reach what Jon Elster called “imperfect rationality”: an individual recognizes his or her own weakness, and voluntarily appeals to external compulsion to realize what he or she would not achieve by him or herself.⁷³ Aspha Bijnaar reveals how this “social constraint to self-constraint” functions in ROSCAS.⁷⁴ In banks and similar institutions, such pressure is often

white collar workers.” In a sample of 28 working families in Lae, 22 heads of family engaged in “sundaying” and in a sample of 89 migrant workers around Goroka, 59 “sundayed,” percentages 66 and 79 respectively. Skeldon regards this as a process of adaptation: “The system appears to recreate in a modified form the cycles of debt and credit, of exchange and reciprocity in the traditional society. It helps to integrate the migrant into a network of social responsibility in the urban environment.” Skeldon, “Regional Associations,” pp. 252–3.

⁷⁰ Gorsky, “Mutual Aid and Civil Society,” pp. 308–9.

⁷¹ See also Weisser, *Brotherhood of Memory*.

⁷² Lewis, *Five Families*, p. 63.

⁷³ Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, Chapter 2; see also De Swaan, *In Care of the State*, pp. 144–5.

⁷⁴ Bijnaar, “Kasmoni,” Chapter 4.

absent. An account of Jamaican ROSCAs (referred to as *partners*) illustrates the difference:

every thrower [participant] feels it to be his most important obligation to obtain the money for his throw. He foregoes all other purchases to make that payment and exerts strenuous efforts to find ways of earning money. When a member has accumulated the money for his throw, he takes it immediately to the banker [administrator], so that he will not be tempted to spend it in any other way. On the other hand, the government savings bank engenders no such pressure. Throwers report that, even if they plan to deposit a certain amount in the bank each week, it is almost impossible to do so. Their resources are so small in comparison with their needs that they always see something that they need desperately on their way to the bank with the money and, more often than not, spend it and never get to the bank.⁷⁵

A second difference is that mutualist associations are often psychologically and/or practically more accessible than banks: official institutions are sometimes located at a great distance, and one has to be prepared to make a long journey to visit them; banks require a surety or guarantor for a loan, while mutualist arrangements need not do so in most cases, because the participants know each other personally; official institutions are impersonal and formal, whereas mutualist associations are personal and informal;⁷⁶ official institutions sometimes operate considerable financial or legal barriers.⁷⁷

In the process of expanding their operations, banks and insurance companies became increasingly interested in large groups of small savers, and they made more attempts to lower their financial barriers, in competition with mutualist arrangements. In some cases, banks set up their own savings associations. The so-called Christmas Clubs, which spread across the United States from 1909 onwards, are an example. These clubs were administered

⁷⁵ Anon., "'Partners'," p. 439. Another advantage of ROSCAs is that after the money had been contributed, "one could not withdraw money on impulse, as could be done from a bank or building society account." Burman and Lembete, "Building New Realities," p. 41.

⁷⁶ Bouman and Hartevelde, "Djanggi," pp. 115–6.

⁷⁷ In Papua New Guinea, for instance, the colonial authorities had, for a long time, laid down restrictions on the access of Chinese migrants to banks. "According to Chinese informants, the first bank loan was not granted to a Chinese until the 1950s." Wu, "To Kill Three Birds With One Stone," pp. 570–1.

by banks – the members were supposed to contribute a small sum of money for fifty consecutive weeks, on which they received a small interest. On 10 December, the final sum was paid. The banks regarded their Christmas Clubs as “an advertising undertaking”, through which many wage earners who had “almost no knowledge of banking activities” could be familiarized with large savings and credit institutions.⁷⁸

In spite of such attempts, commercial banks and insurance companies never completely won the competition with mutualism everywhere. Even if formal institutions succeed in lowering their psychological and practical barriers for entry, and even if they provide a substitute for the “social constraint,” mutualist arrangements often remain not only more satisfying, but also cheaper and more practical than their commercial counterparts, for the simple reason that their personal and sociable character usually means lower transaction costs.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Crosgrave, “Christmas Clubs.”

⁷⁹ Vollmer, “Warum gibt es (immer noch) Kreditgenossenschaften?”

Chapter Six

Mutual insurance

Insecurity is a structural feature of almost all subaltern workers' lives. But the kinds of risks to which they are exposed can differ greatly. Chattel slaves confront two main kinds of threats: they can either be punished physically, locked up, or starved (or even tortured, mutilated and killed); or, they and/or their lovers or loved ones can be resold to another owner. Against these threats no insurance is possible – at most carefully managing relationships or resistance of some kind can offer a way out. The households of “free” wage workers, self-employed workers and other relatively autonomous workers battle with quite different dangers. Income may be reduced by the death of a breadwinner, retirement, unemployment, temporary sickness, accidental injury, or disability. Even the resources of prosperous households¹ have never been able to compensate fully for these types of reductions in income. In the absence of a good social security system, households need to seek out other means of protection from such risks. Several survival strategies are possible. Depending

¹ I follow Alan Dawley's four categories of income: *poverty* (“the condition of paupers, entirely dependent on charity”), *subsistence* (“the condition of people who earned a living wage and could, therefore, spend small portions of their income for the enjoyments of life and in flush times accumulate savings or petty property holdings”), *prosperity* (“the condition of people whose incomes enabled them to make significant choices about what to purchase”), and *opulence* (“the condition of those who could spend according to whim”). Dawley, *Class and Community*, pp. 167–8.

on circumstances, it is possible to appeal to charity, friends, and acquaintances, or to a social superior with whom one has a patron-client relationship.²

Apart from – or instead of – these informal methods, the need may arise for a different, more organized form of protection: *insurance*. The essence of insurance lies in the elimination of risk of losses for each household, by combining a larger number of similarly exposed households who each contribute to a common fund premium payments, sufficient to make good the loss caused any one household. The economic function of insurance is not the elimination of risk or loss as such, but rather “the substitution of a known small for an uncertain large loss.”³

A general definition of mutual insurance societies is: *associations formed voluntarily for the purpose of providing their members with financial assistance in case of need*. Such societies have always existed in some or other form.⁴ This chapter focuses on mutual insurance societies of which the members (the insured) are predominantly *workers* (artisan journeymen, wage earners, etc.) *who manage the fund themselves*. The criteria for societies considered here exclude neither members outside the proletariat, nor donations from outside sources (such as the state or leading philanthropists) to the common fund.⁵

² For an enumerative description of household survival strategies, see: van der Linden, “Introduction,” pp. 7–9.

³ Manes, “Insurance.”

⁴ Mutual insurance is by no means exclusively a product of modernity, nor is it restricted to the working classes. In *Ancient Economy*, p. 81, Moses Finley mentions “innumerable little benevolent societies, commonly organized by trade or occupation, that mushroomed in the cities and towns of antiquity, especially in the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire [...]” In *Roman Social Relations*, pp. 78–9, Ramsay MacMullen uses statutes to reveal the existence of a similar organization in the Roman town of Lavinium in A.D. 136: “Those who wish to make their monthly contributions toward burial may enter this association, though, under guise of this association, they may not meet together more than once a month. [...] Whoever wishes to enter this association must contribute an initiation fee of 100 sesterces and an amphora of good wine. If anyone of this association shall die while in good standing, 300 sesterces shall be allotted from the treasury, from which sum for funeral expenses 50 sesterces shall be allotted to be divided up at his pyre; and the funeral procession shall proceed on foot. [...] Presidents of dinners in rotation of membership, four in number, shall provide, each one, an amphora of good wine, loaves of bread (cost, 2 *asses* for the number of persons in the association, four sardines [for each member], furnishings of the table, hot water, and waiters.”

⁵ It should be noted that some “nominal” mutual insurance societies were not really mutual insurance societies. Charles Gamba reports, that in Malaya after 1928 “there was an increase in the number of societies some of which were definitely trade unions in fact though not in name. Of the ninety employees’ guilds registered under the Societies Ordinance before World War II, twenty-two were established during the

Workers' mutual insurance societies may be either directly-democratic or bureaucratic. Charles Bergquist's description of *filharmónicas* among nitrate workers in northern Chile around 1900 conveys the culture of directly-democratic societies:

Here workers taught themselves how to play musical instruments and learned to dance. Some *filharmónicas* also offered night classes in elementary education. The quiet decorum of these cultural oases that workers constructed to develop their minds and social skills stood in stark contrast to the noisy, physically exhausting environment they worked in, and the loud and bawdy atmosphere of the bars and brothels where they sought release from the reality of their working lives. Alcohol was prohibited in the *filharmónicas*, and even the all-male dance instruction proceeded in an atmosphere of great seriousness and formality. A sympathetic middle-class journalist reacted with a mixture of condescension and awe to his dance with a well-washed, formally attired member of a *filharmónica* in 1904. 'My partner was extremely polite, and possessed of such strong muscles, that instead of my leading "her," "she" led me as if I were a feather.' Some of these clubs were quite large, with memberships of several hundred workers at the larger oficinas. Workers contributed two to five pesos monthly to mutual-aid funds administered by *filharmónicas* and by sports and drama clubs. These funds were used to sustain injured and sick members, to pay funeral expenses, and to help support workers' families for a short period following the death of a member.⁶

Directly-democratic societies are protective organizations which aim to combine social insurance with sociability, emphasizing both material and cultural self-preservation. *Bureaucratic* societies differ in that they serve no sociability function. Although the members do officially run their organization, membership is so large (thousands, or even hundreds of thousands) that members do not know each other personally, and pay their dues anonymously, by mail or to a collection agent.

Because poorer workers' households face a plethora of risks, and hardly ever have sufficient means to purchase comprehensive insurance, they have

four years preceding May 1941, and were known under the title of Mutual insurance Societies." Gamba, *Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya*, p. 4.

⁶ Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, p. 46.

to select the risks most important to them. It appears that this selection was rarely based on purely economic factors.⁷ Generally two steps were involved in setting priorities. Firstly, meaningful orientations served to establish basic guidelines. Next, decisions were taken on the basis of rational economic factors. Thus, during the Victorian era in Great Britain for example, workers focused on funeral insurance, and in this way managed to arrange impressive funerals: “Funerals were public events, and the ways they were conducted reflected on the status and esteem of the family. Sickness, on the other hand, was a private suffering, and medical attention was a private benefit [...], so medical insurance had a lower position on the list of insurance expenditure priorities.”⁸

Following this preliminary selection on the basis of respectability, subsequent decisions tended to be economic in nature. For example, if the life expectancy of workers was rather short, it made sense to emphasize health insurance over old-age annuities. In the 1880s, J.M. Ludlow explained: “a young man from 18 to 21, who wants to do the best he can for himself and for others in life, has much better uses to put his money to than by providing for himself on the contingency of his reaching 60 or 70 years of age. I think that later on, when he marries and when he has got children about him, he still has much better purposes to which he can apply his money.”⁹ This decision-making process bears a remarkable resemblance to selection in many other situations. It is particularly striking that across very different cultures workers all attached great importance to dignified funerals.

Establishment

Membership selection for mutual insurance societies can be based on a variety of social categories. Workers have organized mutual insurance according to their occupation, place of residence, neighborhood, ethnicity, religion, temperance, or a combination of any of these. Most mutual insurance societies

⁷ For a general analysis of this phenomenon, see Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*.

⁸ Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, pp. 86 and 43–6.

⁹ Maxwell Committee, 1884–85, X (270), q. 1458; quoted in Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, p. 83.

also excluded people from membership according to their age and gender, as I will describe later.

The founders of mutual insurance societies were not necessarily highly skilled workers. John Iliffe reports the following about the short-lived African Labour Union established by immigrant casual laborers in the port of Dar-es-Salaam in 1937:

[The organization] had 32 members in August 1937 and 40 by September. The idea had come from three members who had seen similar organisations in South Africa. The union's rules provide a picture of what work in the port and life in the town meant to the intelligent immigrant labourer. First, the union was meant to be a community. It was to build a club house where the members could meet twice a month to discuss their affairs. [...] The subscription was Shs. 1.50 a month for committee members and Shs. 1.00 for ordinary members, relatively high figures because the union planned to provide benefits for its members. 'They say their union is for the purpose of helping one another when sick and for burial purposes,' it was reported, and the rules promised that 'the union will assist any member in distress.' [...] Besides their desire for security, the members also sought advancement. 'Every member should learn to read and write', the rules stated, for which purpose 'the Union will employ a teacher to instruct members in reading and writing.'¹⁰

The direct motive for establishing autonomous working-class insurance carriers could involve a variety of considerations. Firstly, these carriers provided opportunities for perpetuating an older tradition. This tendency occurred in countries where guilds had existed, if segments of the working class still remembered them, or if traces of these organizations remained.¹¹ Secondly, cases of workers' insurance from abroad might serve as an exemplar, where mutual insurance societies were known to exist in the country of origin. Thirdly, these societies were sometimes established by other kinds of workers' organizations, such as trade unions or consumer cooperatives. Fourthly, individuals or groups from other social classes sometimes initiated them. Fifthly, the state could encourage or sponsor the establishment of benefit

¹⁰ Iliffe, "Creation of Group Consciousness," pp. 55–6.

¹¹ See on the organizational logic of guilds: Gustafsson, "Rise and Economic Behaviour"; Hickson and Thompson, "New Theory of Guilds."

societies. Finally, these societies also came into being spontaneously, out of a recognized need for them.¹²

The spontaneous creation of mutual insurance societies followed a simple and logical learning process. A nineteenth-century British observer describes the development in these terms: "The local burial clubs [...] have generally arisen out of the custom of sending round the hat, on the decease of a fellow-workman to collect something for his funeral and family. They thus commence in the rude form of a 'levy' [...]. A society in this stage has no accumulated fund [...]. The first step in the way of organization is to 'keep one death in hand' so as to avoid the delay of collecting the money when it is wanted and hand it over in time to meet the first necessities of bereavement."¹³

Two sides

The directly-democratic mutual insurance societies were tiny, well-run operations. Their membership typically ranged from a few dozen to a few hundred individuals who knew each other personally. Their primary, manifest function was to reduce personal financial risks, by accumulating a fund for support payments in case of calamities, such as death or unemployment. This characteristic distinguishes mutual insurance societies from trade unions (of

¹² Little has been written about the autonomous construction of mutual insurance societies. One example, however, is Emily Honig's account of female textile workers in Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s: "After working together for several years, six to ten women would formalize their relationship with one another by pledging sisterhood. Sometimes this simply involved going to a restaurant, eating a meal together, drinking a cup of 'one-heart wine' and toasting their loyalty to one another. Because large numbers of women workers were Buddhists, it was more common for those forming sisterhoods to go to a Buddhist temple, burn incense before the statue of a deity, and pledge to be loyal to one another 'through life and death'. Once they had formed a sisterhood, the members would call each other by kinship terms based on age: the oldest was 'Big Sister', the next oldest 'Second Sister', and so forth. [...] Often the sisterhoods functioned as an economic mutual insurance society: in order to avoid borrowing from 'stamp-money lenders' who charged over 100 percent in interest, women paid a monthly 'sisterhood fee'. Then if one of the members faced an extraordinary expense such as a wedding, a funeral, or an illness, she could draw on this fund." Sisterhoods also fulfilled a sociability function: "Members of sisterhoods socialized together: they would get together at one member's house to chat on Sundays, to go window-shopping, or to hear performances of local opera." (Honig, "Burning Incense, Pledging Sisterhood," pp. 700–1.)

¹³ Beveridge, *Voluntary Action*, p. 54.

which the main goal is to influence terms of payment and working conditions) and from broader political movements.

Non-permanent “dividing societies” were the simplest variety of directly-democratic societies: members divided up the greater part of the accumulated fund on a bank holiday, or otherwise within a fairly short time period.¹⁴ The clubs were well suited to the insecure lives of poorer workers: “if due to unemployment or other crisis they had to cease contributions they could lose no more than one year’s contribution.”¹⁵ An Irish report from 1874 reveals an added benefit: “[When] the divide time comes, [the women] look pretty sharp after their husbands, and consider the divide as a godsend. They stick to him when he goes to draw it, for fear he might be tempted into a public house and lose it all. This helps to keep the man straight, and the divide is to the fore for little comforts for the family. The chief reason women like tontines [dividing societies] is that money is paid in and comes back to them and their children which would otherwise be spent on drink.”¹⁶

Because older members were more likely than younger ones to fall ill or die, division of funds often entailed an ageing membership for dividing societies. “If the dividend falls, the society loses in attractive power; it is unlikely to get new members, ultimately dwindles and dies. If the dividend is kept up by recruiting new blood, this means that the younger members, sharing equally with the old, will get a smaller annual dividend than they could get by forming a precisely similar new society of their own. Sooner or later the young members, or those invited to become young members, will realize this.”¹⁷

Suspending regular distribution of portions of the accumulated fund led to a transition to more permanent forms of insurance. Sometimes reserve funds were simply stored in boxes, but they might also be deposited in bank accounts, or used for lending purposes, investments, or even speculation.

The *second manifest function* of early mutual insurance societies was, as mentioned above, social rather than financial. Their small membership size made these associations ideal for enjoying the company of others. Members basked

¹⁴ Gosden, *Friendly Societies in England*, p. 57.

¹⁵ Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State*, p. 30.

¹⁶ *Friendly and Benefit Building Societies’ Commission: Reports of the Assistant Commissioners, Ireland and Wales (with Monmouth and Hereford)* [British Parl. Papers, 1874 (995), XXIII, Part 2], p. 28. Quote in Buckley, “On the Club’,” pp. 50–1.

¹⁷ Beveridge, *Voluntary Action*, p. 43.

in warmth and respect among their peers at weekly, biweekly, or monthly gatherings, where an atmosphere of “comradeship, solidarity, unity and even brotherly love prevailed.”¹⁸ This cohesion manifested itself in a variety of ways, including drinking bouts, religious celebrations, parades, dances, or sporting events. Many societies pursued higher ambitions and tried to enrich their members’ professional knowledge, religiosity, or political involvement. Sometimes they set up small libraries for this purpose.¹⁹

Finances

How did mutual insurance societies organize their finances? In addition to regular contributions, their income could include entrance fees (payable by new members to compensate for the fact that they had not paid premiums in the past), fines if a member failed to comply with any of the rules (such as not attending a colleague’s funeral or a meeting or refusing to perform rotating managerial duties), donations from notables and institutions such as religious congregations, and government subsidies.

Expenses consisted of payments due in the event of a member’s death or illness, other costs associated with support benefits (such as doctor’s fees and medication), overhead (remuneration of board members), sociability (dances, drinks, and the like), possible dividends payable to members, and taxes.

¹⁸ Sibalis, “Mutual Insurance Societies of Paris,” p. 25.

¹⁹ It is striking how much the expressions of sociability can vary. Masonic language and rituals were prominent in Britain and its (former) colonies Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United States, but their influence does not appear to have been important elsewhere. No convincing explanation is currently available for this presence or absence. Perhaps part of the explanation is that freemasonry in the British Empire at an earlier stage was much less restricted to the upper classes, in contrast to other regions. See Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*. (Thanks to Jaap Kloosterman for this thought.) Mary Ann Clawson ascribes masonic influence in the United States to the temperance movement, which deprived men of their taverns (important “masculine social space[s] from which women were barred”). The result was the quasi-masonic lodge: “The ritual of the lodge was, like the act of drinking, a ritual of male solidarity and superiority. And the lodge itself could serve as an equivalent of the tavern, a sex-segregated, male-only social space suitable for casual socializing as well as more solemn endeavors. The fraternal order provided a way for men to comply with the norm of temperance without acceding to the attack on the male social world that it could imply” (Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood*, p. 162). While the explanation may be valid for the United States, it does not apply in other countries, if only because of the tremendous importance of pubs to many quasi-masonic organizations.

The operating account of a mutual insurance society for a given time period (for example, a year) would therefore include the following types of entries (Figure 6.1):

Figure 6.1
Operating account of a mutual insurance society

<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Costs</i>
Entrance fees	Support payments
Dues	Other forms of relief
Fines	Overhead
Donations	Sociability
Subsidies	Dividends
Other income (interest, etc.)	Taxes
	Other expenses
	<i>Savings</i>
Total	Total

Few organizations actually had every kind of income and expense listed here. Still, this table clearly shows the organizations had a variety of means at their disposal to improve matters in the event of financial difficulties. Virtually all conceivable varieties appear to have been applied, ranging from increasing dues (once or permanently) and requesting additional donations, to relaxing or imposing time restrictions on support payments, and curtailing sociability expenses.

Organizational strengths and weaknesses

The structure of directly-democratic benefit societies had at least the advantage that members knew each other personally. They had regular face-to-face contact, and were consequently able to exercise reciprocal social control, making it easy to discover fraud by members who falsely claimed to be ill or unemployed. This advantage was especially true for those societies in which all members practiced the same occupation, or lived close to each other.²⁰ On the other hand, these early societies were also exceptionally vulnerable.

²⁰ See for example Frevert, *Krankheit als politisches Problem*, p. 255; or Badoza, "Typographical Workers."

One problem was an *insufficient spreading of the risks* for which members sought insurance. The membership of many mutual insurance societies consisted of subaltern workers employed in the same field, or even with the same company. As a result, all members faced the same risks, such as unemployment, illness, or disability resulting from disasters in the workplace (mining accidents, for example). In addition, burial funds experienced serious trouble with the age distribution of members of mutual insurance societies. Frank Hankins described this problem in American burial societies:

Inevitably the uniform levy or assessment proved workable only during the early years of a society, while the membership was increasing at a rapid rate and the majority of members were still young and their mortality low. As the average age of the membership increased and it was no longer possible to maintain the early percentage rate of growth, the death rate and hence the number of assessments rose sharply. Since this threw a disproportionate financial burden on the younger members, recruiting became steadily more difficult and withdrawals were stimulated by the constant formation of new societies offering lower rates and as a rule promises of additional benefits. Many flourishing orders became insolvent; some merged; all were compelled to make radical alterations in their financial operations. [... Of] the 3500 mutual assessments formed during the period between 1870 and 1910, fully 3000 failed after an average life of fifteen years.²¹

Sickness benefit societies experienced similar problems. In 1834, a British report on societies at Boroughbridge stated: "There have been several, but they are all broken up, owing to the increase in the claims of the aged, which have deterred the young from entering [...]"²² The real victims of bankruptcies were often the older members, who had paid their dues for many years and were suddenly left uninsured. As mutual insurance societies hardly ever accepted new members beyond a certain age, it was virtually impossible for those older members to join a new society. Of course, some of these problems also resulted from insufficient actuarial knowledge. Many societies drew on

²¹ Hankins, "Fraternal Orders," p. 424.

²² *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiry and Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws with Evidence and Appendices* (London, 1834), Appendix A, p. 806; quoted by Birke, "Soziale Selbsthilfe," p. 84, note.

a very limited range of experiences, and used calculation methods involving rather odd assumptions.

Funds management was a second source of vulnerability for these societies. Direct democracy in the early organizations involved rotating the offices for chairman and treasurer (sometimes especially because of geographic mobility among members), which meant frequent changes in leadership. Such a system made it extremely difficult to develop managerial expertise.²³ Nor were members of mutual insurance societies used to managing large sums of money, which often led to improper use of accumulated funds. Because small societies mostly lacked private office space, members usually met in ecclesiastical buildings, or in pubs. Meetings held in pubs (as they often were) could however have nefarious consequences, precisely because of the sociability function of early societies. "When the box was full, the temptation of sharing out the money was often irresistible. In some clubs a third of the contributions was spent in drink; and as each member had to spend so much for the good of the house at the monthly or fortnightly club meetings, the industrious and abstemious, it was said, learned to drink."²⁴ It was also quite common for the person in charge of the cash box to embezzle funds, or simply take off with the money. The funds might be used in a lottery (in an effort to increase capital quickly) or loaned out "to members with partiality and on defective security."²⁵ Finally, funds meant to cover different risks often remained together, so that money intended as funeral insurance might be spent to cover sickness. In addition, early societies frequently overstretched their means. If the secretary of an organization received compensation for his services according to its membership, pay-outs might be increased to attract members, or new members were recruited indiscriminately, which might have disastrous effects on the financial state of affairs.²⁶

²³ Members were sometimes penalized for refusing to serve in rotating offices. Penalties, consisting of fines (as was often the case), could lead to inequality among members: "Because of the duties of the officials, many preferred not to serve but to pay a fine. This meant that only the poorest members served, and these could least afford the loss of earnings through attending to their duty (though these duties were not very onerous, and visits to the sick might be fitted into dinner-time). The system of fines thus increased the difficulties of the poorest members." Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, p. 29.

²⁴ George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 293.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, p. 29.

A third problem was the sensitivity of small mutual insurance societies to the *state of the economy*. In times of economic hardship, they had to cope not only with reduced wage income among working members, but also with rising unemployment affecting registered members. Both factors lowered the disposable income of workers' households, and often bankrupted the societies during economic slumps. Sometimes, severe hardship drove members to liquidate their fund, and divide up the proceeds as a form of unemployment compensation.²⁷

In addition to their vulnerability, early mutual insurance societies suffered from geographical limitations. The mobility of journeymen and skilled workers frequently deprived them of their entitlement to membership benefits when they moved away, or else forced them to make complicated arrangements to continue paying dues in their former place of residence.²⁸ If they fell ill, these members would receive payments from their old branch, and would have to undergo medical treatment at their former place of residence as well.

Affiliation

Affiliation provided a partial solution to the vulnerability and geographical limitations of mutual insurance societies. It meant that loose ties were established with other, similar societies on an intercommunal or national (and occasionally even international) basis. The abundance of quasi-Masonic organizations in Anglo-Saxon countries (such as the Manchester Oddfellows) is an example of such affiliation. Because affiliation did not affect the operations of small branches, conventional social practices remained intact. Affiliation also facilitated insurance for mobile members, by making it possible for local branches to settle their accounts with each other:

²⁷ "When trade was poor and the members of such an association could not get enough to eat it was obvious that a common fund accumulated ostensibly for some other purpose must be used to provide them with some sort of regular 'dole' until trade improved." Gosden, *Friendly Societies*, p. 55.

²⁸ That local mutual insurance societies could maintain themselves even with highly mobile workers is shown by the example of the Unión Martí-Maceo, an organization founded in 1904 by Afro-Cuban cigar makers in Tampa, Florida. See Greenbaum, "Economic Cooperation."

arrangements were easily made for a man to pay his contributions into a branch in his new locality and to receive his benefits from that branch. The debts thus created between this local branch and the branch in his home town of which he remained a member could be settled by their branch officers. The great advantage of this arrangement was that the member could avail himself of the facilities of a local lodge and the services of a local doctor, paid for ultimately by his own lodge. This doctor would not only heal his illnesses but would also, and importantly, certify his entitlement to benefit.²⁹

In addition, affiliation made it possible for branches in financial difficulties to request aid from other branches.

Affiliated Orders experienced the administrative problems of the local societies at a higher level. They could opt to set up a main office with a permanent managerial staff, or to rotate central management functions among different branches, as a form of direct democracy. Both methods were used in practice, although unsurprisingly the financial affairs of organizations that rotated management typically ran less smoothly than the affairs of societies that set up main offices with permanent managers.³⁰

Coverage problems

In some cases (especially in advanced capitalist countries), mutual insurance societies achieved stability and overcame the problems facing exclusively local organizations, through national federation and (partial) centralization. Nevertheless, two fundamental problems persisted.

The first problem was that a large proportion of the laboring poor remained uninsured, even in countries with highly sophisticated systems of mutual insurance. On the one hand, segments of the working population lived in places beyond the reach of mutual insurance societies.³¹ On the other hand, there is a

²⁹ Buckley, "On the Club," p. 54: see the reference to *Second Report of the Commissioners to Inquire into Friendly and Benefit Building Societies, Part II* (Brit. Parl. Papers, 1872 (514), XXVI), Q81. See also Gosden, *Self-Help*, p. 47.

³⁰ Gosden, *Self-Help*, p. 45.

³¹ It is, of course, possible that some workers would have liked to take out insurance, but were not interested in the concurrent sociability requirement.

sociological principle, according to which a system of small, autonomous, collective provisions generally excludes a substratum.³² Although this rule did not apply universally, mutual insurance societies almost always maintained a threshold shutting out certain categories of “undesirable” people. The main criteria for exclusion were usually health, age, occupation, ethnicity, religion and gender. The excluded groups might however organize mutual insurance societies of their own (such as women’s societies, an area that has received insufficient attention), probably again excluding certain groups. There seem to have been two main reasons for this exclusion policy, corresponding to the two manifest functions of the societies:³³

- Even if actuarial principles were virtually unknown, members clearly understood that exclusion of individuals in high-risk groups would improve the society’s financial position. Most societies therefore refused new members above a certain age, or requested that applicants undergo physical examinations.
- The societies – at least most of them – expressed (patriarchal) concepts of honor and sociability, and were unable to cope with many external influences. Far too little research has been done on the exclusionary nature of mutual insurance societies, which were not just completely under male *control* (as many scholars have noted), but also frequently made men the sole *beneficiaries*. Mutual insurance societies (and other forms of insurance, discussed below) almost always provided insurance coverage for *paid* workers. Women and children were often ineligible for membership, unless they performed wage-labor themselves. This practice had several consequences. Women were less likely to report sickness than men. Additionally, men more often used the services of scientific medicine, while women and children often made do with traditional healing methods.³⁴

A second problem was that almost none of the mutual insurance societies provided comprehensive protection against *all* possible risks facing working-

³² De Swaan, “Workers’ and Clients’ Mutualism,” p. 47.

³³ De Swaan overlooks the second reason, thereby making it impossible to understand why women, for example, were excluded from many mutual insurance societies.

³⁴ Frevert, *Krankheit als politisches Problem*, pp. 288–91.

class households. Most organizations offered sickness insurance, or contained provisions for burial insurance, but other forms of insurance (such as old-age pensions and unemployment compensation) received little attention. This neglect existed partly because some kinds of insurance (such as superannuation) required more thorough actuarial knowledge, and much larger financial reserves. Because most members of the working class earned rather low wages, it was difficult to accumulate a large fund.

Had the insurance business consisted entirely of mutual insurance societies, it would inevitably have left many categories of risk uncovered.³⁵ Nevertheless, all-inclusive forms of mutual workers' insurance did evolve later on, for example in the United States during the 1930s.³⁶

Competitors

Mutual insurance societies were rarely the only insurance carriers serving the working class. Competing institutions were active as well, in most cases. Obviously, these competitors not only dealt with segments of the population neglected by mutual insurance societies, but also with groups covered by them.

Trade unions were the first competitors facing mutual insurance societies. Many unions expanded their core operations (the struggle for decent wages and working conditions) to include extra benefits comparable to those supplied by mutual insurance societies. Mancur Olson's "free rider paradox" helps explain why these extra benefits strengthened unity among union members: if a union could obtain higher wages and better conditions for *all* workers (including non-union workers), and if union membership was so large that individual contributions were barely a drop in the bucket, then individual workers often did not regard it worthwhile – at least in the short term – to

³⁵ Beveridge, *Voluntary Action*, p. 76 estimates that in 1910, shortly before the National Insurance Act, there were 12 million employed in the United Kingdom, of whom over 4.5 million were insured by mutual insurance societies.

³⁶ A good example is the International Workers' Order (1930–54), a large organization (membership reached 185,000 in 1947) subject to communist influence, which relied substantially on volunteer efforts and enrolled members regardless of their insurability. See Walker, *Pluralistic Fraternity*, and Sabin, *Red Scare in Court*.

join the union, reasoning that they would benefit from the union's achievements anyway without joining it. Not only did they save money this way, but their employer might also regard their non-union status favorably. Therefore, a fairly large union benefiting both members and non-members was motivated to offer various *additional* incentives, to increase loyalty among members.³⁷ Personal services such as insurance have been an important means of "recruiting members for immediate and tangible goals, while also affording the union funds and organizational facilities which could be used for more collective purposes."³⁸

Trade unions which did not grow out mutual insurance societies (in actual fact they frequently did) often learnt the hard way about how important it was to offer their members additional benefits. For example, failure to establish mutual insurance funds caused many American trade unions to be dissolved during the Panic of 1873–9. Unions with large memberships, such as those of cartwrights, millers, mechanical engineers, bricklayers, quarry workers, miners and cobblers, lost their members after an economic downturn occurred because, as a contemporary German observer noted, they lacked "the *material bond*, the money to assist and protect the sick, the disabled, and the unemployed."³⁹ In some cases, an insurance activity was compatible with other practices among local workers. In 1916, the union of railway and street-car employees in Java noted that many members paid their dues irregularly, because they "were not accustomed to labour unions that stressed struggle, but rather to mutual support organizations from which they received immediate benefits in return for regular contributions." Hoping to attract new members, the union therefore formed a widows' fund.⁴⁰ Sometimes trade unions provided such extensive services, that they were almost indistinguishable from mutual insurance societies.⁴¹

³⁷ Olson, *Logic of Collective Action*, esp. pp. 72–3. See also van Leeuwen, "Trade Unions and the Provision of Welfare."

³⁸ Crouch, *Trade Unions*, pp. 55–6.

³⁹ Sartorius von Waltershausen, *Workers' Movement in the United States*, p. 197.

⁴⁰ Ingleson, *In Search of Justice*, p. 81.

⁴¹ For example, see the debate between C.G. Hanson and Pat Thane: Hanson, "Craft Unions"; Thane's comment ("Craft Unions"), and Hanson's reply ("Craft Unions [...]. A Reply").

Corporate funds

Insurance funds established by corporations were a second source of competition facing mutual insurance societies. Such funds were often part of an effort by business (and armies) to persuade employees to stay with the company.⁴² Participation in corporate insurance plans was often voluntary, but there were also many cases of compulsory membership. Such coverage offered advantages to workers, especially if employers contributed to the fund, which they usually did. But there were also major disadvantages, in particular the complete control of the fund by management. Management used insurance as a disciplinary lever against employees: if an employee quit the company, he or she forfeited any right to collect benefits, even after years of paying dues. Moreover, management often had exclusive access to financial details about the insurance fund, so that employees had no way of knowing whether the benefits (such as the quality of medical care and the rate of compensation) could be improved.⁴³ Finally, if a company went bankrupt, its fund might become insolvent.

In addition to mandatory company funds, workers frequently set up mutual insurance societies of their own to provide supplementary benefits. Because corporate funds always provided physical examinations and supervision, it was possible for these supplementary societies to operate at a lower cost than independent mutual insurance societies. Workers also frequently tried to gain more control over the corporate fund. Michael Hanagan correctly calls this effort a struggle for workers' control: "It was not a battle for workers' control in the traditional sense, but it was a battle in which workers fought to establish their right to exist on a basis that would free them from dependence on the arbitrary whims of employers."⁴⁴

⁴² Wolfram Fischer describes the following trends in corporate social policy: "1. Insurance for sickness, accidents, disability, and old age. This type includes provisions for widows and orphans as well as credit unions. 2. Subsidies to reduce the cost of living, including special employee dwellings or settlements, company cafeterias or refreshment facilities, as well as provisions for health and personal care ranging from showers to hospitals. 3. Training opportunities (such as factory schools and training workshops). 4. Financial benefits, including premiums, bonuses, profit sharing and commission." Fischer, "Pionierrolle der betrieblichen Sozialpolitik," p. 34.

⁴³ Hanagan, "Agriculture and Industry," p. 97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–8.

Bureaucratic and commercial funds

The principal difference between bureaucratic and commercial insurance funds is that insured parties had the ultimate say in bureaucratic funds, whereas stockholders controlled commercial funds. Nevertheless, the differences between the two kinds of funds were in practice often minor. Members of bureaucratic funds (also known as “collecting societies”) rarely had any effective say in matters of policy. In the 1940s, a British observer noted: “Through ignorance or indifference or both, rarely more than a handful of members or their delegates ever attend the meetings at which governing committees should be appointed by them. Some societies numbering their members in millions issue an open invitation to all to attend the annual general meeting, and then perhaps hire a single hall which would accommodate 5,000 at the most! Indubitably the Management would be surprised if every one of their million or more members tried to force a way in.”⁴⁵

Collecting societies and commercial insurance companies shared two characteristics. Firstly, they both specialized in funeral insurance. Unlike mutual insurance societies, they lacked a sociability function, and therefore lacked direct contact and mutual supervision of members. This made it much harder to provide health insurance. “Sickness benefits are notoriously difficult to manage. Unless careful supervision is exercised, members are apt to ‘stay on the funds’ long after they are really fit for work.”⁴⁶ Secondly, they used agents who made home visits to recruit new members and collect dues. It was the collector’s task “to remind the policyholder of long-run goals when immediate financial pressures seemed overwhelming – he imposed the sort of discipline for saving that many people could not exercise on their own.”⁴⁷

Doctors’ funds

Doctors also fulfilled a social function in certain situations, and sickness funds generally preferred to employ their own doctors. Allan Mitchell explains why

⁴⁵ Ginsburg, “Industrial Life Assurance,” p. 267. In this light, it will come as no surprise that collecting societies sometimes became commercial insurance companies.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, 38–9. Initially members of collecting societies frequently paid their dues to the main office by post (Ginsburg, “Industrial Life Assurance,” p. 263). It is likely that households ran into difficulties with this arrangement.

this was so in the case of France: "In a few instances, initially, members were allowed to consult any doctor in the commune or urban *arrondissement*. But it rapidly became apparent that the 'treating' (private) physician and the 'controlling' (mutualist) physician might disagree about the severity of an illness or injury, and therefore about the society's liability. For obvious reasons, then, it made sense for the state to require that the diagnosis of a family doctor be countersigned by the society's own. Additional fees for private medical care were normally declared to be outside the society's responsibility."⁴⁸

Differences of opinion between mutual insurance societies and doctors frequently occurred because of conflicting financial interests. Tensions mounted between them when mutual insurance societies increased their market share for medical services, reducing doctors' bargaining power. A remarkable event occurred in the Irish town of Cork:

There a growing number of wealthy people became members of local friendly societies, thus avoiding the necessity of paying their doctor's fee. Feeling their independence and the income of their private practices under threat, local doctors rebelled [...]. The society they formed in 1894, the Cork Medical Benefit Association, was technically a friendly society. It was open, however, only to people of moderate and low income (maximum £200 per annum) and was effectively run by the doctors of Cork. Having thus made provision for the poor, these doctors then fixed a rate at which they would be employed by other friendly societies in the city, and they refused to accept terms other than those collectively agreed amongst themselves.⁴⁹

State intervention

Generally speaking, states can take either a passive or active role in the area of social insurance. A passive stance means that the state does not wish to organize social insurance itself, and therefore leaves this responsibility to other institutions, providing at most legal supervision. Active intervention means that the state provides social insurance directly, including for its own

⁴⁸ Mitchell, "Function and Malfunction of Mutual insurance Societies," p. 176.

⁴⁹ Buckley, "'On the Club,'" p. 48. In 1846, a group of doctors in Amsterdam established their own sickness fund because they felt threatened by commercial and mutual funds. Van Genabeek, *Met vereende kracht risico's verzacht*, pp. 183–90.

employees. In practice, states often combine the two approaches, such as in today's United States.

In most countries which experienced capitalist industrialization, the state initially assumed a passive stance with respect to mutual insurance societies. Initially governments only sought to identify and define them legally (such as in the British Rose's Act of 1793) and to distinguish them from "undesirable" organizations, such as trade unions. Several concerns, however, often caused the state to change its approach from passive toleration to active intervention:

- *the condition of the social insurance sector* as it developed and grew, creating a power struggle between competing insurance carriers;
- *the interests of the state itself*, including social and political stability, international competitiveness, minimum operating costs and maximum efficiency;
- *the interests of workers*, to ensure wide coverage and uniform enforcement of social regulations administered by the workers themselves;
- *the interests of employers*, to enforce social regulations tailored to particular market conditions, mediate business competition, and regulate funds administered by employers or specialized private associations.⁵⁰

These factors as well as many others shaped the differences between social security systems evolving in each country, and consequently the different roles which mutual insurance societies attained in them. Countries which tried to imitate foreign social security systems never fully succeeded,⁵¹ and a diversity of national social security systems resulted. Nevertheless two basic

⁵⁰ Therborn, "Neo-Marxist, Pluralist, Corporatist, Statist Theories," pp. 224–5.

⁵¹ "Various specialists have observed that the Bismarckian model of social insurance has been unable to function adequately in Latin America because the labor force there differs in composition from that of Europe. In the latter, salaried urban workers represented a larger part of the labor force, whereas in Latin America the labor force consists mostly of agricultural workers and the self-employed. In the reformed Bismarckian model, social security is financed by contributions from the worker and the employer that are based on the salary of the worker. The self-employed worker in Latin America cannot afford to pay the employer's contribution, and low-income agricultural workers who tend to be migratory and to change employers frequently are difficult to identify." Mesa-Lago, *Ascent to Bankruptcy*, p. 13.

options were open to states pursuing an active social security policy: they could either integrate existing insurance carriers in the implementation of the state social security system, or negate them by establishing social security services independently.

Germany during the Bismarck Era offers a classic case of *negation*. Bismarck's social legislation of the 1880s resulted from adopting the principle that "the state had an obligation to provide insurance," without involving existing voluntary funds in the policy.⁵² The National Insurance Act of 1911 in England which established compulsory insurance arrangements was a typical case of *integration*. This act contracted the existing Friendly Societies, trade union funds, and commercial insurance companies ("Approved Societies"). The system lasted only a few decades, however. Negation followed in the 1940s: "The marriage of 1911 between the State when it entered the field of insurance against sickness and the voluntary agencies with a hundred years' experience in this field, has been followed in 1946 by complete divorce."⁵³

Integration also occurred in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Whereas the main function of trade unions (the struggle for decent wages and labor relations) was taken away from them, as part of the program of forced industrialization, they were granted complete control over the social security system. From then on, only the growth of this secondary form of compensation for work (selective benefits) justified the existence of trade unions. "In 1948 about one million active trade unionists altogether performed the functions of insurance delegates. Their task has been to regulate locally all matters concerning invalid pensions, sickness benefits, and so forth. The trade unions also took over the management of holiday resorts, sanatoria, and rest homes."⁵⁴

Outcomes

The discussion so far helps to clarify historically what the options of directly democratic mutual insurance societies were.

⁵² All quotes are from: Mitchell, "Bürgerlicher Liberalismus und Volksgesundheit," p. 405.

⁵³ Beveridge, *Voluntary Action*, pp. 80–1.

⁵⁴ Deutscher, "Russia," p. 559. See also Rimlinger, *Welfare Policy and Industrialization*, pp. 278–9.

When states took a *passive* approach to regulating their operations, the fate of these societies depended largely on the competition they faced from other insurance carriers. To stay in business, mutual insurance societies needed to be just as efficient as their competitors. Three outcomes were possible:

- Mutual insurance societies managed to stay abreast of competitors. Their success then inevitably led to expansion, gradual bureaucratization, and consequently the loss of their original sociability function.
- Societies preferred to retain their sociability function, effectively reducing them to small friendly societies that no longer focused on social security.
- Societies neither withstood competitors and grew in size, nor retained their sociability function, and were therefore eventually wound up.

Where the state *actively* intervened in the affairs of mutual insurance societies, and pursued a policy of negation or selective integration which excluded these societies, marginalization became inevitable. This situation arose in Germany following Bismarck's social legislation: "Funds consisting of voluntary donations (*Hilfskassen*) stagnated and became rather meaningless, whereas funds made up of mandatory contributions (*Zwangskassen*) grew with the help of government subsidies and immeasurably superior means."⁵⁵ In Ireland, where the government negated mutual insurance societies since the 1940s, the remaining Friendly Societies became sociability clubs.⁵⁶

If the state took over mutual insurance societies as part of a policy of active integration, then expansion, bureaucratization, and loss of sociability soon followed. Lord Beveridge noted that, as a result of the British National Insurance Act of 1911, Friendly Societies "became more official and less personal, more of insurance agencies and less of social agencies" and that there "was pressure to concentrate in larger units, leading to disappearance of a large proportion of small societies."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Mitchell, "Bürgerlicher Liberalismus und Volksgesundheit," p. 406.

⁵⁶ Buckley, "'On the Club,'" p. 57.

⁵⁷ Beveridge, *Voluntary Action*, pp. 78–9.

Clearly, it is possible for directly democratic mutual insurance societies to coexist with passive intervention by the state, and mild competition from other types of insurance carriers. Should that situation change, the societies are inevitably confronted with a choice between three options: expanding their operations, with the effect of bureaucratization at the expense of sociability; marginalization; or dissolution.

Chapter Seven

Consumer cooperatives

Consumer cooperatives are based on budget pooling: several individuals or households pay into a joint fund, used to purchase goods for subsequent distribution among these individuals or households. But even the simplest cooperatives can function only if the members have at least some money, and can have direct contact with retailers or wholesalers. More complex forms furthermore require some organizational freedom. That is why especially “free” wage earners, share-croppers and self-employed workers formed consumer cooperatives, and why such organizations flourished especially under non-repressive social conditions.¹

Sometimes such cooperatives were initiated and run by members of the “higher” ranks and classes. I will refer to such organizations as “heteronomous”. My primary area of interest, however, concerns the *autonomous* cooperatives, where members also participated in the organization’s decision-making process.² Their value with respect to potential members

¹ It is conceivable that also *unfree* laborers who had some money, such as urban slaves-for-hire able to build up a “nest egg” (Velasco e Cruz, “Puzzling Out Slave Origins,” p. 218), had access to “dividing stores”, but I have yet to find evidence for this variant in the relevant literature.

² Nevertheless, notables (e.g. priests, mayors, judges, high-ranking officials) might be entrusted by the cooperative with advisory or supervisory responsibilities: such arrangements enhanced the organization’s standing and benefitted relations with both the authorities and potential members.

is demonstrated repeatedly in various parts of the world, from the Philippines to Germany.³ Although in the past there was a worldwide effort to propagate one standard model for consumer cooperatives (the model of the British so-called Rochdale Pioneers), it never replaced the others altogether, and many different types of organizations exist to this day.⁴

The need of working-class households for consumer cooperatives arises from their practice of purchasing consumer goods with money, which may lead to various problems. Financially, both the stability and the amount of the family's wage income may be insufficient to purchase goods deemed necessary or desirable.⁵ If a working-class family's income fluctuated and failed (even when averaged over a longer period of time) to cover costs, the consequences for purchasing consumer goods were clear:

- Lack of money would force such a family to pay proportionately higher prices due to its ineligibility for bulk discounts.
- The family was often forced to request credit from a shopkeeper or credit institution.
- Lack of money often led to the purchase of inferior goods.
- Financial difficulties might tempt households to forego purchasing some goods, or replacing others despite wear and tear.⁶

Conventional market transactions gave rise to other objections as well: consumer goods available on the "free market" were sometimes of inadequate

³ Kerkvliet, *Manila Workers' Unions*, Chapter 2; Gutknecht, "Zur Entwicklung der internen und verbandsmäßigen Willensbildung," pp. 168–9. Consumer cooperatives may trade a broad variety of goods – as will be described – but never comprise all commodities available in a country at a given time.

⁴ The legendary Rochdale Pioneers had formed a cooperative in 1844, which included among its principles: one vote per member; repayment of surpluses to members based on their share in the sale; cash payments; and political and religious neutrality. On this subject, see e.g. Holyoake, *Thirty-Three Years of Co-operation*. Members of the international cooperative movement were long at odds as to which principles were "Rochdale." See e.g., Hasselmann, *Geschichte der deutschen Konsumgenossenschaften*, pp. 21–3. At the end of the 1920s, Vahan Totomianz noted that while the Rochdale type prevailed in Europe and the United States, it was not the only type of cooperative. Totomianz, *Konsumentenorganisation*, pp. 76–80.

⁵ I am using the terms "household" and "family" as synonyms here. While the two concepts are not entirely identical, their differences are not relevant to my argument. See also my "Introduction."

⁶ Prinz, *Brot und Dividende*, pp. 27–30.

or unreliable quality, or insufficiently available.⁷ These different motives were not always kept apart. The appeal of the cooperative idea can exist “at many different levels” simultaneously.⁸

Establishment

Consumer cooperatives arise in any number of ways. In chapter 5, I indicated how “dividing stores” can be organized virtually from scratch. The dividing store is a rather obvious invention, which appears to have arisen spontaneously in many places in the world. In the 1930s, the so-called “city cooperatives” emerged in the United States, most of which were established with identical principles:

Cooperative interest is generated in a small discussion group which meets for from six to eight weeks to thrash out thoroughly the economics, social philosophy and technique of cooperation. With this as a nucleus, the group transforms itself into a cooperative buying club. Selecting a limited list of commodities, the members pool their orders and begin to purchase on a cooperative basis through a nearby cooperative wholesale or a regular wholesaler. A purchasing agent is selected to channelize these purchases, to build cooperative interest and to bring new consumers into the club. When a sufficient volume of business is built up, the club opens a cooperative store. In this way a cooperative venture may be launched without a large original outlay of funds.⁹

Consumer cooperatives also originated in other ways. In eighteenth-century Britain, the Friendly Societies (mutual insurance societies for workers) established funds for such cooperatives. Acting either independently or in

⁷ Obviously, all these obstacles may be surmounted in other ways, including appeals for government regulation (maximum prices, quality inspection, etc.) or illegal action (shoplifting as a form of social protest or squatting). See van der Linden, “Working-Class Consumer Power,” and chapter 10 of this book. Political considerations might exert influence. Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France*, p. 51, claims that French members of the First International founded consumer cooperatives for three strategic reasons: “First, they generated monies for political activism – notably strikes. Second, they provided a legal base for propaganda and political activity. Third, they were a concrete manifestation of democratic, egalitarian, worker-controlled commerce.”

⁸ Pollard, “Nineteenth-Century Co-operation,” p. 88.

⁹ Campbell, “Consumers’ Cooperative Movement,” p. 52.

conjunction with sister organizations, they purchased wheat, which they ground down as inexpensively as possible, and then made available to their members. These cooperatives became known as “flour clubs:”

Stocking-knitters at Long Eaton, Notts, founded a flour club, and the Sheffield masons, believing that ‘sick societies have the power of effecting something very advantageous towards easing the present almost intolerable burthen’, combined with fifteen other local friendly societies ‘to procure grain or flour of the best quality and at the lowest prices’. Every member received ‘for himself one stone of flour per week at prime cost and those who have families half a stone a head for the rest of the family’.¹⁰

Class struggles could be equally important. Sometimes a defeat stimulated the emergence of consumer cooperatives. In 1899 *Produktion* was established in Hamburg, shortly after the local trade union movement realized that the longshoremen, who had recently staged an unsuccessful strike, might have held out longer if they had been able to purchase food more inexpensively through a cooperative.¹¹

In some regions of a particular country, consumer cooperatives were formed because of a decision elsewhere (at the cooperatives’ headquarters) to establish a local branch. Regarding Britain, Carr-Saunders *et al.* note: “In those areas in which Co-operation first made progress, chiefly in the industrial north, it developed spontaneously as the result of local enthusiasm in the towns and villages; as a result there are still many small societies and a considerable amount of overlapping. In districts in which progress has been more recent, co-operation has developed by an increase in the membership and extent of a smaller number of established societies; in consequence societies cover large areas and there is little overlapping.”¹²

Finances

Consumer cooperatives require relatively little start-up capital, and are capable of quickly achieving a high turnover in many everyday consumer goods.

¹⁰ Tann, “Co-operative Corn Milling,” p. 46.

¹¹ Göhre, *Die deutschen Arbeiter-Konsumvereine*, pp. 424–9.

¹² Carr-Saunders, Florence, and Peers, *Consumers’ Co-operation in Great Britain*, p. 67. Later they add: “To some extent, therefore, low co-operative loyalty is the cause, not the result, of the growth of larger societies.” (p. 76).

They can launch operations with very little cash.¹³ It is even conceivable, and has actually happened, that consumer cooperatives begin operations without any start-up capital, by obtaining advances from suppliers. Obviously, starting without capital requires that the members leave at least part of their bonuses in the treasury of the consumer cooperative during the early years. In some cases members even contribute additional funds to their consumer cooperative, effectively using it as a savings fund.¹⁴

Low selling prices were often the original motive for establishing consumer cooperatives. Chinese miners and railroad workers who in the early 1920s chanted “Create a consumer cooperative so that we can get cheap foods” were expressing one of the driving forces behind founders of cooperatives all over the world.¹⁵ Selling goods below retail rates, or even at cost price, can have several consequences.

- *Local retailers are driven into bankruptcy.* This course is likely to instigate aggression and political opposition against the consumer cooperatives.
- *Sale of goods to non-members becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible:* theoretically, non-members might be granted the same advantages as members, which would eliminate any reason for members to supply capital to the cooperative; alternatively, a double pricing standard entailing higher rates for non-members than for members would elicit practical objections.

¹³ Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, p. 106, observes: “In fact, the main advantage of consumer cooperatives over production cooperatives is the ease in establishment and the speed of their growth.”

¹⁴ Consumer cooperatives derive their capital from three principal sources: subscription to shares; bonuses that remain in the fund or are converted into shares; and loans (from members or third parties). Most consumer cooperatives limited the number of shares per member, although the maximum varied widely from three to a few hundred. At least two motives underlay these restrictive regulations. Firstly, they protected cooperatives from a takeover by an affluent individual or a competing firm. Even if each member had only one vote, a majority shareholder could dominate the consumer cooperative by threatening to leave the organization. Secondly, bonuses left by the members in the treasury of the cooperative can ordinarily be reclaimed. Moreover, members can sell their shares back to the consumer cooperative through a redemption scheme. Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, pp. 108–10. Both cases reveal that consumer cooperatives have much to fear from majority shareholders. All the same, consumer cooperatives can use extra capital, for example to establish or purchase production companies (vertical integration). Over time, various appeals have been launched to abolish the restriction on the number of shares per member.

¹⁵ Shaffer, *Mao and the Workers*, p. 88. This was the cooperative founded in Anyan, Hunan Province on 1 May 1922.

- *The cooperative system fosters illicit membership.* Members become tempted to purchase items from the cooperative for their non-member friends or relatives, or even to act as middlemen by reselling items acquired inexpensively from the cooperative at somewhat higher rates.
- *A cooperative is forced to remain a rudimentary operation:* it lacks the financial means to pursue other goals, such as promoting individual or collective saving, insurance for members, capital accumulation, etc.

When items are sold *above* their cost price, operating consumer cooperatives logically obtain a surplus.¹⁶ The surplus may be allocated in several different ways. One is to distribute the balance to the capital providers. Another is to invest the surplus in educational and similar causes, such as solidarity. A third way may involve paying the balance to the customers, in the form of money or as coupons awarding members credit toward future purchases from the consumer cooperative. This third option was probably the one most frequently used, although it could obviously occur in combination with the others.

Paying the customers requires devising a distribution mechanism. The most obvious system is to base that mechanism on the value of the groceries purchased, which requires specific knowledge of the amounts spent by each household. To this end, each member is assigned an individual account; the grocery members' purchases are listed in booklets to be carried with them at all times; members are given tokens representing the value of their purchases; or, members are given receipts indicating the value of their purchases. All these different methods have advantages and drawbacks, but describing them all is beyond the scope of this study.¹⁷

¹⁶ Often this surplus is not designated as a profit. In France, such differences were known as *bonis*, *ristournes*, or *trop perçus*. In Britain, they were called *divi* (from *dividend*) or *surplus*.

¹⁷ At any rate, the surplus may be distributed among the members once the value of each member's purchases has been calculated. Various disbursement systems have been used. Linear assessments are the simplest method: suppose the total turnover for a given year is 1,000,000 monetary units, with 200,000 monetary units remaining as the net surplus. Members who spend 1,000 monetary units that year will receive a year-end pay-out of 200 monetary units. This method's advantage lies in its simplicity. The disadvantage is the implicit illusion that all products yield the same surplus rate. In reality, some products obviously generate little surplus (or may even be sold at a loss), while others may yield a higher profit. Linear assessments inordinately favour members purchasing only products sold at a loss over those purchasing products with

Clientele has a direct bearing on the selling price and surplus distribution. Should a consumer cooperative sell goods exclusively to its own members, or to non-members as well? If items are sold to the general public, which procedures should apply? If the surplus is distributed to the consumers, rather than to the suppliers of capital, should purchasing non-members be entitled to some or all of the bonuses for which members are eligible? Practices have varied widely.¹⁸ The Rochdale pioneers sold to the public; non-members received half the *bonis répartis* [distributed surplus] awarded to members; the other half went into a reserve. Obviously, granting the general public the same benefits as the members would have eliminated the incentive to join. On the other hand, selling to non-members was an attractive means of increasing sales and earning back the capital invested more quickly. This practice was also an easy way for others to become acquainted with the cooperative.¹⁹

Success

The success of consumer cooperatives, and the resulting amount of their periodic surplus, depended on many factors. The first was the *quality of the management*. Possible areas of vulnerability included: an unclear structure of authority, inadequate management, misappropriation of funds, unwise purchasing policy, etc.²⁰ Secondly, there was the *actual amount of shopping* done by members at the cooperative. The quantities purchased varied widely. Even

a high profit margin. Some consumer cooperatives therefore factored in a fixed mark-up (e.g. 10 percent) over the purchase price when determining the selling prices of individual products. This method was a precaution against an inequitable distribution of the surplus as a result of linear assessment. Instead, a new problem arises. Mechanically increasing all purchase prices by a fixed rate means that some products sell for less than the regular retail prices, whereas others become more expensive. Rational members will therefore purchase only those goods from the consumer cooperative with prices equal to or less than the retail rates; they will buy all other goods from the commercial competition.

¹⁸ In Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy, sales included the general public in 1917 (Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, p. 67); in Germany this practice was prohibited by the laws passed on 1 May 1889 and 12 August 1896. *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁹ Sometimes, a status between membership and non-membership existed. In France, this was known as *adhérent*. *Adhérents* paid an entrance fee but did not participate in organizational activities.

²⁰ Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, pp. 80–1.

deeply committed members might shop there only sporadically, because shopping elsewhere (e.g. at neighborhood shops) seemed more attractive. Karin Hagemann writes about Hamburg during the 1920s: "By no means all members of the consumer cooperatives were regular customers. Before the war the share of non-purchasing members averaged 40 percent; during the war the figure declined to 35 percent only to rise to about 45 percent afterwards. The high rate of non-purchasing members was a long-standing problem for consumer cooperatives."²¹ One solution was to expel members spending less than a minimum annual amount at the consumer cooperative; such a measure could easily be counterproductive however, and lead to a major decline in membership.

A third factor was the *diversity of the supply*. Members whose consumer cooperatives carry a broader variety of consumer goods are less inclined to shop elsewhere.²² Fourthly, *how the price-level compared to other retailers* was of importance.²³ A fifth factor was the *relationship with competitors*. A consumer cooperative which is the sole retail business in a certain place is likely to be busier than one competing with several local retailers. Some consumer cooperatives also competed with each other, especially if they were affiliated with different political movements or ethnic groups. And finally, *legal regulations* came into play as well. In many countries, laws were eventually enacted governing the operations of the consumer cooperatives. A case in point was the Soviet Union, where the regime took the following decision in November 1935: "The organization of consumers' cooperation in towns shall be liquidated and all their property, including all liabilities and assets, shall be transferred to the People's Commissariat of Internal Trade of the USSR."²⁴

²¹ Hagemann, *Frauenalltag und Männerpolitik*, p. 147.

²² This process is obviously self-sustaining: only when a consumer cooperative is doing well can the assortment be expanded considerably.

²³ Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, pp. 85–6.

²⁴ Quoted according to Campbell, "Consumers' Cooperative Movement," p. 37. On the fates of earlier consumer cooperatives in Russia, see: Totomjanz, "Konsumgenossenschaften in Rußland"; Ponomareva, "Rabochie potrebitel'skie kooperativy"; Pumpianski, "Genossenschaftsbewegung in Rußland"; Salzman, "Consumer Cooperative Societies in Russia"; Chambre, "Coopération de Consommation."

Membership

Quite a few consumer cooperatives admitted only people with a certain occupation: railroad employees, workers at a certain factory, officers, etc. While such trade-based cooperatives were often formed entirely voluntarily, they sometimes resulted from compelling circumstances. "When mills or mines were far away from the towns, workers at the same company needed to form cooperatives for lack of any others locally. Railroad employees received special privileges from the Company for transporting their provisions. Therefore, cooperatives could not set up shop for them at every site."²⁵ Such trade-based consumer cooperatives have advantages and disadvantages. The well-developed team spirit can bring about solid organizations, as revealed by the success of consumer cooperatives of civil servants or the military. A disadvantage is that such consumer cooperatives ordinarily keep their distance from general cooperative or labor movements; their motives are purely economic. Other membership criteria include political conviction (socialist), religious affiliation, and possibly ethnicity. Of course, general consumer cooperatives exist as well.

Usually, only one individual from each participating household would be a member of a consumer cooperative. A different arrangement would have been imprudent, both for the household and for the consumer cooperative. If additional family members wished to join the consumer cooperative, they would obviously have to purchase more shares without obtaining any material benefits in return. For its part, the consumer cooperative would not increase its sales. In a great many cases, the head of the household (i.e. the man) was the member. "As a rule, the man of the house would join a cooperative as the family breadwinner. He would receive an interest. Accordingly, he was the only one entitled to co-determination rights in the cooperative."²⁶ A study of a large sugarcane plantation in Guatemala in the 1970s demonstrates that women often preferred to do their shopping elsewhere, since "If the dividend is returned to the husband who keeps it as *his* saving, then the wife has no incentive to shop there [at the cooperative]. If she buys for less in the marketplace, the savings are hers to use for other purchases."²⁷

²⁵ Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, p. 101.

²⁶ Hagemann, *Frauenalltag und Männerpolitik*, p. 140.

²⁷ Bossen, *Redivision of Labor*, p. 363.

Even male observers noted the paradoxical nature of this situation a long time ago. For example, Vahan Totomianz, a leading theoretician on cooperatives during the interwar years, wrote: "It is illogical for consumer cooperatives [...] to be controlled exclusively by men, as most men never do the shopping."²⁸ Nevertheless, in many cases this exclusion appears to have persisted in full force until the 1960s and 1970s, when the women's movements gained ground.²⁹

Markets

Consumer cooperatives can in principle participate in a wide variety of markets. Presumably, however, they were most attracted to the market segments that were easiest to enter (because relatively little capital or skill was required) with reasonably stable sales, and a high turnover in investments. Historical experience confirms this pattern. The original specialization in dry goods of most consumer cooperatives (e.g., the Rochdale Pioneers) is by no means coincidental. The foodstuffs sold (preserves, coffee, tea, sugar, salt, pepper, etc.) are part of just about everybody's daily needs, require virtually no processing, except grinding coffee, etc., and do not spoil quickly, unlike meat, fruit, milk, butter, etc.; this selection's variety reduces vulnerability to price fluctuations, requires little start-up capital, and enables the operation to establish a reputation relatively quickly, because people shop daily.

For the same reasons Japanese cooperatives specialized in the sale of kerosene, a fuel considered indispensable in North Japan during the winter. Kerosene also satisfies a need, has a long shelf life, requires little initial investment, and has a rapid turnover. "The members of Shimin Seikyo (Hokkaido inhabitants' consumer co-operative) told, with pride, about their grave responsibility as a nationwide price leader for kerosene. The price negotiation for kerosene [...] is one of the greatest matters of concern to all Hokkaido inhabitants not restricted to members of Shimin Seikyo. It is said that there are some inhabit-

²⁸ Totomianz, "Le rôle des femmes dans la coopération," p. 413.

²⁹ For example, the gender ratio in Swedish cooperatives has clearly shifted in favor of women over the past few decades (over half the members are now women), although women remain underrepresented among *active* members. (Pestoff, *Between Markets and Politics*, pp. 35, 47.) See also Baulier, "Femmes et organisations féminines"; Ellmeier, "Handel mit der Zukunft"; Gaffin, "Women and Cooperation"; Kog, "Vrouwen en coöperatie."

ants who become members of co-operatives only for the purpose of co-operative purchase of kerosene."³⁰

Bakeries were probably the second most popular option.³¹ This sector was more difficult for consumer cooperatives to enter than the dry goods business, because bakeries are responsible for both production and distribution. Bakers both make and sell bread. "Of all production industries, bread is the oldest, the best known, and the most routine; in many places it remains a household operation. It requires very little capital and involves no machinery. Since the ingredients used are always virtually identical, and the price varies little, miscalculations are exceedingly unlikely."³² Moreover, bread is an indispensable foodstuff (at least in the West!), with sales that may be predicted fairly accurately.

Butcheries were still more difficult for consumer cooperatives to establish. Meat is difficult to preserve; the price of the commodity (livestock) fluctuates dramatically; sales vary, as does the quality of different cuts of meat (which leads to disagreements with customers); and great expertise is required. The fluctuating clientele makes restaurants, cafes, and wine shops relatively difficult territory for cooperatives as well. If their establishment was authorized, cooperative pharmacies sometimes thrived, because their prices proved considerably lower than in private pharmacies.

Once they had amassed substantial capital through other means, consumer cooperatives could become active on the property market, by building homes at their own expense for subsequent sale or rental.

Origin of the goods

Consumer cooperatives obtained their goods in various ways. Firstly, they could obviously manufacture products themselves. Ordinarily, this approach worked only with everyday products that housewives could often make at home on their own, such as bread, pastries, or jam. Secondly, consumer cooperatives could purchase products from commercial wholesalers (an option

³⁰ Nomura, "Consumer Co-operatives in Japan," p. 9.

³¹ See e.g. Daudé-Bancel, "Origines et développement des boulangeries coopératives"; Zoitl, "Gegen den Brotwucher!"

³² Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, p. 124.

that rarely appealed to the more politically inclined cooperatives), from state and municipal companies, or from producer cooperatives.

Once the consumer cooperatives in a given region or country accumulated enough capital to issue large advances, the transition to *cooperative wholesaling* became possible. Purchasing federations were able to purchase more cheaply than individual consumer cooperatives, due to economies of scale. They might pursue other objectives as well, such as facilitating the establishment of new consumer cooperatives; impeding illegitimate or unauthorized commissions (bribes); preventing boycotts by commercial suppliers; or sponsoring educational lectures.

The purchasing federations existed in various types of organizations, listed here in order of ascending power: *commercial information bureaus*, which passed on the prices charged by suppliers to the consumer cooperatives, and reported the resulting orders back to the vendors; *syndicates*, which operated independently as buyers for affiliated consumer cooperatives, and were consequently able to trade on their own consumer cooperative account; and *wholesale societies*, which actually functioned as consumer cooperatives for other consumer cooperatives.³³

The third and final step in the expansion of consumer cooperatives involves neutralizing the role played by the manufacturing companies and farmers, a problem which arises when the cooperation obtains control over this stage of production.³⁴ Large-scale in-house production could generate both industrial products (soap, margarine, shoes, etc), mining products (coal, petroleum), and agricultural produce (fruits, vegetables, etc.). With regard to produce, various European Wholesale Societies actually purchased plots of land for cultivation and even bought colonial plantations (e.g. for tea in Ceylon and India).³⁵

³³ Early cases include the Wholesale Societies in Manchester (established in 1864), Glasgow (1868), Copenhagen (1888), Basle (1892), Hamburg (1894), Moscow (1898), Paris (1900), and Helsingfors (1904). (Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, p. 176.)

³⁴ Renner, "Skizze einer ökonomischen Theorie des Genossenschaftswesens."

³⁵ An important but as yet entirely unexplored issue concerns the relationship between the consumer cooperatives in the colonial metropolises and the workers on the colonial plantations.

Hierarchization

Economically thriving consumer cooperatives could expand their staff considerably. But each such enlargement increased the social distance between staff and management. Over time, consumer cooperative staff established their own trade unions, and internal conflicts became more frequent. A British example illustrates this trend: from 1913 to 1931, the number of employees in cooperative retail societies rose from 101,832 to 187,633, while the number of employees in cooperative wholesale societies grew from 29,679 to 51,917.³⁶ Yet at the same time, many workers became increasingly dissatisfied with them. In 1891, the Amalgamated Union of Cooperative Employees AUCE had been founded, and between 1918 and 1926, several labor disputes erupted.³⁷ Other countries followed the British trend – sometimes decades later. In Sweden, for example, “[during] the late 1970s several dozen wild-cat or illegal strikes were initiated by consumer co-operative employees.”³⁸ Various counter-measures served to reduce the tensions between staff and management, such as assigning membership to consumer cooperative employees, sharing the surplus with the employees, and involving the employees in management of the cooperative. These efforts appear to have been only moderately successful.³⁹

Competition

As the consumer cooperatives increased their market share, they prompted more intense resistance among the shop owners. Ordinary retailers often viewed the consumer cooperatives as a threat to their own business. Around 1900 in Belgium, for example, the *petits patrons* [small businessmen] movement was established in response to the rise of the socialist consumer cooperatives.⁴⁰ Owners of dry goods stores and other small retailers frequently regarded their shops as an ultimate means of subsistence. Winstanley correctly notes about Britain:

³⁶ Calculation based on Carr-Saunders *et al.*, *Consumers' Co-operation*, p. 43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁸ Pestoff, *Between Markets and Politics*, p. 103.

³⁹ Gide, *Les sociétés coopératives de consommation*, pp. 293–304.

⁴⁰ Jaumain, “Les classes moyennes belges,” p. 20.

In a society in which there were minimal welfare provisions until after the Second World War, general shopkeeping offered one of the few openings for widows, invalids, the unemployed and aged to maintain themselves independently. As household production retreated throughout the nineteenth century, the importance of retailing as one of the few sectors of the economy in which married women could combine family duties with profitable employment grew. [...] Above all, however, shopkeeping was seen by many entrants as a way of re-establishing personal control over their lives, of asserting their independence and staking a claim to enhanced social status within the local community.⁴¹

Presumably, the relationship between the market share of consumer cooperatives and the resistance among shop owners was curvilinear: where consumer cooperatives were insignificant, or had attained absolute dominance (at certain points most of the population belonged to a consumer cooperative in some cities, e.g. in Leeds, Breslau/Wrocław, and Basle), resistance seemed unnecessary or pointless; between these two extremes, however, aggression toward consumer cooperatives sometimes ran high. The retail industry had four main defense mechanisms: selling on credit, through savings stamps, etc.; boycotting vendors which also supplied consumer cooperatives; dismissing staff members who belonged to a consumer cooperative; or influencing the government, e.g. by demanding that certain laws apply to consumer cooperatives or by requesting that civil servants be prohibited from joining.

In Britain, major resistance arose among shop owners. It was, in part, the result of the consolidation of the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1893, which exempted consumer cooperatives from income tax under certain conditions.⁴² Around 1930, their objections led to the founding of a National

⁴¹ Winstanley, "Concentration and Competition", p. 251. See also: Lawson, "Shops, Shopkeepers and the Working-Class Community"; and compare the following passage quoted from Levy, *Shops of Britain*, p. 10: "[For the small shopkeeper] the possession of a business is not merely a matter of calculating profits. Sociological problems are involved which are quite alien to the department store or the big multiple shop or chain. The possession of a small shop means an independent livelihood though such independence may mean any amount of worry, drudgery, vexation and insecurity. [...] There is a feeling of pride in the possession which may obscure financial considerations."

⁴² One important aspect of such legalization of consumer cooperatives was as follows: "The Industrial and Provident Societies Act incorporated societies, i.e. defined them as separate legal entities distinct from their members. Societies were to continue

Organizations Co-ordinated Committee, which intended to create trouble for the cooperative societies. The committee's efforts succeeded, and the government declared the trading surplus of a cooperative society equivalent to the taxable profits of a private business in 1933.⁴³

Sometimes business owners joined forces with the government in fighting workers' cooperatives. In the 1930s, this pattern was very pronounced in Germany, where shop proprietors hostile to consumer cooperatives wielded considerable influence in the Nazi movement. "After 1933 consumer cooperatives suffered from coordinated 'spontaneous' terror by National Socialist organizations of business owners and restrictive legislation 'from above.' The consequences included boycotts and infringements on the rights of staff, members, and institutions, liquidation of autonomy, and transformation according to the authoritarian *Führer* principle, [...] and ultimately official dissolution of the societies that were most successful economically and had the largest membership in 1935."⁴⁴

Concentration

Eventually consumer cooperatives, like all businesses under capitalism, are forced to centralize and concentrate capital. The corollary is a declining number of cooperatives, and an increasing total membership strength per cooperative.⁴⁵ In Britain, the average number of members per cooperative rose from 564 in 1881 to 8,185 in 1940, while in Stockholm the average membership per retail unit increased from 235 in 1916 to 1,472 in 1989.⁴⁶

to function under the law independently of changes in leadership and membership. Members were granted limited liability in return. These were, already, limitations on, or particular definitions of, mutuality. In these respects, co-operative societies had the same legal status as joint-stock companies while not in fact being the same forms." Killingback, "Limits to Mutuality," p. 210.

⁴³ Killingback, "Limits to Mutuality," pp. 210, 217, 224.

⁴⁴ Prinz, *Brot und Dividende*, p. 176. On consumer cooperatives and state regulation in Nazi Germany, see: Ditt, "Konsumgenossenschaften im Dritten Reich"; Kurzer, "Konsumgenossenschaften"; idem, *Nationalsozialismus und Konsumgenossenschaften*.

⁴⁵ On Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century, Carr-Saunders *et al.*, *Consumers' Co-operation*, p. 45, note that the "increase in membership [1901: 1,789,358; 1931: 6,531,834] was accompanied by a decrease in the number of societies [1901: 1,455; 1931: 1,159] – evidence of the closing of the ranks and greater concentration of resources to meet the changed conditions of the present day."

⁴⁶ Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, p. 242; Pestoff, *Between Markets and Politics*, p. 234.

One factor necessitating concentration was the transformation of infrastructure, especially the transportation industry (country buses, private cars, and inexpensive rail travel). The result was not only “a closer network of retailing services – small private shops, chain store branches, greatly increased delivery services and door-to-door hawking,” but also “a serious loss of business by stores in small towns or villages, especially in ‘dry goods’ lines.”⁴⁷ Another factor, somewhat related to the first, was the emergence of new types of retailing.⁴⁸ Eventually, expansion became the only way to avoid going out of business, but this solution reduced commitment among members. Often the average age of members rose, as elderly members remained loyal to their cooperatives, and younger ones failed to materialize. The solution of allowing non-members to shop at cooperative stores further eroded the original principles the cooperatives had. While such methods enabled cooperatives to stay in business in some countries, elsewhere their hopeless situation forced many organizations to disband. Those cooperatives which survived, acquired many of the characteristics of conventional capitalist businesses.

Generally, the consumer cooperatives were doomed by inhibitions arising from their pioneering role. Established in an era when small shop-owners controlled retailing, they initially had an advantage. Their larger operations afforded better logistics and economies of scale. But when shopkeepers joined forces in chain stores, central purchasing organizations, etc., new sales systems – including self-service stores, supermarkets, shopping centers and the like – emerged. These new, large-scale commercial ventures featured brand names, systems of accumulated redeemable credits, low prices, and enticing advertisements. As a result, the competitive advantage of the consumer cooperatives deteriorated visibly. The surplus base (surplus divided by sales) decreased, along with the dividends for members and opportunities for innovation and investment. Many consumer cooperatives began to encounter financial difficulties, and faced a serious dilemma in their effort to avoid bankruptcy:⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Carr-Saunders *et al.*, *Consumers' Co-operation*, p. 84.

⁴⁸ On early capitalist competition, see Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France*, Chapter 3. For problems that arose later, see Desroche, “Problèmes de développement”; and Brazda and Schediwy, “Konsumgenossenschaften.” An interesting case study appears in Gandenberger, *Konzentration im Bereich der deutschen Konsumgenossenschaften*.

⁴⁹ See e.g., Böök and Ilmonen, “Problems of Contemporary Cooperatives”; Damsma and Wieling, “De Coöperatie, daar had je hart voor”; Nilsson and Schediwy, “Konsum

- either they could merge with a regular capitalist business, become a limited liability company, or borrow substantial amounts from banks – in each case, they ceased to be autonomous cooperatives;
- or, they could counter the rising competition through modernization and operational expansion – thereby increasing the considerable social distance between members and administrators, as well as further reducing involvement among the members and thereby undermining the organization's cooperative ethos.⁵⁰

In Japan, an interesting initiative was implemented to maintain high member involvement despite progressive concentration. Rather than purchasing individually from the cooperative, members of the consumer cooperative form so-called *Han* groups: "The Han group is the basic unit of the Co-op [...]. In the Han group, members discuss such problems as safety of food, children's education, health tips and improvement of the quality of life."⁵¹ Han groups purchase collectively; one member coordinates the operation by conducting a weekly inventory of the items required by the group members, and passes the list on to the consumer cooperative staff. The goods ordered are then delivered to the Han coordinator, or a group depot, and distributed among the members. "As ordering, distributing, collecting money are done by the members themselves, 2% of purchase amount is paid back as dividend."⁵² Here, the old "dividing society" is reintroduced, but in the guise of a bureaucratized consumer cooperative. Brazda and Schediwy attribute the success of the *Han* groups in part to the "oppressed situation" of Japanese housewives; the *Han* groups would be difficult to replicate in less patriarchal societies.⁵³

Autriche"; Prinz, "Ende der Konsumvereine"; Soumagne, "Le commerce coopératif en France."

⁵⁰ Based on their research on British retail cooperatives, C.-N. Ostergaard and A.H. Halsey have already mentioned "the possible incompatibility of business efficiency and democratic control." See Ostergaard and Halsey, "Democracy in British Retail Cooperatives," p. 72.

⁵¹ Nomura, "Consumer Co-operatives", p. 15, note.

⁵² Ibid., 14, note. The "city cooperatives" in the United States were similar in some respects.

⁵³ Brazda and Schediwy, "Konsumgenossenschaften," p. 75.

Chapter Eight

Producer cooperatives

In theory, free workers have three main options if they want to gain more control over their work. They can leave the employer for another employer offering better terms of employment (labor mobility and migration); they can take up the cudgels and enter directly into conflict with the employer with the aim of winning more power, control or autonomy; or, they can try to build a new business themselves. The second option involves strategies such as strikes and unionization, discussed in chapters 9 and 11; the third strategy includes producer cooperatives, which I discuss in this chapter. I refer to “free workers” deliberately, because only those who are not bound to the employer by physical coercion, debts, or other forms of bondage have the option of forming producer cooperatives. More clearly than in the case of consumer cooperatives, this is exclusively an option for “free” wage earners, share-croppers and self-employed workers.

What the correct definition of producer cooperatives ought to be, is something that has already been debated extensively in the literature. According to the International Cooperative Alliance, for example, *corporate control by workers themselves* is decisive. Such control may take three forms: democratic decision-making within the company (including managerial appointments), profit-sharing, or direct ownership.

Most researchers however find such a description too broad. They often consider only the first criterion to be decisive. Thus, companies that apply the profit-sharing principle, but deny employees a say in management, are not viewed as true producer cooperatives.¹ According to the strictest definition, a producer cooperative is (i) an economically independent company that produces for the market; (ii) is owned jointly and exclusively by the employees; and (iii) is based on the “one (wo)man, one vote” decision-making system. But in reality very few cooperative enterprises fully match this definition. Producer cooperatives often receive partial co-funding from philanthropists or banks. During peak periods, many hire additional staff members who do not share in the profits, and frequently have no voting rights. Discarding excessive purism, I will therefore define producer cooperatives simply as *enterprises where policy is determined largely by the people who work there*. Chris Doucouliagos has rightly noted: “Worker *ownership* is not sufficient. There must be worker *control*. A firm owned by workers is not labor-managed if its operations are controlled by management or external financiers.”²

Establishment

The establishment of producer cooperatives appears to have been motivated by any of five main reasons. Firstly, cooperatives have been a temporary means to pressure the employer or employers to *concede during a labor dispute*. For example, during a strike of coal miners in the neighborhood of Newcastle, Australia, in 1861, a co-operative mine was established: “A syndicate of 15 was formed [...]. A lease of 1,280 acres was obtained at Plattsburg on an undertaking to pay 6d. per ton royalty on all coal produced. Working capital was to be provided by the issue of 6,000 shares at £5 each and an appeal was made to all miners to participate in the venture. Production had

¹ Bonin, Jones, and Putterman, “Theoretical and Empirical Studies,” pp. 1291–2.

² Doucouliagos, “Why Capitalist Firms Outnumber Labor-Managed Firms,” p. 46. Workers tend to be very sensitive to outside influence. When tobacco workers in Manila, for example, opened their own factory in 1909, they decided “that ‘rich people’ [...] were to be allowed to invest only up to 10,000 pesos toward the subscribed capital. Workers were supposed to be responsible for the rest of the capital (20,000 pesos).” Kerkvliet, *Manila Workers’ Unions*, p. 26.

begun before the strike ended but the mine played no part in determining the outcome.”³

Secondly, producer cooperatives can be a means of *eliminating or averting unemployment*. Such unemployment may, for example, be the outcome of an unsuccessful strike. The Philadelphia cordwainers who in 1806 downed tools only to be found guilty of conspiracy by the court “opened a boot and shoe warehouse [...] where they intend[ed] to carry on the business, wholesale and retail.”⁴ Of course, unemployment may also result from economic factors, as was the case with the textile workers in Huddersfield (England), about whom the *Leeds Times* printed an account on 24 May 1834: “The men of Huddersfield are forming themselves into a society for the express purpose of manufacturing on their account. Indeed, it may be a consolation to those who think a redundancy of hands an evil, that many men who have turned out of employment have clubbed their savings, and commenced on their own account, and have orders from various parts of the country for more cloth than they with their present arrangements can supply.”⁵ The threat of unemployment due to impending bankruptcy may be averted, if the staff buys the company from the current owner and continues the operation on their own steam.

Thirdly, producer cooperatives may be established as a means of *abolishing middlemen*. The piano builders in Paris, for example, who in 1849 established a producer cooperative, did so out of annoyance with “the evil salesmanship by the middlemen,” who reduced daily earnings to 2 or 3 francs, “with nearly the same amount going to the intermediary.”⁶ Fourthly, producer cooperatives may serve to *advance the emancipation of a group* suffering from discrimination on the labor market. During the 1970s and the early 1980s, the number of women’s producer cooperatives in the building sector in Britain increased

³ Ross, *History of the Miners’ Federation of Australia*, p. 24.

⁴ Saposs, “Colonial and Federal Beginnings,” p. 129.

⁵ Thornes, “Change and Continuity,” p. 38. Another good example is from the United States during the 1920s, and concerns a producer cooperative “started by the former employees of a cigar factory which dealt almost exclusively with saloons. With the advent of prohibition, this outlet for the product was closed, sales fell, and more than 300 employees lost their positions. Some of the displaced workers organized the cooperative company, with the hope of providing employment for their members, and of disposing of the product through cigar and confectionary stores.” Anon., “Cooperative Workshops,” pp. 241–2.

⁶ Huber, “Skizzen,” p. 928.

because women had difficulty finding work in that sector any other way.⁷ Finally, producer cooperatives may be intended as *a vehicle toward social reform*, at the initiative of the workers themselves, or others. Typically, an employer hands his company over to his staff in such cases. The process usually starts with a philanthropic entrepreneur who first sets up a profit-sharing scheme, then a joint-management system, and finally transfers ownership of the company to the employees upon his retirement, or in his will. One such case is that of the large Paris *Magasins du Bon Marché*, where the owners, the Boucicauts, transferred ownership to the staff in this manner at the end of the nineteenth century.⁸

Many producer cooperatives existed only for a short time. To succeed, they had to meet at least four prerequisites: capable management, skillful staff with a strong democratic impulse, sufficient capital, and adequate opportunities for selling the product. I will note here some salient aspects of each.

Management

A manager needs several qualities. He or she is responsible – possibly assisted by other members – for identifying one or several market outlets for the new enterprise, purchasing the right commodities and labor equipment as inexpensively as possible, coordinating the company's activities, and spreading the risks. Moreover, he or she should have enough authority to encourage the other cooperative members to satisfy the expectations of them. Such skills require talent and experience, which are not necessarily attributes of producer cooperative members insofar as they are ordinary workers. Even if some members have such skills, they will be inclined – except if their social-moral motivation is particularly strong – either to work for a heteronomous company, or to opt for self-employment. In both cases, their income would probably be higher.⁹

There are many examples of producer cooperatives which failed for lack of managerial skills. In 1896, Oppenheimer observed: "The machine build-

⁷ Taylor, "Expansion of Worker Co-operatives," p. 277.

⁸ Gide, "Productive Co-operation in France," p. 45.

⁹ Ben-Ner, "Life Cycle of Worker-Owned Firms," p. 290. James Fletcher, the leader of the producer cooperative of coal miners in Newcastle, Australia in the 1860s, later became a capitalist manager and subsequently the owner of a private enterprise. Ross, *History of the Miners' Federation*, p. 24.

ers of Chemnitz had to disband because they ran their company without any business skills. The same held true for Endler & Co., the oldest watch factory, as well as for Kosa und Genossen, the Breslau tailors producer cooperative, for forgetting to deduct their materials, and the Magdeburg potters cooperative, since 95 percent of their clients consisted of insolvent building speculators, etc."¹⁰

Internal democracy

In addition to being experts in their trade, producer cooperative members have to be able to transcend their authoritarian primary and secondary socialization (in the family, at school, at heteronomous companies) and to adopt a permanent *anti-hierarchical* view, without thereby obstructing the management.¹¹ This lesson is often difficult to learn, as "the ability to participate democratically in the work setting is unlikely to be created by schools that function in a strictly hierarchical fashion where rules, regulations and bureaucratic control characterize the learning and social process."¹² The lack of entrepreneurial and anti-hierarchical qualities often tempts producer cooperative members to maintain small, simple organizational structures, and to mistrust any organizational expansion. Alternatively, a member with strong entrepreneurial skills may, when fellow members are insufficiently anti-hierarchical, be tempted to "hijack" the organization.¹³

Capital

Obviously, a producer cooperative requires sufficient funding for investments in circulating and fixed capital (raw materials, buildings, tools and machines, vehicles). Savings, or the dues collected from the organization's members, are the most obvious source of finance. Such assets tend to be very

¹⁰ Oppenheimer, *Siedlungsgenossenschaft*, pp. 59–60.

¹¹ Often, conflicts of authority would arise in producer cooperatives. A worker might tell his or her supervisor: "You cannot order me around. I am not under your control." Hofmann, "Deutsche Maschinenbau-Arbeiter-Kompanie," p. 96.

¹² Levin, "Issues in Assessing the Comparative Productivity," p. 57.

¹³ This course of events seems, for instance, to have taken place at the *Scottish Daily News* in the 1970s. Bradley, "Comparative Analysis of Producer Cooperatives."

modest however.¹⁴ For that reason, producer cooperatives have often been concentrated in labor-intensive industries, which required little in the way of expensive machinery or other equipment. Acquiring competitive strength generally demands additional resources obtained from external parties. Heteronomous companies usually rely in part on such means as well (issue of shares and bonds, bank credits, etc.).¹⁵ Producer cooperatives ordinarily have a wide range of options for additional external funding, many of which lead to dilution.

Firstly, producer cooperatives may be able to call on people sympathetic to their cause, whose contributions make them effectively shareholders in the company. This tendency is fairly common. In many instances, the establishment of a producer cooperative followed a major campaign to recruit this type of shareholder. Secondly, support is available from labor movement organizations (trade unions, consumer cooperatives, and the like). The success of such support depends largely on the attitude such institutions take toward the very idea of autonomous production; many trade unions have in fact been less than enthusiastic about producer cooperatives, because they believed such activity would *distract* workers from militant action rather than support it.¹⁶

Other possibilities for external finance include philanthropists, local and national state institutions, public utilities companies (e.g. thrift clubs) and the like.¹⁷ Although a straightforward bank loan would seem to be a logical possibility, banks often have little confidence in cooperative firms run by workers themselves. A final possibility is to elicit aid from capitalists, by issuing bonds or shares. Shares entail the distinct disadvantage that they turn external shareholders into fellow owners, which implies an immediate dilution of self-management, while bond issues oblige the producer cooperative to pay a fixed amount in interest annually, regardless of the firm's profitability.

¹⁴ E.g.: "The workers possessed so few resources that without government assistance, the primary difficulty concerned capital accumulation." Schnapper, "Les sociétés ouvrières de production," p. 172.

¹⁵ Gintis, "Principle of External Accountability."

¹⁶ For example Eisenberg, *Frühe Arbeiterbewegung und Genossenschaften*.

¹⁷ Gide, *Les obstacles*, pp. 16–34.

Sales

A company can recruit its clientele in two ways: one very low-key and gradual, the other sudden and large-scale. The second method is possible only if a given company holds a monopoly (or a patent) for a product which is clearly superior to all others, or if it is capable of investing considerably in manufacturing products at a lower cost and/or products of better quality than competitors. Since both these options are usually beyond the reach of producer cooperatives, they usually depend on *gradually capturing a market share*, usually a small one.¹⁸

Depending on the product or service provided and the economy's overall structure, a producer cooperative can have various types of customers. They could include proletarian families, if the product is a relatively inexpensive consumer item; buyers from the "better circles" – although this possibility depends greatly on the cultural characteristics of social classes;¹⁹ other producer cooperatives;²⁰ various labor organizations (trade unions, consumer cooperatives); heteronomous companies; and, of course, local and national state institutions.

Once producer cooperatives are established, they will often operate just as efficiently or even more efficiently than heteronomous companies.²¹ One reason is that a producer cooperative requires comparatively *less supervision* than a conventional enterprise. Producer cooperatives have internalized the contradiction between capital and labor, and therefore suffer considerably fewer asymmetries of information, mistrust and suchlike than heteronomous

¹⁸ Oppenheimer, *Siedlungsgenossenschaft*, p. 5.

¹⁹ Gide, *Les obstacles*, p. 13, describes a producer cooperative known as *La Parisienne*, which produced toilets. This company was unable to become a serious business. "Why? Because too many women lacked the courage to have toilets built by workers from cooperatives and to take pride in patronizing a social emancipation project. They feared being ridiculed in the salons."

²⁰ Engländer describes the case of a Paris producer cooperative of last cutters (ca. 1850). In its early days, the members of this cooperative produced a few lasts and offered them to a shoemakers' producer cooperative: the shoemakers "obviously supported the enterprise. All shoemaker associations promised to become clients [of the last cutters producer cooperative]." Engländer, *Geschichte der französischen Arbeiter-Associationen*, IV, p. 159.

²¹ "An accumulating body of evidence suggests that producer cooperatives often enjoy higher levels of productivity than do otherwise similar conventional firms." Putterman and Skillman, "Role of Exit Costs," p. 596.

firms.²² “In activities in which centralized monitoring is difficult to carry out, mutual monitoring and better incentives for worker-members help overcome shirking and make for superior performance of producer cooperatives.”²³ In his study of contemporary plywood manufacturing cooperatives in the American West, Christopher Gunn writes: “The co-ops use significantly fewer supervisors than their conventional counterparts; the average in the co-ops is one or two per shift of 60 to 70 people as opposed to five to seven in conventional firms.”²⁴ In addition, the *stronger work ethic* in producer cooperatives enhances general efficiency. Various authors have noted that producer cooperatives often yield superior output, and waste fewer raw materials than in the case of production by heteronomous firms.²⁵ Moreover, the *non-productive consumption of employers is eliminated*.²⁶ All these factors combine to keep producer cooperatives’ operating costs significantly below those of heteronomous firms.

Membership

Belonging to a producer cooperative has both advantages and disadvantages for workers. The main advantage is probably that the company is not run by a “boss”, but by the actual employees themselves. Workers, like anybody else, greatly appreciate such independence. Harry Dawes indeed argues that “the desire to be independent” is “often the main aim in life of a worker.”²⁷ Another advantage of a producer cooperative is that when business is good, members can earn relatively high incomes.

The main disadvantage of a producer cooperative is the tremendous risk involved. Firstly, someone who joins a producer cooperative needs to invest a substantial amount of his or her own savings. From a strictly economic point of view, such an action seems unwise: if candidate members of a producer cooperative acted only as rational, self-interested investors, they would

²² Russell, “Employee Ownership and Internal Governance.”

²³ Ben-Ner, “Producer Cooperatives,” p. 436.

²⁴ Gunn, *Workers’ Self-Management in the United States*, p. 111.

²⁵ Oppenheimer, *Siedlungsgenossenschaft*, p. 55; Engländer, *Geschichte der französischen Arbeiter-Associationen*, IV, pp. 160–1.

²⁶ I am referring to the “Luxury means of consumption, which enter the consumption only of the capitalist class” – Marx, *Capital*, II, p. 479.

²⁷ Dawes, “Labour Mobility in the Steel Industry,” p. 86.

spread their funds, and they would certainly not invest in the company where they worked. Moreover, workers joining a producer cooperative have to give up any job they may have held previously.

The decision by workers to join a producer cooperative therefore reflects individual deliberation (perhaps resulting from negotiations within the household) weighing up the expected income and autonomy at the new workplace on the one hand, and expectations of risk on the other hand. These considerations involve on several life-choices. The labor market offers individual workers four main alternatives: hire out their labor power to an employer (wage labor), start a business on own account (self-employment), establish a company with others (a producer cooperative), or become/remain unemployed. This last option is generally the least attractive of the four. The other three may – depending on the specific situation – all have their merits. While the autonomy and expected income of a self-employed worker may be relatively high, the expected risk is equally significant. Wage labor, on the other hand, though often less lucrative and more restrictive, entails a lower risk as well. So an individual worker's choice is determined by several specific facts. In addition to the mentioned selection criteria (income, autonomy, risk), other considerations can be involved (e.g. the *prestige* of an option). Overall, the decision to join or refuse membership of a producer cooperative is a matter of personal taste and ideology, constrained by the reality that workers typically tend to avoid major risks, and therefore “prefer a lower average of steadier incomes over a higher average of more variable incomes.”²⁸

Business sectors

The importance of risk avoidance causes producer cooperatives to focus on activities with the lowest possible risk. Members will invest as little of their scarce resources as possible in constant capital. In other words, they will seek to minimize purchases of expensive means of production (machines, tools, etc.) and to maintain the smallest possible inventory of unsold finished products.²⁹ Distinguishing branches of industry according to these criteria yields the following diagram:

²⁸ Ben-Ner, “Life Cycle,” p. 290; Conte, “Entry of Worker Cooperatives,” p. 44.

²⁹ “The persistence of commodity capital as a commodity stock requires buildings, stores, containers, warehouses, i.e. an outlay of constant capital; it equally requires

Figure 8.1
Business sectors and risks

		Constant capital	
		low	high
Value	low	low	medium
Commodity Stock	high	medium	high

Situations with a low risk are obviously most conducive to producer cooperatives, while situations with a high risk are least favorable. The difference between types with a low and a high commodity stock value often corresponds to the difference between companies that fill special orders, and those that do not. Companies that fill special orders include construction (architects, masons, carpenters, and painters), the metal industry, and the graphic sector.³⁰ The difference between companies with a low and a high constant capital is often identical to the difference between companies that render services (e.g. a bookkeeping collective) and companies that produce goods (e.g. printers). Moreover, groups of workers earning relatively high wages will be in a better position to establish a producer cooperative than their less well-paid colleagues. Regarding the Deutsche Maschinenbau-Arbeiter-Kompanie (Chemnitz, 1863–7), Hofmann has noted: “the relatively high income of metal workers with respect to other groups of proletarians was an essential condition for their participation in the share company.”³¹

Low-risk producer cooperatives existed in many varieties in the past. In Italy and France, several groups of workers rented their services collectively to municipal authorities, thus circumventing payment of a middleman or subcontractor. Many were pavers and carriers. Putting-out workers formed such

that payment be made for the labour power employed in placing the commodities in their containers. Furthermore, commodities decay, and are subject to the damaging influence of the elements. Additional capital must thus be expended to protect them from this, partly in objective form as means of labour, and partly in labour-power.” Marx, *Capital*, II, pp. 215–6.

³⁰ “They do not have shops but simply operate from workplaces.” Gide, *Les obstacles*, p. 10.

³¹ Hofmann, “Deutsche Maschinenbau-Arbeiter-Kompanie,” p. 85.

producer cooperatives as well. In 1923, Charles Gide described a women's cooperative, known as *Union et Travail*.

This cooperative was formed during the war for shirt-making. The women workers were employed from their homes and made soldier's shirts at a rate of 25 centimes each before the war; their daily output was low. The intermediary entrepreneur, who assigned production of these shirts, received 45 or 50 centimes from the Army Service Corps; he thus kept half the revenue for himself.

These women workers either thought of forming a producer cooperative or heard the suggestion from others. Instead of receiving 25 centimes a shirt, they obtained the 45 centimes previously paid to the intermediary, thereby doubling their salaries.³²

Considering the aforementioned factors conducive to establishing producer cooperatives, the prevalence of producer cooperatives in labor-intensive industries should come as no surprise. Jean Orizet, for example, observed a concentration in construction, printing, clothing, and footwear. Producer cooperatives of scavengers are also commonplace.³³

The nature of the labor process is another important aspect. In sectors where workers have a high measure of labor autonomy (i.e. the sectors with formal subsumption of labor under capital, such as traditional craftsmen, internal subcontracting, etc.),³⁴ forming a producer cooperative is often less complicated than in sectors where the labor processes are highly heteronomous (Taylorism, conveyor belt work, etc.). Nonetheless, some producer cooperatives were based on an extensive division of labor. In the early 1850s, V.A. Huber visited the association of furniture makers in Paris: "Very long rooms

³² Gide, *Les divers types*; similar producer cooperatives were established by French seamstresses, washerwomen and midwives during the first half of the nineteenth century. Grubitzsch, "Women's Projects and Co-operatives in France."

³³ Orizet, "Co-operative Movement since the First World War," p. 36; Perry, *San Francisco Scavengers*.

³⁴ "[Capital] subsumes the labour process as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over an existing labour process, developed by different and more archaic modes of production. [...] If changes occur in these traditional established labour processes after their takeover by capital, these are nothing but the gradual consequences of that subsumption. The work may become more intensive, its duration may be extended, it may become more continuous or orderly under the eye of the interested capitalist, but in themselves these changes do not affect the character of the actual labour process, the actual mode of working." Marx, *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*, pp. 1021, 1027.

or galleries, where about a hundred people were sawing chair legs, backs, and frames in very diverse and sometimes very elaborate manners, wood turning, carving, polishing, and in some cases assembling and attaching the individual parts. [... The division of labor is] taken to such an extreme that one worker makes only legs, the other only backs, the third one only frames, and so on."³⁵

Franz Oppenheimer has argued – combining the above considerations – that “trades unaffected by the Industrial Revolution” were the most conducive to successful producer cooperatives. After all, not only do such branches require relatively modest investment, but they are not threatened by major corporations either and can achieve a democratic structure relatively easily.³⁶

External Conditions

In addition to internal factors (management, staff, capital, clientele), external factors determine the likelihood of success of producer cooperatives, i.e. factors not directly subject to the influence of cooperatives’ members.

The first aspect concerns the *abundance or scarcity of organizations affiliated* with the producer cooperative to be established. A dearth of already existing producer cooperatives may be an *intrinsic* obstacle, by raising the costs of establishment of a new one. Legal, organizational, and financial knowledge about establishing a producer cooperative is often hard to obtain for an isolated group of workers; prevailing regulations often fail to accommodate cooperative entities; banks may be reluctant to supply credit, because of their lack of familiarity with producer cooperatives.³⁷

Secondly, *shelter organizations*, which coordinate the activities of producer cooperatives, build expertise and arrange funding, etc. can reduce risks. In some countries, such organizations go back a long way, for example in France and Italy.³⁸ Michael Conte has attributed the scarcity of producer cooperatives in the United States and West Germany vis-à-vis Italy, France, and the United Kingdom to the absence of supporting organizations:

³⁵ Huber, “Skizzen,” p. 919.

³⁶ Oppenheimer, *Siedlungsgenossenschaft*, p. 64.

³⁷ Ben-Ner, “Life Cycle,” p. 290.

³⁸ Thornley, *Workers’ Co-operatives*, pp. 133, 151; Earle, *Italian Cooperative Movement*, pp. 32–60.

[In Italy, France, and the United Kingdom] the cooperative support organizations provide technical advice (similar to that provided by economic-development agencies) to cooperatives, collect statistics on the cooperative sector, and, perhaps most importantly, press for the adoption of legislation defining cooperatives in the context of their country's corporation laws. The central role of these activities is to decrease the uncertainty surrounding the founding and operation of cooperative corporations. In contrast, substantial uncertainty exists in the United States and West Germany concerning the status of such corporations.³⁹

A third aspect is the *economic and political environment*. Public authorities and entrepreneurs could create major obstacles for producer cooperatives. Selig Perlman has described how a railroad company in the United States tried to undermine a producer cooperative of the Knights of Labor and the Union Mining Company of Cannelburg, Indiana around 1880:

After expending \$20,000 in equipping the mines, purchasing land, laying tracks, cutting and sawing timber on the land, and mining \$1,000 worth of coal, they were compelled to lie idle for nine months before the railroad company saw fit to connect their switch to the main track. When they were ready to ship their product, it was learned that their coal could be utilized for the manufacture of gas only, and that contracts for such coal were let in July, nine months from the time of connecting the switch with the main track. In addition, the company was informed that it must supply itself with a switch-engine to do the switching of the cars from its mine to the main track, at an additional cost of \$4,000. [...] Having exhausted their funds and not seeing their way clear to secure additional funds for the purchase of a locomotive and to tide over the nine months before any contract for coal could be entered into, they sold out.⁴⁰

Producer cooperatives were often subject to police harassment, or agitation by tradesmen who saw their livelihood threatened. In Italy, producer cooperatives were the target of fascist aggression from about 1920 onward. In

³⁹ Conte, "Entry of Worker Cooperatives," p. 45.

⁴⁰ Perlman, "Upheaval and Reorganisation," p. 437.

Switzerland during the 1970s, “materials boycotting, blacklisting, and price dumping” persisted against producer cooperatives in the building trades.⁴¹

Fourthly, the threshold for establishing a producer cooperative is lowered, if the founders feel a strong *community spirit*, for example because they have a strong sense of occupational identity and pride in their craft (as has sometimes been the case with typographers), or because they pertain to the same ethnic minority.⁴²

Dilution

Generally, four types of “dilution” of producer cooperatives exist: situations where external capital suppliers outnumber workers-owners; situations where workers outnumber worker-owners; situations where the worker-owners lose their say in management; and various combinations of these three dilutions. Diluted producer cooperatives can arise in several ways.

A type of major historical importance is the “corporate association,” that is a producer cooperative where the capital is largely supplied by other labor organizations, such as trade unions, consumer cooperatives, and the like. The glass-works established in Albi (France) in 1895 is a well-known example. Its principle was that: “The workers’ glass-works shall be run *exclusively* by the cooperative and syndicated organizations.”⁴³ The foundries established by the American Molders’ Union in the period 1866–1906 probably pertain to this category as well.⁴⁴

Another type of diluted producer cooperative is the employee-owned firm or “employee buyout”, which is becoming quite common in the United States and Argentina.⁴⁵ A third type of dilution occurs if the producer cooperative becomes more bureaucratic, with management growing more independent

⁴¹ Cummings, “Co-operative Production in France and England,” p. 378; Earle, *The Italian Cooperative Movement*, pp. 24–7; Siegenthaler, “Producers’ Cooperatives in Switzerland,” p. 22.

⁴² Russell, *Utopia in Zion*, pp. 16–7; also see Ben-Ner, “Comparative Empirical Observations.”

⁴³ Lavergne, “La verrerie ouvrière d’Albi,” p. 49. Also see Gide, “Productive Cooperation in France,” pp. 41–4. The events preceding this glass-works appear in Joan Scott’s *Glassworkers of Carmaux*.

⁴⁴ Stockton, “Productive Cooperation in the Molders Union.”

⁴⁵ Jones, “American Producer Cooperatives,” p. 39; Stryjan, *Impossible Organizations*, p. 21. Also see Gunderson *et al.*, “Employee Buyouts in Canada.”

from the staff. This trend was apparent in the conglomerate of cooperatives in Mondragón (Basque country), regarded by some as the world's leading experiment with self-management in capitalist society. The workers there "do not consider the firms *theirs* in any meaningful way"⁴⁶ – a consequence of the contrast between managers and lower-level staff that has caused conflicts (including a strike!) in the early 1990s, and resistance by workers especially against a widening of the wage differential between the lowest and the highest-paid members.

All these forms of dilution may either lead to *bureaucratization* of a producer cooperative, so that it becomes a sort of "hybrid company" which is neither democratic nor capitalist, or transform the cooperative into a *heteronomous* operation. Altogether, a producer cooperative may therefore evolve in any of four ways, in the long haul: consolidation of the firm according to the original principles; bureaucratization; transformation into a capitalist firm; or dissolution. In the past, several experts have claimed that the first option is unrealistic in the long run, and that *every* producer cooperative will eventually experience dilution. Cummings, for example, considers the second and third options (bureaucratization or transformation) inevitable: "In whatever phase the co-operative problem presents itself, the same difficulties recur. In England, as in the United States and France, the tendency of associated production to gravitate toward a joint-stock form of small capitalists, or to swing still further towards extreme centralization, manifests itself with the constancy of a natural law."⁴⁷

In English-speaking countries, this interpretation became known mainly through the work of Beatrice Potter (Webb). In her classic book *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain* (1891), she examined a sample of 54 producer cooperatives, concluding that "want of capital, want of custom and absence of administrative discipline" consistently created a fundamental dilemma: "While government by the workers proved a potent cause of commercial failure, commercial success promptly destroyed this peculiar form of government [...] by substituting (with or without the workers' leave) the outside capitalist for the working shareholder."⁴⁸ In German-speaking countries

⁴⁶ Kasmir, *Myth of Mondragon*, p. 197.

⁴⁷ Cummings, "Co-operative Production in France and England," p. 378.

⁴⁸ Potter, *Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, p. 131. Later Beatrice and Sidney Webb reconfirmed this view: "In the relatively few instances in which such enterprises

Franz Oppenheimer popularized the same idea. In his book *Die Siedlungsgenossenschaft* (1896) – based in part on Potter’s work – he formulated his “Law of Transformation”: “Very rarely does a producer cooperative prosper. Once it does, it stops being a producer cooperative.”⁴⁹ From the 1890s onward, this idea became influential, and it was adopted by historians as well. In the late 1920s, for example, the American labor historian Norman Ware wrote: “No shop or factory has been able to maintain efficiency where the workers themselves own and operate the plant. If the business succeeds the original workers become managers and stockholders, employing new men in a purely wage capacity, or some sort of paternalism is set up as profit sharing and copartnership. But usually the business fails.”⁵⁰

Since the early 1970s, however, powerful arguments have been advanced against this “degeneration theory”. Before examining the alternative theories, let us consider the hurdles facing producer cooperatives upon their establishment. Economic aspects play an important role. We already observed that producer cooperatives are often founded during economic slumps, that is, when conditions are least auspicious and capturing a share of the market is the hardest.⁵¹ But there are more hurdles than a tight market. Demand for the product supplied by the producer cooperative may decrease structurally, or technological innovations may alter the labor relationships dramatically in the branch of industry. The “cooper cooperatives”, found in Minneapolis between the 1860s and the 1930s, faced a combination of both challenges. The coopers made barrels for storing grain. While the producer cooperatives had dominated this sector for a while (at one point, two thirds of all local coopers

have not succumbed as business concerns, they have ceased to be Democracies of Producers managing their own work, and have become, in effect, associations of capitalists, though often capitalists on a small scale, making profit for themselves by the employment at wages of workers outside their association.” Webb and Webb, *Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain*, p. 155. For a critical re-analysis of Beatrice Webb’s material in *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, see Jones, “British Producer Co-operatives.” Jones concludes that the Webbs’ contention that producer cooperatives “inevitably degenerate into non-participatory institutions” is “false” (p. 58).

⁴⁹ Oppenheimer, *Siedlungsgenossenschaft*, p. 45. Also see Kruck, “Transformationsgesetz’.”

⁵⁰ Ware, *Labor Movement in the United States*, pp. 321–2.

⁵¹ Miyazaki reinforces this view by stating that “the existence of a bona fide LMF [Labor-Managed Firm] is consistent only with an environment in which the PMF [Profit-Maximizing Firm] is expected to become insolvent.” Miyazaki, “Success and Dissolution,” p. 917.

worked in producer cooperatives), the demand for barrels decreased, when other packing materials (e.g. sacks) became popular.⁵² More importantly, technological changes in the industry curtailed the duties of the skilled coopers, and expanded the role of co-workers with different qualifications.

In the early days barrel making was wholly hand work; even the making of the hickory hoops then in use was dull-season work for the cooper. Windlassing the flaring staves into barrel shape, forcing the heavy iron tress hoops into place, bevelling the ends (chamfering) of the staves and making the groove to take the head (crozing) – all these processes were performed by the cooper. But well before the end of the century power machines were introduced which gave such speed and precision to these processes that the cooperatives were compelled to install machines for tressing, crozing and chamfering, and to hire outside help to operate them. The work of the cooper was thus narrowed to fitting the head, adjusting and applying the permanent hoops, and finishing off the barrel.⁵³

Since being a cooper was a prerequisite for joining a producer cooperative, this technological change necessarily entailed a reduction of membership. “The character of the undertaking has been considerably modified by the enforced use of machinery.”⁵⁴ Such circumstances forced the coopers’ producer cooperative to choose between revising its principles, and disbanding.

An additional problem, especially in highly competitive markets, is that it is much more difficult for producer cooperatives to keep trade secrets than for other companies. The democratic internal mechanism of producer cooperatives makes important information available to all members, “and this may jeopardize their position relative to their more secretive capitalist competitors.”⁵⁵ Moreover, internal dissent is a greater threat to the existence of producer cooperatives than to most heteronomous companies. Differences of opinion may arise, regarding necessary investments, planning of the work, or the employment policy. Such controversies can easily cause a corporate crisis,

⁵² Virtue, “Co-operative Coopers of Minneapolis,” pp. 528–32.

⁵³ Virtue, “The End of the Coöperative Coopers,” pp. 541–2.

⁵⁴ Virtue, “Co-operative Coopers of Minneapolis,” pp. 538–9.

⁵⁵ Doucouliagos, “Why Capitalist Firms Outnumber,” p. 54; Bradley, “Comparative Analysis of Producer Cooperatives.”

because each specific branch of industry generally has few producer cooperatives. Dissidents are thus unable to transfer to a like-minded organization.⁵⁶

A producer cooperative succeeding against these odds is still subject to two major forces which threaten to undermine the enterprise's direct-democratic nature. The first is the aforementioned tendency among successful producer cooperatives (observed by Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky) to hire more and more wage workers without voting rights.⁵⁷ Jaroslav Vanek has described this propensity as a self-extinguishing force.⁵⁸ Charles Gide provided an example of this "perversion of productive cooperation," namely that of the spectacle-makers' society (*l'association des lunetiers*) in Paris around 1900: "This society to-day comprises about fifty members who have become wealthy, about an equal number of associate candidates for membership, known as *adhérents*, and twelve hundred hired workmen. Under the circumstances it is clear that there is nothing of co-operation here more than the name. It is simply an association of small employers."⁵⁹

A second threat to a successful producer cooperative is the desire of a heteronomous company for a takeover. The plywood cooperatives in the Northwest of the United States are a case in point. If a producer cooperative prospers, the value of its individual shares increases considerably. A member of a producer cooperative who considers retirement may have difficulty finding another worker interested in taking over his or her share. In such cases, the option of selling one's share to a competing heteronomous firm becomes tempting.⁶⁰

Both tendencies (a growing number of external employees, and a growing share of stocks under capitalist control) often coincide. Clearly, the successful producer cooperative will in that case be under considerable pressure to change its nature. But is this situation an *inevitable* development, or a *constant*

⁵⁶ Ireland and Law, *Economics of Labour-Managed Enterprises*, p. 105.

⁵⁷ Tugan-Baranovskii, *Sotsialnyiia Osnovy Kooperatsii*. Also see Gerschenkron, "Genossenschaftstheorie Tugan-Baranowkis." Raymond Russell and Robert Hanneman have revealed this tendency's aggregate among a growing number of hired workers in Palestine/Israel. In 1933 about 20.6 percent of the labor force of all producer cooperatives was hired. By 1988, the share had risen to 55.3 percent. Russell and Hannemann, "Use of Hired Labor," p. 99.

⁵⁸ Vanek, *Labor-Managed Economy*, pp. 188–9. See also Miyazaki, "Success and Dissolution," p. 912; Doucouliagos, "Why Capitalist Firms Outnumber," pp. 53, 62.

⁵⁹ Gide, "Productive Co-operation in France," p. 38.

⁶⁰ Bellas, *Industrial Democracy and the Worker-Owned Firm*; Berman, "United States of America."

pattern? Jim Tomlinson rightly notes that, although the capitalist environment puts enormous pressure on producer cooperatives toward structural dilution, degeneration need not be inevitable.⁶¹ Those producer cooperatives which persisted while successfully upholding their original principles confirm this thesis.⁶² Two conditions seem crucial to avoid dilution. Firstly, the democratic culture within a cooperative must be kept alive continually.⁶³ This is most likely if the staff strongly identifies with the cooperative's product, for example because of pride in their craft, or political ideals. If the number of staff exceeds a certain threshold (fifteen to twenty people), direct democracy should be complemented with effective indirect forms of representation.⁶⁴ A second requirement is a broad social and political basis (of which shelter organizations are only one manifestation), as observed, for example, in countries with a revolutionary-syndicalist past like Italy, France, or Spain.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Tomlinson, "British Politics and Co-operatives."

⁶² See e.g.: Andrae and Niehues, "Produktivgenossenschaften als alternative Unternehmensform"; Cornforth, "Patterns of Cooperative Management."

⁶³ Stryjan, *Impossible Organizations*.

⁶⁴ Edward S. Greenberg, "Producer Cooperatives and Democratic Theory"; Gunn, "Hoedads Co-op"; Cornforth, "Patterns of Cooperative Management," pp. 516–20.

⁶⁵ See e.g. Egan, "Toward a Marxist Theory of Labor-Managed Firms." Siegenthaler, "Producers' Cooperatives in Switzerland," p. 22, has noted that "strong and specific" demand for the products of producer cooperatives can also be very important.

Forms of resistance

Chapter Nine

Strikes

“Where there is power, there is resistance,” Michel Foucault rightly observed.¹ As soon as subaltern workers are subordinated to a heteronomous labour relationship – which they are by definition – an uninterrupted battle with the employers and their representatives is the result, carried on sometimes openly and sometimes secretly, sometimes individually and sometimes collectively.² Very unfree workers, like chattel slaves, “always resisted slavery and the plantation system, rebelling where they could or had to.”³ But “free” wage earners also engage in a constant battle with their employers; between them an “invisible frontier of control” always exists, “a frontier which is defined and redefined in a *continuous* process of pressure and counter-pressure.”⁴

Subaltern workers may resort to a wide range of strategies. Just exactly what forms of protest are used depends on many factors, but in all cases

¹ Foucault, *Volonté de savoir*, pp. 125–6.

² The relationship between subaltern workers and their employers has three possible stages. First the workers are subordinated to the power of the employers; next, the employers use this power to put workers to work; and finally the relationship between workers and employers is broken again. These three phases are often easily recognizable among “free” wage earners, share-croppers, indentured laborers, etc. With chattel slaves things are more complex, because they are often employer’s property from birth and remains so until they die. In this chapter, I focus on the middle phase.

³ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, p. 16.

⁴ Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, p. 26. See also Carter Goodrich’s classical study *The Frontier of Control*.

the strength of the workers' bargaining position is important. Even the weakest segments of the subaltern working class can resort to methods such as pretending to misunderstand assignments, delivering substandard work, shirking, or collective theft.⁵ Violent methods have often been a means to exert pressure. Arson occurred on many plantations in the "New World," but also in Europe. In East Anglia (in England) such incidents increased dramatically after 1830, during the agrarian protest movement of "Captain Swing" and following the invention of the "strike-anywhere match."⁶ Machine breaking (Luddism) was a well-known practice in early nineteenth-century Europe⁷ and later occurred in the Ottoman Empire, Brazil and China.⁸ Sometimes dynamite was used, if available. In 1890, gold miners at the Anglo-Tharis mine (in South Africa) responded to a cut in pay by blowing up the manager's house.⁹ Physical and sexual violence was also used against hated employers, their family members, or their representatives among all groups of subaltern workers. "Nearly every year, in virtually every state in the South [of the United States], slaves were indicted for killing their owners."¹⁰ In South Africa around 1900, a Zulu-

⁵ Saunders, "Troublesome Servants," p. 169; Cohen, "Resistance"; Cohen, *New Helots*, pp. 200–6; Freund, "Theft and Social Protest"; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 602; Ihonvbere, "Resistance"; Gupta, *Labour and Working Class*, p. 310; Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, pp. 242, 271; LeGrand, "Informal Resistance."

⁶ Archer, "By a Flash and a Scare," pp. 251–4; see also Kuhlken, "Settin' the Woods on Fire." Edward Thompson made the following observation: "It is exactly in a rural society, where any open, identified resistance to the ruling power may result in instant retaliation – loss of home, employment, tenancy, if not victimization at law – that one tends to find the acts of darkness: the anonymous letter, arson of the stack or outhouse, houghing of cattle, the shot or brick through the window, the gate off its hinges, the orchard felled, the fishpond sluices opened at night. The same man who touches his forelock to the squire by day – and who may go down to history as an example of deference – may kill his sheep, snare his pheasants or poison his dogs at night." Thompson, "Patricians and the Plebs," p. 66.

⁷ In countries such as England (Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Derbyshire in 1811–1812), Germany (Eupen 1821, Silesia 1844), Bohemia 1844, Vienna 1848. See e.g. Manuel, "Luddite Movement in France"; Thomis, *Luddites*; Henkel and Tauber, *Maschinenstürmer*; Mooser, "Maschinensturm und Assoziation"; Hodenberg, *Aufstand der Weber*; Klíma, "Arbeiterunruhen in Böhmen"; Walter, "Die böhmischen Arbeiterunruhen"; Häusler, "Von der Manufaktur zum Maschinensturm." See also Hobsbawm, "Machine Breakers."

⁸ Quataert, "Machine Breaking"; Meade, "'Living Worse and Costing More'"; Eng, "Luddism and Labor Protest."

⁹ Richardson and van Helten, "Labour in the South African Gold Mining Industry," p. 92; Cohen, *New Helots*, p. 204.

¹⁰ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, p. 78.

dominated secret society existed, the Izigebengu, whose adherents raped white mistresses to punish them for abusing black “houseboys.”¹¹

The protest can also be largely symbolic. In contemporary Southeast Asia, factory girls regularly express their discontent by crying, screaming or having “epileptic” fits together.¹² Mock trials were also very popular in the past, such as the “court hearing” described by Robert Darnton, where eighteenth-century Parisian journeymen punished several cats, to censure their master and his wife whose conduct they considered unjustified.¹³ Such symbolic protests were a frequent alternative to “economic” action. Prior to 1917, Petrograd metal workers had few formal means for staging protests. They therefore resorted to a kind of *charivari*, and humiliated their despised superiors by wheeling them out of the factory in a wheelbarrow.¹⁴ Some workers presented petitions, to which they sometimes added bribes “to sweeten the petition-receiver’s temperament.”¹⁵

A spectacular form of protest was the “collective exit”, where a group of subaltern workers left the workplace with the intention never to return. Such exits seem to have occurred especially among workers who were unable to assert their interests in the workplace collectively, or could do so only at great personal risk. The most important examples are found among slaves, indentured laborers, journeymen, and wage earners working in “total institutions,” like sailors. An early example is the revolt of the *Zanj*, the East-African slaves who had to work in the South-Iraq salt marshes and in 869 staged a rebellion. They settled in al-Mukhtara, “a very large town, completely constructed by the rebels, [...] in a spot chosen for its inaccessibility” where they even minted their own coins.¹⁶ In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Russian

¹¹ van Onselen, *Studies*, II, pp. 54–5.

¹² See e.g. Mather, “Industrialization in the Tangerang Regency,” p. 14; Smyth and Grijns, “*Unjuk Rasa*,” p. 20.

¹³ Darnton, *Great Cat Massacre*, pp. 79–104.

¹⁴ Smith, *Red Petrograd*, pp. 56–7.

¹⁵ This happened during the rickshaw pullers’ strike in Changsha, Hunan Province, China, in 1918. McDonald, Jr., *Urban Origins of Rural Revolution*, p. 148. McCreery reports, that on coffee plantations in Guatemala around 1900 petitions were “by far the most common mode of resistance.” McCreery, “Hegemony and Repression,” p. 228. See also Heerma van Voss, *Petitions in Social History*.

¹⁶ Popovic, “al-Mukhtara” (quote); idem, “al-Zandj”; idem, *Révolte des esclaves*. The rebellion was crushed in 883.

serfs (whose conditions of life resembled those of chattel slaves) regularly deserted in large numbers from their landowners; sometimes “entire villages” migrated, “leaving and settling together in new surroundings.”¹⁷ In Africa too, large exits by slaves occurred. On the coast of upper Guinea, the Bilali Rebellion took place from about 1838 to 1872, during which a settlement (Laminyah) was established, where “fugitives and enslaved persons from the surrounding Soso and Temne country” sought refuge.¹⁸ On what is now the mainland coast of Tanzania, a mass of slaves escaped in 1873. They built a new village called Makorora, “hidden in a thicket of thorny bushes” and with “heavy fortifications.”¹⁹ In 1905–8 tens of thousands of slaves in the Middle Niger valley deserted their masters; many of them returned to their earlier homes, others sought work in the city.²⁰

In the academic literature, however, by far the most attention has been given to the slave exits in the Americas. Much attention has focused on the “Negro Republic” of Palmares (Brazil), which “spanned almost the entire seventeenth century,” and between 1672–94 “withstood on the average one Portuguese expedition every fifteen months.”²¹ Another wellknown case is the eighteenth-century Boni Wars in Surinam.²² But the total number of occurrences is much larger.²³ Not just slaves, but also “free” workers regularly decided to escape collectively from the clutches of their employer. In the eighteenth century, desertion of sailors was “one of the most chronic and severe problems faced by the merchant capitalists of the shipping industry” in the North Atlantic and elsewhere.²⁴

How such exits were prepared and organized is something we know little about, although it can be assumed that escapees in many cases had “a rudimentary organization and acknowledged leaders when they planned and

¹⁷ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, p. 279.

¹⁸ Rashid, “Escape, Revolt, and Marronage,” pp. 673–4.

¹⁹ Glassman, “Bondsman’s New Clothes,” p. 308.

²⁰ Roberts and Klein, “Banamba Slave Exodus.”

²¹ Kent, “Palmares,” p. 162. An overview of the newer research about Palmares is provided by Anderson, “Quilimbo of Palmares.”

²² Hira, *Van Priary tot en met De Kom*, pp. 138–60; Hoogbergen, *Boni Maroon Wars*.

²³ See, for example, Carroll, “Mandinga”; Debbasch, “Le Marronage”; Debien, Gabriel, “Le marronage aux Antilles française”; Kopytoff, “Early Political Development”; Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*; Price, *Guiana Maroons*; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, pp. 282–92.

²⁴ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p. 100; De Vliegheer, “Desertie.”

carried out their escape."²⁵ In general, the actions seem to have been defensive in purpose, being directed against impending deteriorations in working and living conditions. Where workers have a place of origin which is accessible with available means of transportation, they can upon leaving their employer collectively try to return to that place. That was the case for example in 1921, when coolies at several tea plantations in the Chargola Valley in Assam downed tools, because the authorities refused a wage rise:

This was followed by a desertion of the plantations by the coolies, en masse. They resolved to go back to their home districts, chanting victory cries to Mahatma Gandhi and claiming to have served under his orders. Having started from one or two gardens, by the middle of June, the entire Chargola valley looked deserted, with two gardens reported to have 'lost' virtually their entire labour force, and on an average, most gardens had suffered losses of around thirty to sixty percent. The coolies of Chargola Valley marched right through Karimganj, the subdivisional headquarters, continuing their onward journey either by train or on foot, and also by steamer they made their way back to their home districts.²⁶

In other cases, returning to the former place of residence is not an option, because it is too far away, or because there are no longer any social or emotional ties. In that event, a new collective residence has to be found. Depending on geographic conditions, there are different possibilities here. A temporary solution is to hide on the property of the employer himself, which slaves sometimes did on sugar plantations in the Danish West Indies. As soon as the sugarcane grew tall enough so that one could hide in it, they built temporary shelters amidst the cane where they stayed before the crop was reaped. A contemporary observer describes how such runaway slaves "put down poles of about a meter and a half and make a bower over these with the leaves of the nearest canes plaited together. In this way they form a little hut about four and a half feet high by six to seven feet around. Having cleared the ground in the hut of dry leaves and left an opening, they then

²⁵ Schuler, "Ethnic Slave Rebellions," p. 380; Kopytoff, "Development of Jamaican Maroon Ethnicity."

²⁶ Varma, "Chargola Exodus," p. 34.

use the place to lie up, to store whatever ground provisions they can, and as a fireplace."²⁷

If there are swamps or barely accessible mountainous areas, a band of fugitives can hide there. Runaways can also try to disappear in the anonymity of a large city, although this is obviously easier for a small group than a large one. And, finally, runaways can build their own means of transport, and try to escape with it. In 1819, "eight slaves – seven men and one woman – probably crew on the seventeen-ton interisland schooner *Waterloo*, stole the ship when it arrived in St. Vincent in the British Windwards."²⁸ In the Caribbean sometimes "Slaves secretly built canoes large enough to accommodate whole families."²⁹

When runaways collectively settled somewhere in a new place, their logistical problems were obviously quite extensive. There was a constant danger of punitive expeditions by their former employers. Yet the fugitives were forced to build their settlements in inhospitable areas precisely because these were difficult to access by punitive expeditions. The more rugged the terrain, the more Spartan everyday life became. Eighteenth-century maroons on the Caribbean island of St Thomas who retreated to inaccessible caves along the coast "went naked and subsisted on fish, fruit, small game such as land turtles, or stolen provender."³⁰

Where possible, communities of fugitives therefore often settled in the vicinity of their previous work sites. It is, for example, not accidental that the vast majority of *mocambos* (refugee settlements) in Brazil were located quite near to towns and farms. The most important reason was that "the internal economy of the *mocambos* made proximity to settled areas a prerequisite for success. Rather than a return to African pastoral or agricultural pursuits, *mocambo* economies were often parasitic, based on highway theft, cattle rustling, raiding, and extortion. These activities might be combined with agriculture as well, but rarely did *mocambos* become wholly self-sufficient and completely isolated from the colonial society that generated, and at the same time feared them."³¹

²⁷ Cited in: Hall, "Maritime Maroons," p. 488.

²⁸ Hall, "Maritime Maroons," p. 492.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 485.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

³¹ Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels*, p. 109.

A very important form of struggle used by all categories of subaltern workers is the *strike*. In a sense, a strike means a collective exit – not with the intention of leaving for good, but to exert pressure temporarily. The transition between “running away” and “fighting for better working conditions” is in reality rather fluid. It is therefore not surprising that some forms of marronage by slaves were in fact specifically intended as a kind of strike: they escaped from the plantations to force the master to think again, not to settle permanently elsewhere. “The meaning of such desertions is clear: they involved strikes, initiated by part or the whole of a workshop.”³² Under very different circumstances, Dutch textile workers from the fourteenth century onwards applied a similar tactic. Living in a time when the cities still possessed great autonomy, they organized illegal *uitgangen* (exits) which occurred according to a typical pattern. They left the city in which labor relations were unacceptable, and went to another city, in order to renegotiate their position from there.³³

Contrary to a stubborn prejudice, large and successful strikes are perfectly possible *without* unions. Workers’ unions cannot exist without (the ultimate threat of) the strike weapon, but the converse is not true, as shown by the examples of the *uitgang* and the “marronage-strike” (described by Yvan Debbasch). Even extended labor conflicts may break out without unions, as revealed by the impressive strike of textile workers in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1982–3. With some 240,000 participants, and lasting eighteenth months, this work stoppage may in fact hold the record of the largest single industrial protest ever in the world. A considerable proportion of the workers involved returned to their villages of origin, to avoid starving in the city.³⁴ Frederick Cooper has demonstrated how major conflicts in Kenya, such as the General Strike in Mombasa in 1947, revolved around democratic mass gatherings drawing thousands of participants, where a consensus was reached. Rather than relying on a strike fund, the strikers subsisted from the harvest of their small plots of arable land, and from donations made in solidarity by sympathizers.³⁵ U.S. and European

³² Debbasch, “Le Marronage,” I, p. 28.

³³ Dekker, “Labour Conflicts,” pp. 387–91. The Dutch example shows once again that strikes also often occurred in non-industrial or pre-industrial conditions. See among others Griefinger, *Das symbolische Kapital der Ehre*; Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, pp. 227–34; Van Heesvelde, “Grèves et conflits du travail”; Lis, Lucassen, and Soly, *Before the Unions*; Lucassen, “Brickmakers’ Strikes.”

³⁴ van Wersch, *Bombay Textile Strike*.

³⁵ Cooper, *On the African Waterfront*, pp. 79–82.

history abounds with cases of strikes in which unions were either insignificant or subordinate operators. The great labor uprising of 1877 in the United States was spontaneous and unorganized – “it had nothing in the nature of central leadership and direction.”³⁶

Strikes and unions both serve to establish power at heteronomous workplaces where the parties in control are not the workers. Production processes occur on these sites: laborers use means of labor (raw materials, semi-manufactures, equipment, machines and the like) to generate labor products. Production processes may serve to generate and distribute stockable commodities or to render services. In the first case, production, distribution and consumption are separate, consecutive processes. In the second case, the production period generally coincides with the distribution period (and the consumption period in many cases as well). Production processes consistently occur in a broader social context (see Figure 9.1) however, involving financial structures (e.g. credit mechanisms) and legal relationships (laws and their implementation).

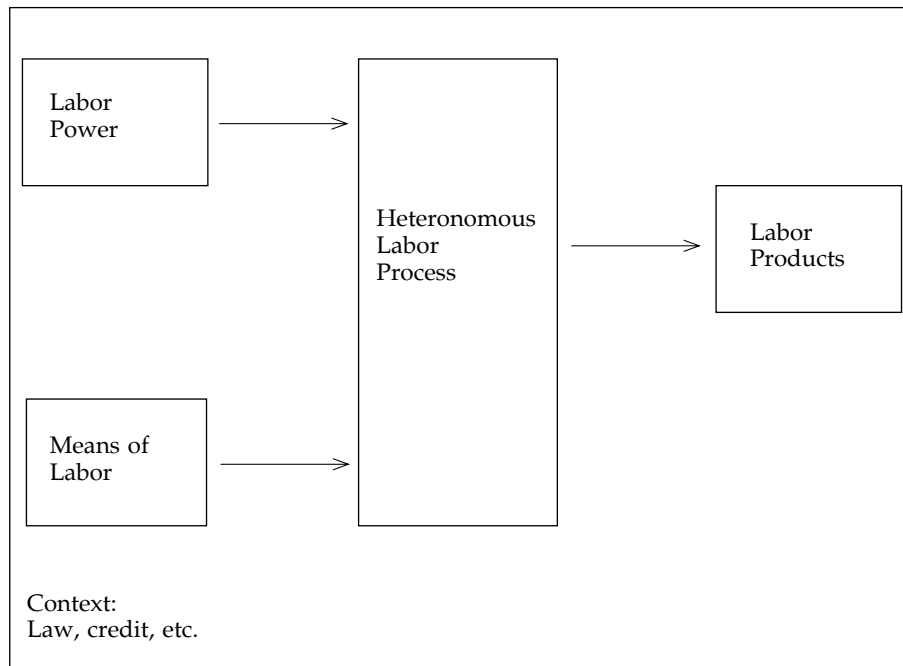
This figure reveals the coercion strategies available to subaltern workers who aim to express their collective discontent by disrupting production. Firstly, they may make the actual production process *less productive* in any of three ways. One way is unilateral, and entails coordinated reduction of the output. The purpose may be to provide a larger number of workers with employment, or to improve piecework rates, or pressure the employer or management in some other way. This method is also known as “go-slow,” “ca’canny,” or “gold-bricking,”³⁷ and it was used both by “free” and “unfree” workers. During a three-day protest action in 1904, the indentured Chinese hammer-men on the North Randfontein gold-mine in Transvaal, drilled no more than “thirteen inches of rock or drilled less than twelve inches.”³⁸ In Chicago, before the lockout of 1900, “the lathers limited their day’s work to twenty-five bundles and were paid three dollars, whilst formerly they handled thirty-five bundles a day for one dollar and seventy-five cents. The gas fitters, steam fitters, plasterers and plumbers in the same city had reduced their exertion in a similar way. The plumbers had a specially low standard of

³⁶ Foner, *Great Labor Uprising*, p. 9.

³⁷ For a classical study, see Roy’s “Quota Restriction.” See also Douglass, “Pit Talk,” pp. 310–1; Hammett, Seidman and London, “Slowdown as a Union Tactic”; and of course, Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent*.

³⁸ Richardson, “Coolies and Randlords,” pp. 166–7.

Figure 9.1
Heteronomous Production



exertion, their day's work being only sufficient to keep a man busy for half or two-thirds of a day. In London the members of the bricklayers union, it is alleged, now lay only five hundred bricks in a day of nine hours, while in New York a thousand in a day of eight hours is the minimum."³⁹ In 1946, miners in Enugu (Nigeria) launched a "ca'canny"; their leader Isaiah Okwudili Ojiyi "indigenized the term by calling it '*welu nwayo*' in Igbo and spent days in the mines teaching the men."⁴⁰

Secondly, workers may resort to *sabotage*. After Laurie Taylor and Paul Walton, I would define this form of action as "that rule-breaking which takes the form of conscious action or inaction directed towards the mutilation or destruction of the work environment."⁴¹ If the sabotage targets machinery,

³⁹ Martin, "Do Trade Unions Limit Output?," p. 371.

⁴⁰ Brown, "*We Were All Slaves*," p. 295.

⁴¹ Taylor and Walton, "Industrial Sabotage," p. 219. A far broader definition is applied in Brown, *Sabotage*. Brown also includes all non-violent and non-destructive

this differs little from classical machine-breaking. Melanesian workers on sugar plantations in Queensland (Australia) “hid rocks in the cane going to the mills, with disastrous effects on machinery.”⁴² Sabotage may also be directed against labor products. About France, Pierre Dubois writes:

Production may be sabotaged in various ways: at Eaux de Vittel in 1970, several vats of water were immersed in soap; plastic bottles were punctured and arrived empty at their destination. At this other plant, a ton of toothpaste spilled around the bottom of the processor and was lost. Lost material following a work stoppage: in May 1971 the workers at one of the Saint-Frères plants discontinued operations several times a day; each time the machines were stopped, the plastic solidified and became unfit for use. In the spring of 1975, delivery vans transporting the *Parisien libéré* newspapers were attacked, and the newspapers were destroyed. Elsewhere, stewards deliberately burned the shirts of passengers while ironing them.⁴³

Thirdly, the exchange value of the labor product may be destroyed by providing it to the customers free of charge, especially when the employees produce consumer goods, or provide services. In 1960, for example, Miami bus drivers did not charge their passengers, and were not supposed to accept tips either.⁴⁴

If such methods are insufficiently successful, strikes are the next weapon. In addition to workers not working for the employer, it is important for this purpose that others (“strike-breakers” or “scabs”) do not take over the work of the strikers.

Strikes: general features

Strikes can be defined as *forms of struggle, coercion and power in which a group of workers collectively stops working to enforce economic, social and/or political*

operations that complicate production. This last definition does conform with the one customary in France. There, “it covers, for example, doing better work than is demanded as well as worse, in order to put up employers’ costs. It also covers what is known as the work-to-rule strike.” Anon., “Syndicalism.”

⁴² Moore, “Counterculture of Survival,” p. 86.

⁴³ Dubois, *Sabotage*, pp. 28–9. Theft of goods obviously affects entrepreneurs in a similar way by causing considerable loss of value as well.

⁴⁴ McCalmont, “Semi-Strike.” See also Sosnick, “Non-Stoppage Strikes.”

*demands that matter to those directly concerned and/or others.*⁴⁵ Let us examine this definition more closely.

- As “forms of struggle, coercion and power,” strikes presume a conflict, a situation of opposing interests, in which one of the parties (“a group of workers”) applies heavy pressure to sway the outcome in its favor.
- Such heavy pressure is exerted through a joint work stoppage. This temporary or permanent refusal to work for an employer puts pressure on the employer, who is unable to supply customers with the output ordinarily produced or supplied via the usual channels. Because the aim of a strike is to inflict economic damage on the employer, strikers may take additional measures as well, mentioned previously as “isolated methods of action”: they may block the use of means of labor, either by cutting off the supply of raw materials, semi-manufactures and the like, or by tampering with equipment; they may block the sale of labor products by preventing their transport, through a consumer boycott or by rendering goods or services useless;⁴⁶ they may take court action; they may try to influence the credit line available to the firm;⁴⁷ and they may commit personal acts of violence against the employer, the shareholders or their representatives.⁴⁸ These

⁴⁵ This definition is based on the one in Kleeberg, “Beitrag zur Revision,” pp. 1060–7. In some types of work stoppages, workers do not make demands. Strictly speaking, these incidents are not strikes. Railway construction workers in nineteenth-century India “were not adverse to withholding their labour from engineers and contractors in situations where they believed the railways desperately needed them – even semi-proletarians saw the value of higher wages and understood the leverage that a high demand for labour in a particular area provided. Early in the 1860s, coolies in the Trichonopoly district of Madras and those along the line-of-works of the Eastern Bengal Railway were able to combine sufficiently and stay away *en masse* from the railway works, in the hope of raising earthwork rates. Their ability to do so, of course, depended on the fact that they did not need the railway work to subsist.” Kerr, *Building the Railways*, p. 173.

⁴⁶ As stated, in the service sector this corresponds with blocking means of labor.

⁴⁷ Christena Turner illustrates such an effort turned into collective action by reporting how, in the early 1980s in Japan, thousands of employees at firms on the verge of bankruptcy organized a joint demonstration, in which they spent many hours marching past the different banks once every three months to protest the restriction of credit. See the detailed description of such a *Sōkōdō* in Turner, *Japanese Workers in Protest*, pp. 41–8.

⁴⁸ The “Scotch Cattle” movement involving the miners in South Wales from 1822 to 1850 is a case in point. E.J. Jones has written: “Anyone sufficiently intrepid to ignore the decrees of the lodges [of the ‘Scotch Cattle’] received a warning which, if disregarded, was followed by a nocturnal visit from some neighbouring band of ‘Scotch

methods can obviously not be applied in all cases. The options depend on the broader political and legal context. If used, these methods may coincide with a strike, although they may also precede or follow one.⁴⁹

- The group of workers concerned applies severe pressure to obtain “economic, social and/or political demands met that matter to those directly involved and/or to others.” This formulation implies that strikes may address three types of parties: the employer or employers of the strikers; the employer or employers of *other* strikers, or of workers who cannot strike themselves (in which case they become known as “sympathy strikes”); or third parties, usually public authorities. In this case, they are also referred to as “political strikes”, although the applicability of this term depends on the context. Madhavan Palat rightly observes that in political systems with established civil liberties, and where the right to strike is beyond dispute, “an economic strike was an affirmation of the political system and as such political, whereas a ‘political’ strike assaulted that same system;” in political systems without civil liberties, however, “the same ‘economic’ strike was a claim to the democratic freedom to strike and thus a direct assault on the political system.”⁵⁰

In most strikes, the strikers leave their place of work. They may do so in various ways. *Rolling strikes* involve a consecutive series of brief work stoppages at many firms. Miners in the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt applied

Cattle.’ The transgressor’s house and furniture was often destroyed, bodily injury inflicted, and sometimes even murder was resorted to [...]. To prevent identification the ‘Scotch Cattle’ not only blackened their faces and assumed disguises, but arranged that a transgressor in one district should be visited by a herd from another district. The terrorists were usually led by a ‘bull,’ the strongest and most pugnacious scoundrel in the herd, and heralded their approach by lowings and growlings. On arrival at the house of their unwilling host, they destroyed its contents with a thoroughness that was appalling. A victim who showed any signs of resistance or attempted to reason with them was immediately chastised.” Jones, “‘Scotch Cattle,’” p. 386.

⁴⁹ Countless incidents of such complementary actions come to mind. Consider the Klang strikes on Malay rubber plantations in 1941: “At one estate, a group of workers assembled at the factory in order to prevent the transport of a consignment of rubber to Port Dickson, while fellow workers were busily engaged in cutting down trees which were then placed across the approach road and a bridge, thereby effectively halting traffic. When police attempted to remove the obstruction, they were met by a ‘fusillade of bricks, bottles and lumps of earth’. In the ensuing clash, four labourers were injured by the police, who used their riot sticks.” Wilson, *Klang Strikes*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Palat, “Police Socialism,” p. 81.

this strategy in 1955: “Each mine shut down for three days: first a big mine, then a small mine, and so forth.”⁵¹ A second form consists of *boycott strikes*, where only some of the products or services are not produced. Boycotts by longshoremen of goods from certain countries are a typical example. In 1905, longshoremen at Chinese shipyards boycotted American goods to protest immigration laws prohibiting the entry of Chinese workers into the United States.⁵² The international boycott strikes against the Apartheid regime in South Africa during the early 1980s received much attention. *Go-slow strikes* are a third option. Here, only workers in key positions go on strike, while the rest of the labor force pretends to work. A fourth (but certainly not the last) alternative is the *general strike*, intended to paralyze economic activity throughout a city, branch of industry, a region, or even a whole country. While truly “general” strikes have never really materialized, the British General Strike of 1926, the French “May ‘68”, and the so-called *Cordobazo* in Argentina the next year came quite close to it.⁵³

But employees do not always leave the work-floor during a strike. There are at least three kinds of strikes where they stay put. The first kind is *temporary slow-down action*. In North Sumatra during the 1950s, plantation workers “would be on their jobs, ‘working’ full-time, though producing one-third to one-half their ‘normal’ output – and still demanding a full-day’s pay.”⁵⁴ This form of protest obviously overlaps with the aforementioned forms of hidden resistance. A second variant is the *sit-down* or *stay-in*, where workers occupy the workplace without working. This strategy was applied from the nineteenth century. It was widespread during the Italian *biennio rosso* (1919–20) and became a veritable international trend during the 1930s.⁵⁵ “In 1934, coal miners at Terbovlye, Yugoslavia, in Pecs, Hungary, and in Katowice, Poland,

⁵¹ Parpart, *Labor and Capital*, p. 148. Stéphane Sirot correctly observes that this battle tactic “requires that the labor organization be sufficiently influential to maintain the discipline required for such a practice.” Sirot, *La grève en France*, p. 97.

⁵² Chesneaux, *Chinese Labor Movement*, p. 132.

⁵³ The idea of a general strike is far from new. See Dommanget, “Idée de grève générale”; Prothero, “William Benbow.” Elizabeth Perry (“Shanghai’s Strike Wave”) correctly points out that “general strike” and “strike wave” are often incorrectly equated with each other.

⁵⁴ Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation*, p. 128. The reason for this strategy was that “union dues were difficult to collect and strike funds almost nonexistent” (Ibid.).

⁵⁵ These factory occupations are addressed in a wealth of literature. The most important publications include: Michels, “Über die Versuche einer Besetzung der Betriebe”; Schwartz, “Occupations d’usines”; Prouteau, *Occupations d’usines*; Spriano, *Occupazione*

stayed down in the pits in desperate actions that won victories. Greek tobacco workers took over a factory that same year. Some 3,000 Spanish copper miners in 1935 remained in the Huelva pits for ten days. Coal miners in Wales, Scotland and France adopted the tactic successfully. In Pondicherry, India, textile workers applied it with complete effect. And in France during 1936, a million workers sat down at one time in the key industries.”⁵⁶

The sit-downs occurring in the United States during the same period are wellknown. Sit-down strikes have three advantages over “regular” strikes: they are a non-violent form of action, and it is “impossible for police or troops to provoke violence without clearly initiating it themselves”;⁵⁷ the method effectively prevents strike-breakers from taking over the work; and it promotes group cohesion among the strikers. While participants in “regular” strikes simply stood at the gates of their place of employment, in adverse weather conditions they would gather at the workplace. The drawback was, that this tactic separated the strikers from their families, and meant that food and the like had to be brought in from outside.

The *work-in* is the third form. Here, production continues during the occupation of the firm. In Italy this practice is known as a “reverse strike” (*sciopero a rovescio*). In addition to occupying the premises, workers take control of the production process – i.e. there is a fluid transition to a production cooperative. This tactic increases both the benefits and the drawbacks of sit-down strikes. On the one hand, the sale of labor products generates income, and therefore slows down the depletion of the strike fund. On the other hand, in addition to having to forage for food, the participants need to organize the supply of raw materials and semi-manufactures (at least if the supplies on site are depleted, and the firm is an industrial operation) and find ways to sell the labor products. Such workplace occupations are therefore simplest to arrange in some extractive industries (e.g. coal mines) and at firms that produce reasonably priced consumer goods.⁵⁸ The best-known example of occupiers in industry who continued production were probably the employees who took

delle fabbriche; Badie, “Grèves du Front Populaire.” More recent factory occupations are reviewed in: Benschop and Kee, *Bedrijfsbezetting*; Bourdé, “CGT argentine.”

⁵⁶ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ Fine, *Sit-Down*, p. 63.

⁵⁸ Visser, *Bedrijfsbezetting*; Wendt, *Betriebsbesetzung*. A spectacular case occurred in the early 1970s. In 1971, the British government decided to close the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Company, which would have left 6,000 workers without jobs. From July

over the LIP watch factory in Besançon, France, from April 1973 until January 1974, and sold the watches they made at the factory gates and via a support network.⁵⁹ Many similar occupations have occurred, for example in Japan.⁶⁰

The Course of Strikes

Leaving aside purely spontaneous stoppages and go-slows, strikes typically proceed through four logical stages. The first is mobilization and preparation of the strike. Then the employees stop working. Next, the strike continues for a brief or extended period. In the final stage, the conflict ends, regardless of its outcome, and demobilization follows. Subjective (i.e. cultural and psychological) influences are important in each of these four stages, as are material (i.e. financial and organizational) factors. The subjective and material aspects, though identifiable, are not always easy to separate.

Preparing for strikes

Generally, strikes depend both on the subjective willingness of the potential strikers, and on the material opportunity to implement them. Subjective willingness to organize and participate in a strike involves a combination of three criteria: the issues, the triggers and the demands. The issues are the longstanding sources of discontent among the employees. The triggers are the specific incidents that crystallize feelings of discontent. Finally, demands are the articulated desires with which the dissatisfied staff members then confront their opponent or opponents. A few salient aspects of each can be noted:

1971 until November 1972, the staff organized a work-in and forced the government to reverse its decision. See Foster and Woolfson, *Politics of the UCS Work-In*.

⁵⁹ A few of the most important publications on the incident are: Anon., *LIP*; de Virieu, *Lip*; Lourau, *Analyseur Lip*; Münster, *Kampf bei LIP*; Meldolesi, *Rapporto con la Lip*; Wittenberg, "LIP." About half the activists at LIP were women. They published: Collectif de femmes, *Lip au feminine*. See also Baumgartner, Burns, and DeVille, "Conflict Resolution and Conflict Development," esp. pp. 125–36.

⁶⁰ One well-known example was the work-in at the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shinbun* in October 1945. See Moore, *Japanese Workers*, and Tasuke, "Arbeitskämpfe."

- *Issues.* Discontent may have many causes, and may arise from courses of events at the workplace or outside. Political, religious or ethnic tensions may exist in society generally or only within the workplace. Because heteronomous labor processes inevitably entail an unequal balance of power and social contrasts at the workplace, workers may very well feel perpetually dissatisfied with their situation. Still, this omnipresent discontent, if it exists, is manifested differently in each labor relationship. Labor psychologists and experts on industrial relations have written extensively about this process and the factors involved. Since this aspect is not my main focus, I will merely note here that the general willingness to stage a strike depends on an intricate complex of factors, including whether or not a grievance procedure exists, the ease of forming a group identity, and the general political and economic circumstances.⁶¹
- *Triggers.* The actual event or events that make “the fat hit the fire” vary greatly. While in many cases they directly affect the workers concerned (redundancies, mismanagement and the like), some concern *other* workers with whom they sympathize, or a public controversy.
- *Demands.* Strikers may direct their demands toward the management or an employers’ association, as well as toward the public authorities. This list of demands may comprise a broad range of grievances, or just a single issue.⁶² The way in which the demands are conveyed to the adversary is essential. In most cases, strikers are represented by elected spokespeople or trade-union officials. If severe repression is imminent, however, and the strikers do not want to disclose the identity of their leaders, they may invoke other methods. In the “round robin,” for example, strikers sign their names in a circle beneath the demands to conceal who signed first.⁶³ The same consid-

⁶¹ The heteronomous decision-making process at the firm appears to be essential. “A system of unilateral decision-making [...] intensifies work grievances – not only because of resentments about procedure but because it has major implications for substantive work problems, including the form of managerial control over the work process. At the same time, since it provides a relatively ineffective means for the resolution of problems at factory level, it tends to lead to an accumulation of grievances.” Gallie, *Social Inequality*, pp. 157–8.

⁶² Richard Biernacki argues that German textile workers around 1900 tended “to formulate an extensive list of demands rather than to strike over a single issue,” while their British peers tended to do the opposite. Biernacki, *Fabrication of Labor*, p. 457.

⁶³ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, pp. 234–5; Davids, “Seamen’s Organizations,” pp. 160–1.

erations may lead negotiations to be conducted collectively (by all strikers together) or by a few representatives. Presentation of the demands may precede, coincide with or follow the negotiations. Demands are crucial for a strike according to the above definition. A strike without any demands is probably intended only to punish the employer.⁶⁴ While strikes without issues are difficult to imagine, they have also occurred without specific triggers, as in the case of calculated, premeditated actions to increase wages.

The three aspects motivating “subjective willingness” I mention may be directly related, but they may also be quite unrelated in some cases.⁶⁵ To illustrate, in late November 1965 a strike broke out at a London rubber factory.⁶⁶ At issue were wage rates and working conditions, a longstanding source of dissatisfaction among the strikers (ninety-five percent of whom were Punjabi Sikhs). The trigger was a relatively minor incident, described as follows in a detailed study: “On Monday, 29 November 1965, Mr Mukhtiar Singh was suspended by the management and sent home after he had reported for duty at the factory ten minutes late from his lunch break. The management claim[ed] that the [man] had taken time off without permission and the union that his suspension was contrary to the Procedural Agreement in that no shop steward was present when he was suspended and that he was suspended without pay.”⁶⁷ The shop stewards then used this trigger “as a hook to hang two other demands and call out nearly 600 Punjabis on unofficial strike.”⁶⁸

Strikes by other workers may influence the emergence of a labor conflict. Firstly, strikes elsewhere may lead workers to perceive their own situation, and consequently the relevant issues, in a different light. Secondly, strikes

⁶⁴ Such sham strikes occurred under European feudalism. William Reddy, for example, notes that the collective actions of French journeymen reflected the tradition of guild disciplinary measures until 1830. “Journeymen would pronounce an ‘interdict’ or ‘condemnation’ on a master, on a group of masters, or even a whole town and then they would look for work elsewhere, that is *faire la grève*. The master was punished; he was not offered negotiations.” Reddy, *Rise of Market Culture*, p. 129.

⁶⁵ Kelly and Nicholson hypothesize that “the greater the dissociation between issues, triggers and demands the longer the strike is likely to last, other things being equal.” Kelly and Nicholson, “Causation of Strikes,” p. 873.

⁶⁶ My account is based on the reconstruction in: Marsh, *Anatomy of a Strike*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

elsewhere may serve as a trigger. In this respect, Carol Conell and Samuel Cohn refer to “stimuli strikes,” which show other employees that “the time to strike is now.”⁶⁹ And, of course, other strikes elsewhere may influence the demands made. If workers succeed in winning, or fail to win, a certain type of demand achieved in one conflict, other workers may be encouraged to make, or be discouraged from making similar demands. Demands and issues from several groups of workers may also be mixed or combined, making the list of demands longer or more complex. This is usually the case with fairly large strike waves, where intricate patterns of solidarity may emerge. In his study of the large TISCO strike in Chota Nagpur (India, 1928), Dilip Simeon writes of “a social avalanche, with separate grievances and initiatives feeding one another.”⁷⁰

What are the preconditions for the subjective willingness to *participate* in strikes? In many cases workers have definite grievances, but are nevertheless *not* inclined to take industrial action. Collective interpretation of issues and their “translation” into demands is facilitated or complicated by a series of technical, organizational and financial factors. In the 1830s, for example, Andrew Ure observed that British proto-industrial textile workers were “scattered over a wide track of the country.” Because they were also “mutual competitors for work and wages,” they rarely managed to “conspire with one another, and never with effect against their employers.”⁷¹

Ure’s observation highlighted both the divergent interests of different labor groups and what Jon Elster refers to as “communicational distance.”⁷² Obviously, employees will need to conclude that they have common interests worth defending by going on strike. The concept of “interests” is more complicated than often believed, since subjective and objective aspects are mixed in it. The interests at issue need to be differentiated according to short and long-term concerns.⁷³ In addition, common interests need not arise exclusively from labor relationships, but can also include other matters, such as ethnic ties or political views.

⁶⁹ Conell and Cohn, “Learning from Other People’s Actions,” p. 369.

⁷⁰ Simeon, *Politics of Labour*, p. 59.

⁷¹ Ure, *Philosophy of Manufactures*, p. 281.

⁷² Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 355.

⁷³ I learnt much from the clear analysis in: Wolf, “Bedürfnis und Interesse.”

Which interests are formulated as central, and whether these interests are indeed cause for a strike, depends largely on the “participation identity” that employees form. I define this concept like Roger Gould as “the social identification with respect to which an individual responds *in a given instance of social protest* to specific normative and instrumental appeals.”⁷⁴ In any collective action, the participants need to be convinced it pertains to an identifiable collectivity that merits their support, and is likely to benefit them as well. Formulating the participation identity as “workers-willing-to-strike” becomes easier with closer ties to established networks, such as community structures, kinship networks and the like. Established union structures are obviously highly conducive to formulating a participation identity as well, since they eliminate the obstacle to forming organizations.⁷⁵

Communicational distance depends on geography, as well as on available means of transport and communications. Group solidarity may be forged on foot, as striking peasants did in early-twentieth century Ukraine, or even by bicycle, as happened during the great strikes of Indian workers on rubber plantations in Malaysia in 1941, when “bands of bicycle-riding workers were reported far afield seeking to persuade labour from distant estates to join the work stoppage.”⁷⁶ Depending on the technology available, far more sophisticated strategies may obviously be applied, including the Internet.⁷⁷ In some cases, however, communicational distance is so vast that collective action becomes exceptionally difficult, or even impossible to organize. This appears to have been the case on the Argentine *pampa*, where rural workers were “isolated physically from one another” and were “unable to build even the rudimentary institutions of collective life.”⁷⁸ However, employers sometimes deliberately increase the isolation of groups of workers. In the Japanese textile industry during the 1920s, many factory girls lived in company dormitories. A contemporary observer noted: “If a strike is called, the dormitory

⁷⁴ Gould, *Insurgent Identities*, p. 13.

⁷⁵ Christman, Kelly and Galle, “Comparative Perspectives,” p. 72; Shorter and Tilly, *Strikes in France*, p. 9; Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*; Britt and Galle, “Industrial Conflict and Unionization”; Britt and Galle, “Structural Antecedents.”

⁷⁶ Edelman, “Rural Proletarians,” p. 264; Wilson, *Klang Strikes*, p. 19.

⁷⁷ Lee, *Labour Movement and the Internet*. Klaus Tenfelde discusses several aspects of communicational distance in: “*Arbeiterschaft*.”

⁷⁸ Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, p. 102.

workers are locked in the factory grounds and cut off from all communication with the strikers outside."⁷⁹

Employers complicate strike mobilization in other ways as well. They will try to raise the cost of collective action, for example by playing groups of workers off against each other, or by threatening to dismiss them. Public authorities may intensify such repression by prohibiting meetings, suspending newspapers or resorting to overt violence.⁸⁰ Conversely, public authorities have sometimes also supported strikes. During his first term (1916–22), Argentine President Hipólito Yrigoyen encouraged – or at least prevented – the police from intervening if the workers concerned were potential voters for his own Radical Party: "Yrigoyen supported strikers not because of his ideals but in hope of winning votes."⁸¹ Many strategies "from above" serve directly or indirectly to deter potential strikers. The strikers are often at great risk, and may in some cases even jeopardize their entire future life. This fact may in part explain why they take anxiety suppressants, such as alcohol. In Russia, towards the end of the nineteenth century, alcohol consumption very often preceded a workers' revolt: "Drunkness acted as a trigger for violence, releasing anger or repressing the fear of punishment."⁸² Strikes might in fact also be interpreted (though not exclusively) as a "collective defense against fear."⁸³

The beginning of the strike

When the time arrives to stop work, the procedure adopted by the strikers depends in part on the nature of their work. In many production processes (e.g. unloading a ship, building a wall or teaching school), the work is simply discontinued abruptly. In some cases, however, this proves difficult. In continuous process industries, such as the petrochemical industry, sudden

⁷⁹ Orchard, *Japan's Economic Position*, p. 344.

⁸⁰ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, p. 100. An account of a very early case of "brutal and cynical" repression of a labor dispute by public authorities appears in: Benecke, "Austrian Labour Relations," p. 115.

⁸¹ Horowitz, "Argentina's Failed General Strike," p. 60.

⁸² Brower, "Labor Violence in Russia," p. 421. Something similar seemed to apply to the bismuth miners in the German Democratic Republic in 1951. See Port, "Der erste Arbeiteraufstand in der DDR."

⁸³ Puls, "'Ein im ganzen gutartiger Streik,'" p. 195.

interruption of factory operations may cause serious material damage, and shutting down production safely is a lengthy process. Complete strikes are rare in this branch of industry. Often other strategies are used here, such as refusing to do overtime.⁸⁴ On the other hand, workers may also deliberately use the technological features of the production process to bring about a *fait accompli*. The strike of 1842 in Lancashire and Yorkshire became known as the “Plug Plot Riots”, because the strikers “pulled plugs from factory boilers, extinguished fires, stopping the engines and making an early resumption of work impossible.”⁸⁵ These measures prevented strikers who decided to go back to work from resuming their duties immediately, and forced the workers not yet on strike to join. Outright sabotage, to which I referred already, is the next step.

Maintenance of the strike

Several interdependent factors determine whether, how and for how long the strike continues.

1. The way in which the strike is organized depends in part on the *gender composition of the strikers*. Margaret Maruani reveals how, in a series of “inverted” strikes (where the workers took control of production) during 1975–1978, French women textile workers planned their struggle to accommodate their family needs:

The general factory meetings, the rhythms of work, and the strike meetings corresponded to children’s school schedules and husbands’ work hours. [...] The general meetings, where all decisions were taken, took place during working hours because women had to attend to domestic tasks after work. No leader arose from the union community because no one could take power by investing much more time than others in union activism: as a consequence of their subordination in family life, the women strikers did not have the means, open to most men, to become bureaucrats and petty bosses in union life. The rotation of functions and the sharing of tasks among the strikers

⁸⁴ Kahn *et al.*, *Picketing*, p. 59.

⁸⁵ Challinor and Ripley, *Miners’ Association*, p. 27.

were almost inevitable. The strike's methods were a democratic answer to the general social problem of women's lack of free time.⁸⁶

2. Going on strike means having to cope with *lost wages*. Workers lose income at least for the duration of the strike, and must find an alternative means of subsistence. Even strikers belonging to a union with a substantial strike fund, or who have formed a collective fund on their own, will find that their strike-benefits are less than the wages they ordinarily receive. There are various options. Strikers can for instance try to collect money, or sell goods, among sympathetic fellow workers and the broader public. During a strike lasting five weeks at the Ishikawajima shipyard in Tokyo (October–November 1921) “[s]everal hundred workers split into five-man groups, set up outdoor stalls or pushcarts, and sold toothbrushes, soap, and other such items, raising money for the strike fund and gaining local sympathy.”⁸⁷ Another alternative was common in colonial and post-colonial countries. Seasonal and permanent migrants from rural areas would return to their villages in the hope of supporting themselves there. In 1931, for example, virtually all non-permanent railway workers in Sekondi-Takoradi (Gold Coast/Ghana) returned to their home villages and towns for two months.⁸⁸ A third possibility is that an affluent individual provides the strikers with the means to subsist. When the carters in Colombo (Ceylon/Sri Lanka) wanted to resist a new municipal by-law in 1906, the popular cart contractor John Kotelawala, who felt personally involved, acted as the strike leader. “During the strike, Kotelawala fed all the carters and their bulls, who crowded into his front garden.”⁸⁹ The striking sailors in Hong Kong (1922) used yet another method. The union headquarters and most of the strikers were transferred to a site of refuge in Canton. In addition to evading the pressure from the Hong Kong Government and their employers, this strategy kept their cost of living down. While initially only

⁸⁶ This was the strike at the Confection Industrielle du Pas-de-Calais. Maruani, “France,” p. 130; a more detailed account appears in Maruani and Borzeix, *Le temps des chemises*.

⁸⁷ Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy*, p. 169.

⁸⁸ Jeffries, *Class, Power and Ideology*, pp. 30–1.

⁸⁹ Jayawardena, *Rise of the Labor Movement*, p. 127. For an interesting case study about the communication between the city-based strike leadership and the strikers who had returned to their villages during the great labor conflict in Bombay, 1982–1983, see: van Wersch, “Flying a Kite.”

a few thousand seamen were involved, the sympathetic strikes that ensued increased the number of “emigrants” to nearly one hundred thousand.⁹⁰

3. During the strike, keeping up *morale among the strikers* is essential. The workers need to remain involved in the process, and must not lose hope. To this end, all strikers may be invited to attend regular mass gatherings, where the strike leaders inform supporters about the course of events, and “touch base” with them. This strategy features in numerous strikes, especially in wildcat ones such as the Rotterdam harbor strike of 1979.⁹¹ Songs reinforce group cohesion as well. The leader of a copper miners’ strike in Northern Rhodesia in 1955 noted: “Two or three of these songs sung and repeated at general meetings were enough to consolidate workers’ opinions.”⁹² Strike opponents will of course try to undermine striker morale from outside, such as by having members of the clergy turn religious workers against the cause.⁹³

4. The solution to the *democracy dilemma* (Jean Hartley’s term) relates to the morale problem. On the one hand, every conflict with employers requires strong discipline, unanimity and clear leadership. On the other hand, the need to involve the strikers in the course of events may lead to debate and consequently to disagreement.⁹⁴

5. *Auxiliaries* are groups of non-strikers (for example students from a nearby university, or family members of strikers) providing strikers with moral and material support, which can affect the course a strike takes. During the strikes of Zambian male copper miners in 1935 and 1940, the strikers were joined by their wives. “They grew extra food, organized neighborhoods, went to union meetings, and bullied husbands into following union directives.”⁹⁵ In many strikes, the resolve of the women helped the men prevail. During the British general strike of 1842, an outsider (who considered the demands of the strikers

⁹⁰ Chan, “Labor and Empire,” p. 276.

⁹¹ van der Linden, “Der ‘wilde’ Rotterdamer Hafenstreik.” Some more general ideas about this issue appear in: Bosc, “Démocratie et consensus,” and Bourdieu, “La délégation.”

⁹² Parpart, *Labor and Capital*, p. 149.

⁹³ For example during the miners’ strike in Upper Silesia of 1889. Puls, “‘Ein im ganzen gutartiger Streik,’” p. 192.

⁹⁴ Hartley, “Leadership and Decision Making,” p. 243.

⁹⁵ Parpart, “Women,” p. 244. Descriptions of other cases appear in: Ribordy, “La grève du nickel”; Stone, “‘Iron Ladies’”; Cameron, “Bread and Roses Revisited”; Scates, “Gender”; Cothias-Dumeix, “Les femmes”; Moriarty, “‘Who Will Look after the Kiddies?’”

to be “extortionate”) observed: “The women, particularly, were exceedingly inveterate in urging their husbands to hold out, saying they would rather live on potatoes and salt than give in.”⁹⁶

6. *Control of strike-breakers.* The success of employers in finding strike-breakers depends in part on the requisite level of skill, the supply of workers with that level of skill, and the transaction costs.⁹⁷ In caste societies (e.g. in South Asia), the caste structure may come into play. During the laundrymen’s strike in Colombo in 1896, employers had enormous difficulty finding local replacements, since laundry work was a caste monopoly.⁹⁸ In some cases, employers anticipated strikes by recruiting a pool of potential strike-breakers in advance. This happened in San Francisco where, after defeating two strikes of longshoremen (in 1916 and 1919), the Waterfront Employers’ Union set up a labor exchange intended to supply strike-breakers to employers in need of their services. “Even when a strike is not in progress, the [Marine Service] Bureau maintains up-to-date files of potential strike-breakers,” noted an observer in 1935.⁹⁹

The ability of strikers to deter scabs depends on their “power of persuasion” towards employers and strike-breakers. Threats of mass violence are one way to pressure employers. In Changsha (Hunan Province, China), in April 1917, striking longshoremen announced: “If the authorities dare hire new workers to do the unloading, we will beat them to death immediately and use kerosene to burn up [the boats].”¹⁰⁰ The three logical steps in deterring strike-breakers are persuading the strike-breakers to reconsider, using (the threat of) force to keep them away from the workplace, and preventing them from getting any work done there. Because strike-breakers are typically less fortunate members of the working class (e.g. because they are unemployed, or receive inferior rates of pay), one strategy for convincing them not to break a strike is to help them organize, and to persuade them that they should not act as scabs. Bolshevik workers used this approach when they set up unemployment councils in St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1905–7.¹⁰¹ Another case in

⁹⁶ Challinor and Ripley, *Miners’ Association*, p. 26.

⁹⁷ See also McIvor, “Employers’ Organisation”; Stearns, “Against the Strike Threat.”

⁹⁸ Jayawardena, *Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon*, p. 105.

⁹⁹ Hopkins, “Employment Exchanges,” p. 255.

¹⁰⁰ McDonald, Jr., *Urban Origins*, p. 146.

¹⁰¹ Rozina, “Rukovodstvo bol’shevikov.”

the late nineteenth century involved the industrial association of blacksmiths in Denmark, who actually paid unemployment benefits to their unemployed peers specifically to prevent them breaking strikes.¹⁰² Strikers have even been known to offer pay-offs to *potential* strike-breakers to stop them from breaking a strike.¹⁰³ Disclosure of information is often important as well, especially if strike-breakers are not aware about the real reasons why they are being recruited.¹⁰⁴

If efforts to deter strike-breakers are unsuccessful, acts of revenge which emphasize violence and shaming will often occur. Some of these acts have been very cruel indeed. Andrew Ure, for example, mentioned the use of “the corrosive oil of vitriol,” which was “dashed in the faces of individuals, with the effect of disfiguring their persons, and burning their eyes out of the sockets with dreadful agony.”¹⁰⁵ There are many accounts of traditional *charivari* methods intended to heap public dishonor on the strike-breakers, such as by placing the dishonored person on a pole and “riding” him or her around the city.¹⁰⁶ In some cohesive communities (e.g. of miners or dockers), strike-breakers were stigmatized for years, or even generations.¹⁰⁷ Many languages have special opprobrious labels for strike-breakers.¹⁰⁸

7. How do *relations with the opponent* (the employer, the state or another person or institution) evolve? Will the conflict escalate, for example because the

¹⁰² Østergaard Schultz, “Solidariteten,” esp. pp. 72–5.

¹⁰³ During a strike in 1848, the British United Flint Glass Makers’ Society “offered the Frenchmen [strike breakers] 26s per week each, if they would join the strike and undertook to pay their expenses back to France, if they preferred to go; but they all refused.” *Morning Chronicle*, 23 December 1850, quoted here after Matsumura, *Labour Aristocracy Revisited*, p. 88.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Rössler, “Immigrants.”

¹⁰⁵ Ure, *Philosophy of Manufactures*, pp. 282–3.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example: Gorsky, “James Tuckfield’s ‘Ride’”

¹⁰⁷ Burge, “In Search of Harry Blount”; Østergaard Schultz, “‘Arbejdsspaerringen’.”

¹⁰⁸ “In France, in the days of Louis Philippe, they were called *bourmont* and *ragusa*. At the present day they are in Germany termed *Streikbrecher*; in Italy, *krumiri*; in England, *blacklegs*; in America *scabs*; in Hainault, *gambes de bos*; in France, *jaunes*, *renards*, or *bédouins*; in Holland, *onderkruipers*; and so on.” Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 292. Many of these terms appear to have racist overtones. Leeson, for example, believes that the English word “blackleg” emerged in the early nineteenth century and was “clearly racial.” “In the masons’ records they are spoken of as ‘Africans’ and a union pamphlet shows a black figure in ‘servile chains’, the implication being that the anti-union man is a slave.” Leeson, *Travelling Brothers*, p. 154. See about this stereotype also Arnesen, “Quicksands of Economic Insecurity.”

employers proclaim a lockout? Are negotiations conducted, and, if so, how do they proceed? Note that in some cases strikers have actually *refused* altogether to negotiate with their opponent. For example, Robert Jackson observes in his study of carpenters and typographers in the United States, that employers and workers in the early nineteenth century considered their own positions to be non-negotiable, and aimed for nothing less than the total defeat of their opponent. It took many years before both sides grew more flexible, and became involved in complex negotiations.¹⁰⁹

Often, outside mediators are invited to resolve the conflict. Their chances of succeeding depend on three factors, namely the balance of power between the management and the workers, the stand of the public authorities, and the ability of mediators to take the positions of all adversaries seriously.¹¹⁰

Termination and outcome of the strike

At some point – after a few hours, or perhaps a few months – the confrontation will end, because the strikers are forced to do so through (the threat of) violence, because they volunteered to do so, or because the movement expired. Often the resumption of work is preceded by extensive and fiery debates. When, in June 1972, the leaders of a large and bloody strike in Karachi called on workers to end the strike, they needed two whole days of discussion to persuade the rank and file. Only after a very popular shopfloor leader held a speech of nearly three quarters of an hour and “swore on his children that he would never betray the laborers and would always work for their benefit,” the workers agreed to return to work.¹¹¹

When strikes are defeated by the successful use of strike-breakers, conflicts between scabs and strikers may arise. Depending on the nature of the opposition, different kinds of outcomes are also identifiable. With strikes directed against third parties (e.g. public authorities), the outcome depends not primarily on the employers of the striking workers, but on the third parties indirectly addressed by the strike. With sympathy strikes, the outcome again depends not primarily on the employers of the striking workers, but on the direct or indirect influence brought to bear on other employers. Finally, with

¹⁰⁹ Jackson, *Formation of Craft Labor Markets*, p. 97.

¹¹⁰ Simeon, *Politics of Labour*, p. 324.

¹¹¹ Ali, “Strength of the Street,” p. 97.

strikes targeting the actual employer or employers of the striking workers, the outcome may of course be a complete victory for the employers, a complete victory for the employees, or a compromise between the two parties.

Whatever the outcome of the strike, three aspects are always identifiable:¹¹²

- *Substantive outcomes*: the tangible accomplishments in terms of wages, working hours, working conditions, recognition, work intensity, output, etc.
- *Procedural outcomes*: these concern the persons or agencies authorized to take particular decisions at work; the actual decision-making procedures; changes in laws, contracts, agreements or regulations etc.
- *Contextual outcomes*: the general sentiment prevailing in the workplace; implications of the conflict for other workers elsewhere; the attitude of the general public and the state authorities, etc.

The ability of strikers to force their employer into concessions depends on several factors. No matter how well prepared the workers are, and how strong their resolve, they are never completely in control of the outcome of a strike. "It is the *balance* of resources between the sides, not the absolute level of labor's arsenal, that decides the outcome of struggles."¹¹³ Which factors are more specifically relevant in this context? I will start by considering the simplest case, where the strike affects *one employer with one establishment*.

1. *The endogenous strategic positions of workers*. Back in the late 1940s, John Dunlop observed that some workers were more strategically positioned than others, because withdrawal of their services "quickly [broke] the whole stream." While the power of such groups of workers may lie in their specific skills, it may also simply be the outcome of their particular position within the overall production process, such as cutters in the garment industry.¹¹⁴ In the Chicago stockyards, for example, the workers on the killing floors had

¹¹² The first two types of outcomes reflect the observations of Dunlop, *Industrial Relations Systems*. Although he does not explicitly state this, Dunlop appears to be elaborating on the distinction that Spielmans drew previously between disputes on legal or quasi-legal "rights" and disputes on "interests" – a distinction derived from Scandinavian labor legislation. See Spielmans, "Labor Disputes."

¹¹³ Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, p. 181. See also Biggs, "Strikes as Sequences of Interaction."

¹¹⁴ Dunlop, "Development of Labor Organization," p. 179. See also the hypothesis about the "positional power" of groups of workers devised by Luca Perrone and others: Perrone, "Positional Power and Propensity to Strike"; Perrone "Positional

a certain endogenous power due to “the perishable nature of the product.” Accordingly, it is unlikely to have been coincidental that many strikes started with them, and then spread to adjacent departments. Conversely, strikers with a weak endogenous strategic position have difficulty striking effectively. John Walton notes that the cotton hand-loom weavers in nineteenth-century Lancashire were geographically dispersed; but even if they could communicate with each other, they were unable to resist their masters anyway, because the putting-out system reduced the fixed capital overheads of employers, making them less vulnerable in the event of strikes.¹¹⁵

2. *The market relationship between the company and the customers and suppliers.* Two related issues appear to be especially important to customers. Firstly, if production grinds to a halt during the strike, how soon will competing firms be willing and able to use this opportunity to take over the market? Secondly, if the employer grants all or part of the demands of the strikers, and the selling price of the product supplied rises as a result, will sales decrease? This is more likely to be the case, if a close substitute is available for the product, or if the price elasticity for demand of the product is high, so that a minor change in price automatically reduces demand.¹¹⁶ The main concern of the suppliers is whether they derive a substantial share of their income from supplying raw materials or semi-manufactures to the firm affected by the strike. Will the strike jeopardize their income? Or is the firm affected by the strike relatively self-sufficient?

3. *Relationships on the labor market.* Whether a strike will succeed, obviously depends largely on the extent to which entrepreneurs depend on the strikers. If the strikers have certain exclusive skills, or are difficult to replace with other workers or machines for different reasons (e.g. because they have a powerful industrial organization), the employer will be more inclined to yield, all other things being equal. The employer will also be more receptive to the demands of his workers if he has already invested in them. In Ghana, for example, many highly skilled railway workers were sent abroad for training. They rep-

Power, Strikes and Wages”; Wallace, Griffin and Rubin, “Positional Power of American Labor.”

¹¹⁵ Walton, *Lancashire*, p. 143.

¹¹⁶ An illustrative analysis of copper, which takes these and other factors into account, is provided in Hildebrand and Mangum, *Capital and Labor*, pp. 278–9.

resented a “considerable capital investment,” and this may explain why the management tended to listen to their grievances.¹¹⁷

4. *Relations between the strikers and the workers at related firms*, such as staff members at purchasing and supplier firms, at competing firms, and at firms not involved in the conflict. The interest constellations may be exceptionally complex. Workers at purchasing firms, for example, often benefit if the wages of employees at supplier firms are low, since this reduces production costs at their firm, increases profit margins, and thus allows greater leeway for increases in their own wages. For the same token, however, the staff at purchasing firms may not be guided by such short-term considerations, and may instead value solidarity with other workers.

5. *Relations with the general public*. If they manage to mobilize considerable support in public opinion for their campaign, strikers will directly and indirectly increase the pressure on the opponent. In a case study about early nineteenth-century England, Maurice Milne noted: “Obviously the state of trade and the relative cohesion of masters and men were more significant factors, but the attitude of non-participants could not be discounted. The readiness of civil and military authorities to intervene, the reaction of the general public to requests for contributions to relief funds, the willingness of politicians to contemplate changes in the laws concerning combination: all these were influenced by the state of public opinion.”¹¹⁸ This observation holds true in various forms for most labor conflicts at other times and places.¹¹⁹ In some cases, strikers are unable to mobilize public support, but in other cases they succeed in doing so, such as during the railway strikes in Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) in 1917, when the strikers managed to “capitalize on widespread public dissatisfaction with abysmal railroad service to win active support that cut across class lines.”¹²⁰ The available channels of communication are often essential of course – both the small-scale networks of sociability around pubs, churches and the like, as well as the mass media.¹²¹ Another factor is whether the strike

¹¹⁷ Jeffries, *Class, Power and Ideology*, p. 33.

¹¹⁸ Milne, “Strikes and Strike-Breaking,” p. 226.

¹¹⁹ See e.g., Wade, “Miners and the Media,” about the British miners’ strike of 1984–85; and Chassaigne, “L’Opinion publique.”

¹²⁰ Bak, “Labor, Community, and the Making of a Cross-Class Alliance.”

¹²¹ Regarding Paris in the nineteenth century, Scott Haine writes that “The most effective weapon during strikes was probably [...] public opinion in the cafés, which

affects consumers (such as with disruption of public transport), and – if this is the case – whether the damage inspires hostility or understanding.

6. *Relations with the public authorities.* How public authorities perceive strikes is the result of discordant learning processes. Charles Tilly correctly observes that “It is not simply that legislators made some forms of the strike legal and other forms of the strike illegal. That happened, too. But in the process the antagonists created – in practice as well as in theory – a sharper distinction between the strike and other forms of action with which it had previously often been associated: sabotage, slowdown, absenteeism, the demonstration.”¹²² Do strikers and authorities both perceive the strike as a strike? Do the authorities regard the strike as manifestly legal or illegal, or do the different parties involved have different interpretations of the laws? Are the authorities unanimous or divided? How do the strikers relate to the political establishment? If the strike is organized or supported by a union, does this union have ties with an influential political party in the country? “To the extent that labour is successful in acquiring control over political institutions, it can exercise power through these means and will not be limited to the industrial arena.”¹²³ How do the strikers cope with the repression system? Are the police sympathetic or hostile toward the strikers?¹²⁴

7. *Relations with third parties, such as religious authorities.* Depending on the specific context, religious authorities may have either an encouraging or an inhibiting effect. Priests, imams and other functionaries have discouraged and even threatened strikers in many cases. This approach has often alienated parts of the working class from the religious hierarchies.¹²⁵ When a general strike erupted in Finland in 1905, the religious authorities became very hostile toward the leftist labor movement.¹²⁶ But in perhaps an equal number of cases, the clergy has more or less *encouraged* strikers. In the early twentieth century, the young Russian-Orthodox priest Georgii Gapon became famous

usually heavily favored the strikers.” Haine, *World of the Paris Café*, p. 83. See also Breckenridge, “‘We Must Speak for Ourselves.’”

¹²² Tilly, “Repertoires of Contention,” pp. 134–5.

¹²³ Korpi and Shalev, “Strikes,” p. 170.

¹²⁴ One large strike that elicited sympathy among the lower-ranking policemen was the London dock strike of 1889. See Ballhatchet, “Police and the London Dock Strike.”

¹²⁵ See e.g. Paul, “Catholicism.”

¹²⁶ Heininen and Heikkilä, *Kirchengeschichte Finnlands*, Chapter 8.

for his prominence in the emerging labor movement in St. Petersburg, and his role in leading the strike at the Putilov steelworks (1904–05).¹²⁷ Recent cases of such support for the labor cause include the assistance from the Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian clergy in the South-Korean labor protests emerging in the 1970s, the simultaneous support from grass-roots communities for the metal workers' strikes in São Paulo, and the influence of Koranic schools on labor conflicts in Northern Nigeria around the same time.¹²⁸

8. *Morale among the strikers and their opponent or opponents.* As noted above, the morale of the workers is essential to maintain a collective refusal to work. Such morale can also influence the position of the opponent. A public relations battle for the "hearts and minds" of the participants, their supporters and the general public often ensues.

9. *Alternative sources of livelihood.* The better strikers can manage without their regular wages, the longer they will hold out in a conflict. At least three alternative sources of livelihood are available: a strike fund of savings of the strikers and other workers; material and financial aid from family members, friends or other supporters; and income from other activities. Because strike funds are sometimes non-existent or modest, and because benefits from this fund are often lower than the regular wages, workers frequently make use of both other coping methods. A few examples have already been cited. In some cases, strikers resort to central coordination of such survival strategies (sometimes assisted by political parties). Among German skilled metal workers at the end of the nineteenth century, the general custom during strikes was that single workers without children left town to look for work elsewhere, thus relieving the strike fund.¹²⁹

10. *Dependence of employees on their employers outside the immediate employment relationship.* Relevant questions in this respect are: do the workers reside in company housing, and are they in danger of eviction? Are they likely to lose their savings or pension rights? Are they part of a truck system? In this respect, "One effect of the truck system was that it seriously curtailed workers' power. So long as they remained indebted at the tommy shop – 'owed my

¹²⁷ Sablinsky, *Road to Bloody Sunday*, esp. Chapter 6; Surh, "Peterburg's First Mass Labor Organization."

¹²⁸ Koo, *Korean Workers*, Chapter 4; Keck, *Workers' Party*; Lubeck, *Islam and Urban Labor*.

¹²⁹ Cattaruzza, *Arbeiter und Unternehmer*, p. 80.

soul to the company stores', as the American mining song has it – it greatly limited their freedom of action, their ability to seek to remedy grievances or come out on strike."¹³⁰

11. *The financial position of the employer.* The more affluent the employer, the tougher a stand he can afford to take. During the great cotton strikes in the Dutch region of Twente (1923–24 and 1931–32), the manufacturers had so much capital, that they did not need to make any concessions, despite the losses they suffered, and despite the imminent erosion of their markets.¹³¹ The opposite situation prevailed in the Lancashire mining industry of the 1840s, where small pits abounded: "Small owners, with little capital to fall back on, could not afford to have their pits idle for long. Their resources were less than the union's, and, as a result, they had to come to terms."¹³²

12. *The relationship of the employer with other employers.* Adam Smith believed that "Masters are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination, not to raise the wages above their actual rate. To violate this combination is everywhere a most unpopular action, and a sort of reproach to a master among his neighbours and equals."¹³³ The course of events since then reveals that mutual solidarity between employers is relative. Even although maintaining a united front against workers intact might be rational in the long run, short-term interests may force individual employers to yield, for example, because of the previously mentioned financial position of the firm. The likelihood that a front will disintegrate increases as the number of entrepreneurs involved rises. Employers' associations may enhance cohesion among the capitalists,¹³⁴ but such organizations can also be fragile. In the Solomon Islands Planters' Association, founded in 1914, "someone was

¹³⁰ Challinor and Ripley, *Miners' Association*, p. 56.

¹³¹ Alberts *et al.*, *Marges van de vakbeweging*, p. 127.

¹³² Challinor and Ripley, *Miners' Association*, p. 184.

¹³³ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 59.

¹³⁴ Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenenthal argue that capitalists tend to organize themselves formally only after the workers have done so: "In all capitalist countries, the historical sequence is this: the first step is the 'liquidation' of the means of production of small commodity producers and the merging of these into capitalist industrial firms; the second step is the defensive association of workers; and the third is associational efforts that are now made on the part of capitalist firms who [...] enter into formal organizations in order to promote some of their collective interests." "Two Logics of Collective Action," p. 178.

always opting in or out," which made concerted industrial action by employers impossible – a pattern which also occurred in other places.¹³⁵

13. *Timing of the strike.* Two factors are involved: the time pressure affecting employers (some employers are more sensitive than others to time pressure) and the time pressure that potential strikers themselves experience. The factors may include: (i) *product type*, i.e. product shelf life – newspaper printers, for example, have time on their side. "Nobody wants to buy yesterday's newspaper, so if a particular edition does not appear on the newsstands at the appropriate time, it is lost."¹³⁶ (ii) *The state of the product market*, i.e. the order book. "Clearly, an employer with full order-books, struggling to meet commitments to customers, will be more willing to make concessions to labour to ensure that production continues than will an employer facing falling demand. Indeed, an employer in the latter case may actually *welcome* a strike because it saves him the need either to pay workers whose products are not being purchased or to make workers redundant and incur the costs of redundancy payments."¹³⁷ On this subject, Turner *et al.* even refer to "a heaven-sent occasion to suspend production temporarily."¹³⁸ (iii) *The size of the strike fund.* Zambian copper miners subsisted from the food their wives grew on small plots of land during strikes. "Strikes were called to coincide with production."¹³⁹ In 1889, miners in Upper Silesia coordinated the timing of their strike: "they awaited the end of the pay period to have a modest financial cushion."¹⁴⁰

14. *The strike leadership.* Not all strikes have clearly identifiable leaders. When the miners in Real Del Monte (Mexico) downed tools in August 1766, for example, it appears to have been "a clear example of the spontaneous leaderless revolt."¹⁴¹ In most cases, however, strikers are unable to manage without any leadership at all, or without at least some spokespeople to represent them in negotiations with their employer and the public authorities. Such spokespeople are often strikers themselves, elected by democratic vote, although many also originated from outside the group, or were not specifically elected.

¹³⁵ Bennett, "We Do Not Come Here to Be Beaten'," p. 150. Compare Lincoln, "Le Syndicalisme patronal."

¹³⁶ Crouch, *Trade Unions*, p. 87.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹³⁸ Turner, Clark, and Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry*, p. 118.

¹³⁹ Parpart, "Women," p. 244.

¹⁴⁰ Puls, "Ein im ganzen gutartiger Streik'," p. 183.

¹⁴¹ Danks, "Labor Revolt of 1766," p. 155.

In South Asia, for example, men from the upper castes very often served as strike leaders. Behind this practice was a logic which Dilip Simeon summarizes as follows: “Workers could conduct departmental *hartals* and even shut down the plant, but over time they needed the assistance of persons literate in the language and legality of colonial society.”¹⁴² The outcome of a strike depends in part on the position that spokespeople adopt during the negotiations. They are caught up in a situation where they mediate conflicting interests almost by definition, and therefore have an ambiguous role: they represent the workers, but also need to cultivate sufficient trust from the opponent (the employers or public authorities) during the negotiations. This involves a willingness to seek acceptable compromises, and once delegated negotiators manage to broker a settlement, they also have to “sell” this settlement to the workers, not always an enviable task. In a triadic configuration, “The delegate represents the First toward the Third and the contract with the Third toward the First. And he represents himself toward both sides.”¹⁴³

A strike *against an employer with several plants* is more complicated still, because the employer can probably reassign some of the discontinued operations to other parts of his company. An employer may even decide to shut down the firm affected permanently.

A *strike against a group of employers* includes an additional factor. What is their joint strategic position? Are they perhaps concentrated in a relatively small area, so that they can easily coordinate their actions? Such a group of employers might even waive profit optimization for a while, to teach insurgent staff a lesson for once and for all.

When a group of workers with great endogenous power in a company goes on strike, such action will (in addition to paralyzing the whole firm, and possibly having broader repercussions for the whole economy) have direct business consequences for suppliers and customers, and probably consequences for other parts of society as well. “The effectiveness of a strike thus depends not simply on the pressures immediately brought to bear on the employer by the striking workers, but on the extent to which other key actors in the society – the state, other capitalists, the media, political parties, the public, con-

¹⁴² Simeon, *Politics of Labour*, p. 73.

¹⁴³ Sofsky and Paris, *Figurationen sozialer Macht*, p. 158.

sumers – apply pressure because of systematic disruption.”¹⁴⁴ This “disruptive potential” of a group determines, together with their labor market position (based on skill and market scarcity), the “total bargaining capacity.”¹⁴⁵

The outcome of a strike is often treacherous. John Hicks has argued that “The majority of strikes are doubtless the result of faulty negotiations,” and might thus have been avoided.¹⁴⁶ This statement has some theoretical merit in purely economic strikes within consolidated collective bargaining systems. But it is only partly true even in those situations. After all, the information available to both parties is normally incomplete, there are risks and uncertainties, and a strike may be rationalized precisely because it predisposes or benefits a *future* negotiating position. Finally, strikes may have the corresponding benefit of enhancing group cohesion among the workers toward their common opponent, the employer or employers, or the state authorities.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Perrone, “Positional Power, Strikes, and Wages,” p. 414. The disruptive potential therefore depends largely on the way the society is organized. Parkin regards this as an indication that the working class’s “actual potential for bringing the system to a permanent halt was never all that great before the era of highly advanced capitalism.” Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory*, p. 81. Perrone infers that “the typical development of late capitalist societies [...] may endow unprecedented potentials for disruption upon a small group of workers, be they shop-floor operatives, technicians, municipal employees, etc.” (“Positional Power, Strikes, and Wages,” p. 414.)

¹⁴⁵ Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory*, pp. 80–1.

¹⁴⁶ Hicks, *Theory of Wages*, p. 146.

¹⁴⁷ Ehrenberg and Smith, *Modern Labor Economics*, p. 462.

Chapter Ten

Consumer protest

Wage earners' collective use of purchasing power can be an important weapon to improve their standard of living, and put pressure on employers or third parties. Such consumer power can be either direct or indirect. The application of *direct* consumer power is inextricably linked to the actual consumer goods involved: their quality, which stands in need of improvement; their prices, which are excessive; or their supply, which might be insufficient. The application of *indirect* power exerts collective purchasing power to areas not immediately related to consumption, such as by putting additional pressure on entrepreneurs during a strike.

Drawing an analogy with Marx's distinction between circulating and fixed capital, Hans Deutsch distinguishes between two types of consumer goods: circulating commodities, which can be consumed only once upon purchase (such as bread or rice), and fixed or durable commodities, which can be used repeatedly after purchase (such as a coat).¹

¹ Deutsch, "Theoretisches aus der Sphäre des Konsums." According to Karl Marx, fixed capital is the part of constant capital that "maintains the specific use-form in which it enters the production process [...]. It continues to perform the same functions over a shorter or longer period, in a series of repeated labour processes." Examples are plant and machinery, land, buildings, and vehicles. Circulating capital consists of commodities that "are completely consumed in every labour process that they enter into [...]. They do not preserve their independent use-shape as they function." Examples are coal for a steam engine, or gas for lighting. *Capital*, II, pp. 237–8. In

Another system of classification uses conventional target criteria applied in historical budget research. This classification usually distinguishes three main areas of expenses: food, clothing, and housing. In modern times, means of transportation and (tele-)communication should obviously be added to this list. Combining both types of criteria produces the following table:

Table 10.1
Distribution of consumer goods (examples)

Area	Circulating	Fixed
Food	Rice	Refrigerator Stove
Clothing	Cleaning Supplies	Textiles Shoes Washing Machine
Housing	Rent Mortgage Utilities (heating, etc.)	House Seats Beds
Communications	Subscriptions Television and Radio Taxes	Telephone Radio Television
Transportation	Gas	Car

Each consumer product has a certain turnover “frequency”.² Circulating commodities are usually bought more frequently than fixed commodities, and fixed commodities include both items bought once in a lifetime as well as goods that must be replaced on a regular basis. This pattern of turnover is of strategic importance. Firstly, buying or not buying “high-frequency” products can very rapidly transmit massive protest. Secondly, it is much easier to mobilize consumer protest around goods with rapid turnovers compared to those subject to low buying frequency. Ernest Spedden notes it was easier to organize labelling campaigns for cigars, than for a kitchen range. In the former case, the buyer “learns to associate the label with the particular commodity, and successive purchases strengthen the habit of asking for goods bearing

modern economic statistics, the distinction is usually between fixed assets, intermediate goods and services, and final or finished goods (durable or perishable consumer goods, and consumer services).

² Halbwichs, *La classe ouvrière et les niveaux de vie*.

the label of a particular union," whereas the buyer is unlikely or far less likely to do so for "articles purchased only at long intervals."³

It is possible to classify the methods available to consumers for using their power if we consider that consumption in a market society mainly occurs in two stages: first consumers *buy* a product at a given price from the seller, and then they *consume* the product they have purchased. Refusing to take either one (or both) of these steps can be a way to assert power. That is why consumers have at least two other means of taking action in the sphere of consumption, beyond starting consumer cooperatives (Chapter 7): refusing to buy, and refusing to consume (boycotts and labelling); and also consuming without paying the asking price or without paying for the exact quantity offered (unilateral price or quantity adjustments).⁴

Consumer boycotts and labelling

A consumer boycott involves a planned and organized refusal to buy or consume items from specific vendors, business owners or barkeepers. The labelling tactic, a positive form of a boycott, means that only products carrying a specific label are purchased. Collective consumer boycotts (the actual practice considerably predates the term)⁵ were internationally most common during the four decades preceding World War I, when they occurred regularly in countries like the United States, Germany, and Austria-Hungary, although the tactic was applied throughout the twentieth century.⁶ The boycotts

³ Spedden, *Trade Union Label*, pp. 73–4. The label system is believed to have originated in the United States, but was adopted in other countries as well. On the German example of the cigar makers during the 1890s, see Schröder, *Arbeitergeschichte und Arbeiterbewegung*, pp. 245–7.

⁴ Of course, there are also pressure tactics that do not rely on the market, such as petitions and demonstrations, although these methods will not be discussed here.

⁵ "The word was first used in Ireland, and was derived from the name of Captain Charles Cunningham Boycott (1832–97), agent for the estates of the Earl of Erne in Co. Mayo. For refusing in 1880 to receive rents at figures fixed by the tenants, Captain Boycott had his life threatened, his servants compelled to leave him, his fences torn down, his letters intercepted and his food supplies interfered with. [...] The term soon came into common English use, and was speedily adopted by the French, Germans, Dutch and Russians." Anon., "Boycott," p. 353.

⁶ For example, see Frank, "Gender, Consumer Organizing, and the Seattle Labor Movement," pp. 273–95; Muraskin, "Harlem Boycott of 1934"; Skotnes, "'Buy Where You Can Work'."

targeted a wide variety of products, including milk, meat, cigars, newspapers, beer, bread, and liquor.⁷

But conflicts also erupted over other forms of consumption. In the years preceding World War I, tenants in Budapest used boycotts as a weapon against individual landlords. "Residents who were not able to pay the increased rent and who were therefore evicted, called upon those seeking dwellings to boycott the houses concerned. These calls were publicized in newspapers and posters, and met with much success. As a result of this, and the solidarity of the tenants still living there, many landlords were forced to conclude collective contracts which severely restricted their rights."⁸ In South Africa, black workers traditionally resorted to bus-boycotts: in Alexandra, Johannesburg, in 1947 and 1957, in Natal in the 1970s, and the Western Cape in the 1980s. "Whole communities refused to use buses when fares were increased. The uncomfortable, crowded and dirty conditions on buses were also the cause of boycotts, as was the perception that monopolized bus services were government companies. In these circumstances, commuters have either walked to work or made use of alternative transport: taxis, trains or private vehicles."⁹

Consumer boycotts served several purposes. Firstly, they were often a protest against price increases caused by a changing market situation or by additional taxes, regarded as unjustified. Such boycotts could therefore target business owners and shops, as well as central government or local authorities. Secondly, they frequently served as a pressure tactic complementing or even substituting for a strike. The American "grape boycott" of the 1960s and 1970s is a wellknown example of action in support for Californian farm workers. Thirdly, boycotts could strengthen workers organizations. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the social-democratic party in Salzburg launched a campaign specifically for this purpose, aiming to convince workers to shop only at those businesses advertising in the local party newspaper.¹⁰ In addi-

⁷ For example, see the cases described in: von Heckel, "Boykott"; Wolman, *Boycott in American Trade Unions*; Ware, *Labor Movement in the United States*, Chapter 15; Gordon, "Labor Boycott in New York City"; Carvalho, "Baughmann Boycott"; Blessing, "Konsumentenprotest und Arbeitskampf"; Roberts, "Drink and the Labour Movement."

⁸ Gyáni, "Budapest," p. 175. See also Lichtblau, "Boykott – Krawall – Gewalt – Demonstration."

⁹ Kraak, *Breaking the Chains*, p. 210; Lodge, "'We Are Being Punished Because We Are Poor.'"

¹⁰ Bauer, "Boykott," p. 148.

tion to their practical side, consumer boycotts can also serve a symbolic purpose: they might express a sense of unity or the sentiment “we’ve had it.”

Consumer boycotts can arise in several ways. While often organized by unions and political organizations, they can also occur quite spontaneously. Michael Schacherl reports that in parts of Austria in 1908, when the price of beer rose, “an unexpected reaction arose among the workers, the spontaneous eruption of a beer boycott, which began on July 1 without any decision or further ado and achieved such tremendous popularity that the social-democratic party in Styria and Carinthia officially proclaimed the boycott of the beer that had become more expensive.”¹¹ More research is needed to reveal the relative importance of spontaneous resistance vis-à-vis formally organized campaigns. But whatever prompts its occurrence, the success of a consumer boycott depends on six main factors:¹²

1. *The level of organization among the boycotting consumers.* To be effective, the largest possible number of customers of the targeted business has to be motivated to join the campaign. This usually implies the need for both comprehensive organization (a trade union representing only workers in one occupation will have more difficulty here than an interprofessional organization) and for persistent agitation to make sure the public does not forget about the campaign.

2. *The size of the boycotted market.* It is obviously easier to boycott a business only serving a local market, than one which operates nationwide or even internationally.

3. *The nature of the boycotted commodity.* Not just anything on sale is a suitable target for boycott campaigns. Firstly, the products or services to be boycotted must be standard consumer items among the working classes. Expensive luxury items, industrial production equipment, semi-finished goods and the like are therefore often unsuitable. At the beginning of the twentieth century, trade union theoretician Adolf Braun declared: “Not even the most powerful workers organization could [...] possibly contemplate a boycott on iron foundries, railway rolling mills, or factories for locomotives, electrotechnical

¹¹ Schacherl, “Ein viermonatlicher Bierboykott,” p. 273.

¹² The first four points reflect the analysis in Sartorius von Waltershausen, *Workers' Movement in the United States*, esp. pp. 167–9.

equipment, automobiles, railway carriages, pianos, chemicals, munitions, or diamond cutting.”¹³ Secondly, to sustain a boycott over a sufficient time, the product involved should not be indispensable to the participating workers’ households, unless it is easily replaceable, or substitutes are readily available. Thirdly, the boycotted items needs to be clearly recognizable as originating from the manufacturer to be boycotted. It is therefore much easier to boycott prepackaged goods than items lacking brand names. In his previously cited work, Braun wrote that “[w]hile flour is an important consumer product among the working masses, it is exceptionally easy to confuse its place of origin. The working class buys most ready-made clothes from all fields of the garment industry, but it becomes extremely difficult to determine where these shoes, clothes, hats, etc. are made. Therefore, boycotts in Germany, if they were to have any success at all, were usually limited to beer, bread, and white bread and rolls.”¹⁴

4. *The number of commodities boycotted.* Each boycott campaign can usually target only a limited number of products and businesses without becoming too complicated for consumers to understand and remember.

5. *Not all commodities can usually be boycotted at once.* Unless non-market substitutes are readily available, a total, general boycott of all products for sale (a general protest against the marketplace) is unlikely to succeed; it is one thing to reject buying certain commodities, but quite another to ensure alternative sources of supply.

6. *Intervention by governments and boycotted business owners.* In several countries, business owners have been known to organize anti-boycott organizations (the German beer brewers are a well-known example). In fact, governments have outlawed consumer boycotts on numerous occasions, on the ground that they constituted “conspiracy” or “coercion”.

Especially prior to the 1960s, (male) authors often believed that working-class women tended to *undermine* consumer actions. In his study of labeling tactics, Ernest Spedden writes for instance: “It is the experience of the unions that the wives of trade-unionists do not insist on having the label on

¹³ Braun, “Boykott,” p. 411.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the articles which they purchase.”¹⁵ Michael Schacherl expresses a similarly negative view of the role played by women, claiming that consumer boycotts frequently failed because of “women’s indolence.”¹⁶

The background of these accusations merits additional research, to examine whether women really felt less committed than men to certain forms of consumer activism. If they did, was their apathy due to their ignorance of the issues at stake, or were other considerations involved? In truth, there are a myriad of examples of consumer boycotts in which women actively participated. William Fishman, for instance, writes that the success of the labelling campaign in London’s East End in 1904 (for improved hours and working conditions in bakeries) was largely due to the “immigrant housewives” who “rose to the occasion”:

A few days after the strike began, the smaller master bakers attached the union label to their product, as the Jewish women refused to buy any other. It was the custom of grocers to stock bread. Women would first buy their provisions, then ask for a loaf. If the label was missing it would be handed back. The grocer was left with so much unsold bread that he immediately switched to a union-based supplier. It did not take long before the union’s demands were agreed to by every master.¹⁷

Unilateral adjustments of prices or quantities

Unilateral price or quantity adjustments include all measures taken to consume those goods or services which are either *not intended* for consumption or use by the owner, or for which the owner expected a *higher price* than the one actually paid by consumers. These methods are nearly always officially illegal, because they violate market laws as well as the rights of owners.

¹⁵ Spedden, *Trade Union Label*, pp. 72–3.

¹⁶ Schacherl, “Ein viermonatlicher Bierboykott,” p. 273.

¹⁷ Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals*, p. 253. I owe this reference to Karin Hofmeester. On a similar note, Ingrid Bauer wrote that in Austria, especially during the protests against increases in the prices of commodities, women were by no means as indolent as the predominantly male body of officials liked to complain. As an example, Bauer mentions the social-democratic demonstrations of 1911 “against price increases for coal and alcohol as well as sugar and meat, which, with a noticeably high turnout of women, erupted in impromptu and violent riots in the outlying districts [of Vienna].” Bauer, “Boykott,” 146.

Therefore, contrary to consumer boycotts, there are no economic conditions guaranteeing the success of these measures. Virtually everything depends on the social and political balance of power. Nevertheless, the state authorities did occasionally “look the other way” when such transgressions of the law occurred.

In the past, many kinds of groups, ranging from church communities and neighborhood committees to unions and political parties, have organized unilateral price or quantity adjustments. A great variety of methods exist to implement them.

Food. The peak of illegal food appropriation coincided with the well-researched *food riots* during the historic period of transition, when local and regional economies were integrated into national and international markets. It is, however, important to remember that such acts have also occurred much more recently, especially in times of war and economic hardship. As populations grew more proletarian, the working-class nature of new campaigns became more pronounced. Irving Bernstein notes that by 1932, organized looting of food by workers was “a nation-wide phenomenon” in the United States.¹⁸ Such looting reappeared in Italy in the early 1970s, and in several parts of the Global South in the 1980s.¹⁹ Although the “paternalist model of food marketing” was obsolete, the belief that “prices of ‘necessities’ should remain at a customary level”²⁰ probably did prevail. There is only sparse research on this form of workers resistance,²¹ probably because the press often did not report such incidents to avoid contagion.

Housing. Efforts to obtain decent housing at affordable rates have been the cause of all sorts of measures. The first type involves a *rent strike*, which still occurs in many places. Its purpose is usually to reverse a rent increase, or to obtain improvements in building maintenance or the provision of services, such as heating and water. The Glasgow rent strikes of 1915 are probably the best known examples of this tactic.²² Rent strikes can take many different

¹⁸ Bernstein, *Lean Years*, p. 422.

¹⁹ Collonges and Randal, *Les autoréductions*, Chapter 4; Walton, “Debt, Protest, and the State.”

²⁰ Thompson, “Moral Economy of the English Crowd,” p. 253.

²¹ Two exceptions that prove the rule are Scholz, “Ein unruhiges Jahrzehnt”; Geyer, “Teuerungsprotest.”

²² Melling, *Rent Strikes*. Also see Moorhouse, Wilson and Chamberlain, “Rent Strikes.” Other examples can be found in Baer, “Tenant Mobilization”; Graham and Hood, “Town Tenant Protest.”

forms. Ronald Lawson describes six kinds for New York from 1904 to 1980, including rent slowdowns, where tenants jointly delayed rent payments as a warning to the landlord; rolling strikes, in which tenants continuously withheld the rent for a period of time to force negotiations; and strikes that used unpaid rent to finance residential improvements.²³

Squatting is a second approach, which likewise continues to be practised. It was especially popular in several European countries shortly after World War II.²⁴ Dwellings were occupied either for the direct purpose of providing housing for working-class households, or as a symbolic act, such as in France, where large empty mansions were squatted to call attention to social inequities in the housing market.²⁵

In addition to the preceding two strategies for housing, the provision of utilities (energy, fuels and water) has been a bone of contention. In 1974, self-reduction committees were established throughout Italy to coordinate reduced payment of electricity bills.²⁶ Miners used a different system: they would appropriate coal for household use in times of need. In 1935, Louis Adamic noted that “[e]ver since anyone in the Pennsylvania anthracite field can remember, it has been customary for miners and their families to go with sacks or pails to the culm dumps surrounding their bleak towns and pick coal from among the rock and slate thrown out in the breaking and cleaning processes at the big collieries. The pickers usually were the poorer families.”²⁷ Miners in areas where the coal lay near the surface often illegally mined coal for heating their own homes – and later on for resale as well.²⁸

Communications and Transportation

Once public transportation and (tele-)communications became major items on working-class budgets, which happened during the twentieth century in most countries (and only after World War II in some poorer countries), action became possible in this field. Once again, the best known examples are from

²³ Lawson, “Rent Strike in New York City.”

²⁴ For example, see Hinton, “Self-help and Socialism.”

²⁵ Duriez, “squatters,” p. 80.

²⁶ Collonges and Randal, *Les autoréductions*, Chapter 5; Ramirez, “Self-Reduction of Prices in Italy,” pp. 187–8.

²⁷ Adamic, “Great ‘Bootleg’ Coal Industry,” p. 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, describes the situation in Pennsylvania. A description of concurrent developments in Upper Silesia appears in Machtan, “‘Elendsschächte’ in Oberschlesien’.”

Italy during the 1970s, where the *autoriduzione* first occurred when commuters around Turin refused to pay increased fares for public transportation.²⁹ Soon afterwards there was an attempt at self-reduction of telephone costs – which was difficult to sustain, because the telephone services of those defaulting on payment could be cut off at a center inaccessible to the activists.

²⁹ Collonges and Randal, *Les autoréductions*, Chapter 3; Ramirez, “Self-Reduction of Prices,” p. 186.

Chapter Eleven

Unions

Just exactly how “trade unions” ought to be defined is a question about which opinions have differed a great deal. The literature provides dozens – and possibly even hundreds – of definitions which accentuate different aspects. The common thread that runs through them all is that *trade unions are organizations that enable employees to protect their interests*.¹ But *who* exactly are the employees concerned? *Which* specific interests are at stake? *How* exactly (i.e. by what means) are these interests actually protected? Opinions differ greatly on these matters, so that the same type of organizations are included as *bona fide* unions by some, and excluded by others using different criteria.²

If our aim is a description sufficiently flexible to include more than just the officially recognized union organizations in advanced capitalist countries, then we should define “employees” in very general terms. I would also include self-employed workers who are formally independent entrepreneurs, but who in fact depend on work for only one or two employers, or

¹ Horke, *Soziologie der Gewerkschaften*, p. 21.

² Webb and Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, 1, define a trade union as a “continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment.” Herbert A. Turner has noted, however, that “continuous organisation” does not necessarily require formal organization, regular meetings or recognized leadership. Turner, *Trade Union Growth*, pp. 50–4.

who are agricultural share-croppers, bonded wage labourers, or slaves-for-hire. Their ways of defending their interests often closely resemble the practices of so-called “free” wage-earners. Moreover, their organizations frequently overlap with “regular” trade unions.³ This holds true not just for unions in the Global South, but also for the North Atlantic region. Actually, in the history of Europe and North America, the rank and file in the organizations traditionally described as “trade unions” really consisted of “covert” wage-dependents (self-employed artisans, etc.). The strike-prone vineyard workers’ unions in the French Aude region during the early twentieth century “included both small vineyard owners-workers and propertyless skilled vinedressers”;⁴ and the diamond workers who stood at the cradle of the modern Dutch trade-union movement were also self-employed.⁵ Sociologically, the differences between such organizations and (say) the contemporary Self-Employed Women’s Association in Ahmedabad, India are not so great.

Employees who join a union have two main kinds of interests to defend. These concern the exchange of labor power for money (the implicit or explicit labor contract) and the actual “consumption” of the labor power bought by the employer, during the labor process. Trade unions therefore deal both with wage negotiations, sick pay arrangements, etc., and with working conditions, labor intensity, and the like. A strike, or the threat of a strike, is the ultimate weapon a trade union can use to enforce these interests. A workers’ association which rejects the strike tactic altogether on principle, or never even *threatens* strike action, cannot really be considered a trade union.⁶

³ I exclude from my definition those wage earners whose salaries are so large, that they can save an amount of capital enough to provide an income that makes working for wages optional. Such workers are strictly not *dependent* on wage income for their livelihood.

⁴ Frader, *Peasants and Protest*, p. 140.

⁵ van Tijn, “Algemeene Nederlandsche Diamantbewerkerbond.”

⁶ This does not mean that strikes are the *only* weapon available to unions. Adrian Randall has explained, for example, that Luddism (machine breaking) was a rational union strategy in England around 1800. Strikes proved effective against small employers, but not against large ones. Calculated violence served to prevent the introduction of gig mills and shearing frames. “The cloth dressers’ actions [...] were essentially pre-emptive, recognising that, once machinery was allowed to secure a significant share of the trade, all employers would be forced to introduce them in order to compete and the dressers trade would be irretrievably undermined. Violence was selective, controlled and aimed at specific targets, supplementing and reinforcing the more orthodox sanctions of their combinations.” Randall, *Before the Luddites*, p. 150.

The founding of unions

According to popular belief, unions were a product of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. In truth, their historical origin dates back much earlier. Exactly when the first union was founded is unknown; but we do know for instance that on 24 May 1345, the Captain of the Italian City of Florence arrested the wool-carder Ciuto Brandini and his two sons “because he said Ciuto wished to form a company at Santa Croce and make a sect and assembly with the other workmen in Florence.” The specific charge of the authorities was as follows:

Ciuto had deliberated together with many others seduced by his words to form with the largest membership possible a brotherhood between the wool-carders and wool-combers and the other workers of the *Arte della Lana*, and to nominate from such new corporations, *Consoli* and Heads, and to this end had on different occasions and places assembled very many workmen of the worst reputation, and had in such assemblies proposed that each should contribute a certain sum (a matriculation tax) in order that thus it would more surely succeed.

Despite the massive strike and riots that Ciuto’s companions staged in protest, Ciuto was hanged by the authorities.⁷

Ciuto appears to have been trying to organize a union, complete with a dues system and elected leaders. From that time at least, there have been countless attempts across the whole world to form unions of one kind or another. Although Ciuto’s experiment seems to have been a spontaneous, isolated initiative – we cannot be entirely sure – unions arose in many other ways as well, through imitation and transformation of already existing organizations.

Imitation

Many unions were formed simply by following the example set by others. In some cases, they arose from deliberate efforts by other parties to enlarge or replicate their own unions elsewhere. In other cases, the organizational “copy” was initiated by the imitators themselves, or by non-proletarian

⁷ Rodolico, “Struggle for the Right of Association,” p. 184.

outsiders. The copy was rarely exact, however, since local circumstances called for, or necessitated, a different approach.

Outside parties often encouraged the dissemination of certain union models, for example when trade unions in one country set up fraternal organizations in another. This practice often occurred within a colonial or neo-colonial context; the initiatives came from trade unions or trade-union confederations in the metropolitan countries. The British Trades Union Council and the French Confédération Générale du Travail were very active in establishing trade unions in British and French colonies, respectively. International trade union federations, such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the Christian and Communist internationals, also supported the drive to organize labor, especially after World War II.⁸

In many cases, the imitation process was reversed however, meaning that workers took the initiative to follow examples from abroad. Thus, when the Ghanaian railway management sent artisans to be trained in Britain, these workers learnt about British union practices. The result was the establishment of a Railway Association in Ghana.⁹ In Sudan, during World War II, workers received propaganda material from the British Ministry of Information about the British way of life, noting the importance of trade unions. This inspired Sudanese workers to organize their own interest organization from 1944.¹⁰ Migrants and seamen figure prominently in disseminating trade union models internationally. In ethnically segregated societies, workers from one ethnic group might also imitate their counterparts from another ethnic group. In South Africa, for example, large numbers of Africans worked as helpers of skilled white workers, and consequently were encouraged to form trade unions like their masters.

Sometimes, the initiative to imitate did not originate from labor circles, but from non-proletarian outsiders. They included intellectuals imbued with a strong sense of social justice, who believed wage earners needed to organize to improve their lives. The first trade union in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was initi-

⁸ Davies, "Politics of the TUC's Colonial Policy"; Dewitte, "La CGT et les syndicats d'Afrique"; Nicholson, *TUC Overseas*; Pasture, *Histoire du syndicalisme chrétien international*; van der Linden, *International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*; Tostorff, *Profintern*.

⁹ Jeffries, *Class, Power and Ideology*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Din Fawzi, *Labour Movement in the Sudan*, p. 38.

ated by Alfred Edward Buultjens, a dissident Burgher and intellectual. He had studied the union movement in the United Kingdom, and successfully urged the printers on the island to form a union in 1893. The organization emulated the British model as closely as possible, with a printed book of union rules, a Latin motto (*unitas vis nostra*) and British rules of procedure.¹¹

Such initiatives by outsiders often had political or religious overtones. Many trade unions are known to have been established at the instigation of Communist, Social Democratic, Liberal or socially concerned Christian politicians. Even conservative and fascist politicians have formed trade unions on several occasions. One such case was the *Sindicalismo Libre* in Spain (1919–31), which attracted extreme right-wing Catholic (and later also fascist) support.¹² Other unions were even formed at the instigation of the police (for example, in Czarist Russia). There are also the Kuomintang unions in Shanghai in the 1930s, and the “saffron” unions of the Shiv Sena movement in Mumbai (Bombay), which became highly influential after the defeat of the great textile strike in 1982–83.¹³

Sometimes colonial and neo-colonial authorities encouraged the establishment of “responsible” trade unions in the colonies. In the 1930s, for example, the British government sent trade union advisors to many colonies. A Labour Department opened on the Gold Coast in 1938, and subsequently in several other places as well. In 1940, at the urging of the Labour Party, the Colonial Development and Welfare Act was passed, determining that territories were not to receive grants, unless they provided reasonable facilities for trade unions. The French government adopted a somewhat similar policy from 1944. Labor Inspectorates were set up in the colonies, and in some cases civil servants were made available to trade unions as full-time officers. Trade unions were also allowed to use government buildings free of charge.¹⁴

¹¹ Jayawardena, *Rise of the Labor Movement*, pp. 85–97. The brief existence of this organization may be less than coincidental.

¹² Winston, *Workers and the Right*. Similar fascistic trade unions emerged elsewhere in Europe as well around this time. See e.g. Staudinger, “‘Unabhängige Gewerkschaft’”; Lewis, *Fascism and the Working Class*, pp. 151–65.

¹³ Pospelovsky, *Russian Police Trade Unionism*; Schneiderman, *Sergei Zubatov and Revolutionary Marxism*; Gourlay, “‘Yellow Unionism’ in Shanghai”; Heuzé-Brigant, “Populism and the Workers’ Movement.”

¹⁴ Orr, “Trade Unionism in Colonial Africa,” pp. 75–6; Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy*; Basdes, “Walter Citrine”; Weiler, “Forming Responsible Trade Unions.”

The line that separated such state initiatives from the initiatives of foreign trade unions was often very fine. The U.S. Government joined forces with the AFL-CIO to influence the labor movements in Latin America, and during the reconstruction of Germany, Italy and Japan after 1945.¹⁵

Transformation

Trade unions can also emerge from “adaptations” of other types of organizations. In a widely-read article, Natalie Zemon Davis shows that, by the sixteenth century, printers’ journeymen in Lyon (France) used their professional association as a trade union.¹⁶ In 1844, Bohemian cotton printers used money from their mutual aid society as a strike fund: “The striking workers received benefits amounting to 40 kreuzer a day from there.”¹⁷ In Changsha (Hunan Province, China) during the first decades of the twentieth century, construction workers were organized in a guild. As the interests between masters and journeymen diverged, however, many journeymen seceded from the guild in 1922 to form the Changsha Construction Workers’ Union, after only three weeks of preparations. “The secret to this rapid mobilization was simply that the workers were already organized; they were already members of a guild with a tradition of group solidarity; and they were angry.”¹⁸ Some trade unions started out as “yellow” unions. The Communications Workers of America (CWA), for example, arose from a group of company unions originally set up by AT&T and associated companies in the 1920s. After the Wagner Act forced these companies to discontinue their support in 1937, the company unions became local independent unions, of which several formed a federation. In 1947, this federation was transformed into the CWA, which affiliated to the CIO two years later.

¹⁵ Mielke, “Grenzen und Motive”; Steininger, “England und die deutsche Gewerkschaftsbewegung”; Schoenberg, “American Labor’s Cold War in Japan”; Fichter, *Besatzungsmacht und Gewerkschaften*; Eisenberg, “Working-Class Politics”; Spalding, “US Labour Intervention in Latin America”; Filipelli, *American Labor and Postwar Italy*; Romero, *United States and the European Trade Union Movement*.

¹⁶ Davis, “Trade Union in Sixteenth-Century France.”

¹⁷ Klíma, “Arbeiterunruhen in Böhmen”, pp. 262–3. About the transition of mutual aid societies to trade unions in Southern Rhodesia, 1918–21, see Yoshikuni, “Strike Action and Self-Help Associations,” pp. 464–5.

¹⁸ Shaffer, *Mao and the Workers*, pp. 109–21, section quoted from p. 121.

Trade unions and strikes

Unions exist primarily to enable collective bargaining over wages, rights and conditions, with the strike weapon as their ultimate bargaining lever. But they use many other kinds of action as well, such as restriction of output, violence, etc. (see Chapter 9) and there is no *necessary* transition from strike action to industrial organization, even although union membership has often grown spectacularly during and after strike waves.¹⁹

Trade unions come in many shapes and sizes. Classified according to their frequency of resorting to strikes, we can distinguish broadly between unions that exist exclusively, or almost exclusively, to organize strikes; unions that organize strikes, but serve other purposes as well; and unions intended to prevent strikes where possible.²⁰ Given that, apart from autonomous trade unions where the members have a direct or indirect say, there are also heteronomous trade unions ultimately controlled by employers or third parties, we obtain the following typology:

Table 11.1
A general typology of trade unions

	Autonomy	Heteronomy
Union is intended primarily to organize strikes	Revolutionary Syndicalism, "mushroom" unions	—
Union is not intended primarily to organize strikes	Craft societies Bargaining unions	Autocratic unions Rackets
Union is not intended to organize strikes	—	Yellow unions

¹⁹ Lison, "Produktion – Proletariat – Protest"; Zucker and Kreft, "Evolution of Socially Contingent Rational Action." Eric Hobsbawm has even noted that all "'explosions' of labor unionism with which I am familiar" were "the *result* of worker mobilization and not its cause." Hobsbawm, "Should Poor People Organize?", p. 291. Even if this is true, many cases of worker mobilization did *not* cause an explosion of labor unionism.

²⁰ These three categories are an elaboration of the economist Kenneth Boulding's distinction between two functions of trade unions: "warfare" on the one hand, i.e. the organization of strikes, etc., and "diplomacy" on the other hand, i.e. "the administration on a day-to-day basis of the industrial relationship and the prevention of open strife." Boulding, *Conflict and Defense*, p. 218.

Let us elaborate on these categories.

i) *Autonomous unions intended primarily to organize strikes* comprise two sub-types. Firstly, some trade unions are formed at the start of, or during a strike, and disband quickly afterwards (regardless of whether the strike ends in victory, defeat, or compromise). These kinds of unions are often called “mushroom organizations.”²¹ Many of the earliest European trade unions were probably “mushroom” organizations in this sense. Raymond Challinor and Brian Ripley observe about Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century: “Unions, as distinct from trade clubs and friendly societies, were viewed as temporary expedients for a particular end. The demise of a union was accordingly something to be expected once its objects had been achieved. Brevity of life was a characteristic feature: it happened to the successful unions as well as the failures.”²² A great many “mushroom unions” existed. In the early twentieth century, for example, John Commons wrote that newly proletarianized Jewish workers in the United States were zealous, enthusiastic and resolute in labor conflicts, but that “once the strike was settled, either in favor or against the cause [...] that ends the union.”²³ The same trend is visible across the world. In Nigeria in the 1950s, many workers “would feel obliged to support the union financially, and otherwise, only when there is a wages agitation, or to make a contribution to its coffers after a new award has been won.”²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted about the Calcutta jute workers: “Each outburst of labor protest, especially from the 1920s, resulted in some kind of organization. Once the outburst spent itself, however, the organization as a rule disintegrated.”²⁵ About Argentina, Ruth Thompson writes: “Before the 1900s, most of the unions that existed were short-lived, formed to fight a particular campaign but not durable thereafter.”²⁶

The second type consists of the trade unions that outlast a single labor conflict, and organize a series of strikes. Best known among such “serial strike organizations” are the revolutionary syndicalist trade unions, which operated on all continents between 1890 and 1940. These organizations regarded the

²¹ Jayawardena, *Rise of the Labour Movement*, p. 127.

²² Challinor and Ripley, *Miners' Association*, pp. 8–9.

²³ Commons, *United States Industrial Commission Report*, pp. 325–7; Herberg, “Jewish Labor Movement,” p. 503.

²⁴ Yesufu, *Introduction to Industrial Relations*, p. 68.

²⁵ Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, p. 124.

²⁶ Thompson, “Trade Union Organisation,” p. 160.

conflict between workers and employers as a “class war,” to be won through ongoing guerrilla warfare.²⁷

ii) *Autonomous trade unions that do not exist solely to organize strikes*, but develop other activities as well, include three types. Firstly, there are organizations that do *not* negotiate with employers, but instead practice unilateral control. Such organizations were common in early nineteenth-century Britain, where the typical craft society “reserved to it alone the right to determine the rules of the trade (usually relying on its interpretation of traditional practice) and the rates of pay, and to enforce these through its own members.”²⁸ Union members simply refused to work for employers who did not accept these rules. This method is effective where highly-skilled union members monopolize their segment of the labor market. Secondly, there are also trade unions willing to negotiate about some issues, but not others. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers (British) established in 1851 illustrates this variant: “On fundamental issues such as apprenticeship and demarcation, which were seen as the very foundations of the craft, the principle of unilateral control remained the rule; but on questions of wages and hours they were more ready to negotiate and compromise.”²⁹ Thirdly, many organizations are willing to negotiate with the employers in all kinds of areas. These organizations are typical of the “modern” trade union movement around in the world.

iii) *Heteronomous trade unions which are not intended exclusively to organize strikes* but have other responsibilities as well include two sub-types. In autocratic unions, the union officials have accumulated so much power that they cannot, or can no longer, be deposed by the members. Secondly, there are “rackets,” set up by organized crime to benefit from industrial relations and regulated by violence. This type of “hold-up unionism” (Robert F. Hoxie) disciplines employers by threatening “labor trouble”, and extorts tribute from workers at the same time. This will often give rise to “a double-sided monopoly,” where the union bargains with favored employers “not only for the sale of its labor but for the destruction of the business of rival employers,” while “the exclusion of rival workmen from the craft or industry” is achieved.³⁰

²⁷ See the essays in van der Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism*.

²⁸ Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, p. 44.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁰ Hoxie, “Trade Unionism in the United States,” p. 81; Troy, “Local Independent and National Unions,” p. 497; Bell, “Racket-Ridden Longshoremen”; Weinstein, “Racketeering and Labor.”

iv) *Heteronomous trade unions that never or rarely organize strikes* should, I think, include all unions established by employers, or by institutions working with employers, to keep “industrial peace” and prevent autonomous trade unions. Such pseudo-unions are also known as “yellow unions.” Examples include the “national” trade unions in Germany and France before and shortly after World War I, the many “company unions” in the United States in the 1920s and 30s, and similar organizations at American multinationals in developing countries.³¹

I am not aware of any heteronomous trade unions intended primarily to stage strikes, or of autonomous trade unions *never* willing to strike. But it ought to be said that the distinctions between the different types are not always clear-cut. In some borderline cases, trade unions cannot be assigned to one specific category.

- The short-lived Canadian One Big Union (1919–20), for example, was normally regarded as syndicalist, although it did engage in collective bargaining, and therefore resembled a *bargaining* union.³²
- Sam Parks, head of the housesmiths’ (architectural iron workers’) union in New York City from 1885 extorted employers. “Convicted of attempted extortion, Parks was still able to retain the loyalty of his members who supported him throughout his troubles with the law-enforcing agencies of the city. He was re-elected while serving in Sing-Sing.”³³ In this case, the leader of an autonomous trade union was really a *racketeer*.
- With regard to the so-called Japanese “second unions” or “unions by appointment” (*goyō-kumiai*), Ronald Dore explains that they usually arose when a radical trade union organized a strike which caused dissent among the strikers. In some cases, management then seized the opportunity to encourage the establishment of a second union among workers willing

³¹ Mosse, “French Right and the Working Classes”; Mattheier, *Gelben*; Nelson, “Company Union Movement”; Hawes, “Theories of Peasant Revolution,” esp. p. 288; Rao, “Shanghai Postal Workers’ Union.”

³² “The OBU may have *looked* like a Canadian version of a revolutionary syndicalist organization, but it was not. It was a hybrid institution that was neither syndicalist, nor industrial unionist, nor even ‘one big unionist.’” Bercuson, “Syndicalism Side-tracked,” p. 221.

³³ Taft, *Corruption and Racketeering*, p. 6.

to compromise and resume work.³⁴ Such organizations appear *midway* between yellow unions and bargaining unions.

Sometimes trade unions mutate. Sections of the Italian revolutionary-syndicalist trade union movement turned fascist in the early 1920s, for example, while some radical unions in Shanghai became rackets or yellow unions during the 1920s and 30s.³⁵

Domain of control

Rudolf Hilferding described the trade union system as a “ring,” or “in a sense, a quota cartel,” since its purpose is to monopolize the commodity “labor power.”³⁶ This concept can be misleading, if it is interpreted to mean that unions operate in the same way as a quota cartel for oil or coffee beans. They do not. After all, trade unions deal not with “ordinary” commodities, but with people whose labor power is only “sold” (or hired out) *pro forma* – labor power which needs to be realized in the labor process as well. That aside, however, the formula “quota cartel” is quite pertinent.³⁷

Assuming that labor markets are subdivided into all kinds of more or less permeable segments, workers intending to establish a trade union will need a *domain of control*. This means that they must be in a position to close off a segment of the labor market, account for a substantial share of that labor-market segment, and coordinate their operations.³⁸ The segment could be defined by skill, economic sector, employer, religion, ethnicity, caste, locality, etc.

³⁴ Dore, *British Factory – Japanese Factory*, pp. 327–8.

³⁵ Cordova, *origine dei sindacati fascisti*; Perry, *Shanghai on Strike*, pp. 95–103 and *passim*.

³⁶ Hilferding, *Finance Capital*, p. 351.

³⁷ Some authors do not acknowledge this caveat. Theo van Tijn, for example, defined the trade union as “a sales cartel for labour power” and associated this description with a definition of the “success” of a trade union that was as simple as it was Eurocentric: “By the success of such a trade union is meant its recognition by the employers concerned as an agent selling the labour power of the workers it represents; the recognition becomes a fact when wages and other conditions of employment are determined in the framework of a [...] collective labour agreement, in which the trade union is a party in a formal contract.” van Tijn, “Contribution to the Scientific Study,” p. 212.

³⁸ See previously Livernash, “Relation of Power,” at p. 13: “To exercise power over a period of time, a union must organize and keep organized a meaningfully distinct product or labor market.”

Every union type moreover has its own idiosyncrasies. Craft-based unions for example tend to have a clear gender-bias. The “craft” concept is frequently loaded with masculine connotations which imply the exclusion of women.³⁹ Enterprise-based unions for their part usually serve tenured workers, and are inclined to identify with their “own” enterprise.⁴⁰

Opportunity to close off the labor-market segment

The success of a unionization initiative depends primarily on the ability of the union to separate “insiders” from “outsiders” effectively. “Any convenient and visible characteristic, such as race, language, social origin, religion, or lack of particular school diplomas, can be used to declare competitors as outsiders.”⁴¹ The group develops a form of categorical inequality defining who is to be excluded. Excluded categories may be based partly on tangible characteristics (e.g. certain concrete skills) but also depend on “a substantial amount of social construction” as well.⁴² In addition to categorical inequality, possibilities for communication and transport play a role. Even if workers at one worksite are able to take over the work at another worksite, temporarily or permanently, the employer has more difficulty recruiting these competitors as the distance between worksites increases. An example is a mine in a remote location, where substitute labor can take weeks or months to recruit.

If a group of employees lacks the means to establish an entry threshold, forming an effective organization will become virtually impossible. Benjamin Marquez reports on the case of Mexican-American garment workers in El Paso, Texas, during the early 1990s. He concludes that the would-be trade union La Mujer Obrera faced “virtually insurmountable barriers” to mobilization efforts, because the big employers could easily transfer their operations elsewhere or even abroad.⁴³ In New York City around 1900, garment workers were difficult to organize, because the necessary work-skills were easy to

³⁹ Phillips and Taylor, “Sex and Skill.”

⁴⁰ Hanami, *Labour Law and Industrial Relations*, p. 60.

⁴¹ Murphy, “Structure of Closure,” p. 548.

⁴² Tilly, *Durable Inequality*, p. 82.

⁴³ Marquez, “Organizing Mexican-American Women,” p. 67.

acquire, the labor force was dispersed throughout numerous small shops, and the labor supply was vast, thanks to the continuous arrival of immigrants.⁴⁴

Relative size

It is difficult to fix a minimum group size relative to the size of the labor-market segment it aims to control. But the numerical ratio of employees willing to join the trade union to those refusing to join must be sufficient to prevent non-members from taking over members' work. Partial unemployment among the labor segment will make organizations harder to establish.

Coordination

Potential trade union members need to coordinate their operations. To this end, they must at least be aware of each other's existence, and be in a position to communicate with each other. Coordination of members within the chosen domain may be directly-democratic, indirectly-democratic or autocratic, but these distinctions may in practice be vague. Directly-democratic coordination proceeds through joint plenary consultation, or elected delegates. Indirectly-democratic coordination occurs via controlled union officials, or other "specialized" strike coordinators. Autocratic coordination involves unsupervised managers, such as sub-contractors.⁴⁵

Effective coordination depends mainly on the physical aspects of communicating with members (location and distance, etc.) and the quality of the formal or informal leaders.⁴⁶ Marshall Ganz argues that a trade union's "strategic capacity" depends on the "local knowledge" available to the organization, and on heuristic processes enabling creative application of such knowledge; strategic capacity, in turn, depends on the personal experiences of the leaders,

⁴⁴ Seller, "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," p. 258.

⁴⁵ The last option is described in Kooiman, *Bombay Textile Labour*, Chapter 3. Textile workers in Mumbai (Bombay) were divided into numerous "jobber units" of about thirty or forty people. Several leaders of these units (the jobbers) started to help establish trade unions: they signed on and were "automatically" followed by the workers from their unit. "Very often it was jobbers who were instrumental in organizing demonstrations or protest meetings [...]. As union fees replaced *dasturi* [fee or commission, to be payed to the jobber] it was usually jobbers who were entrusted with the task of collecting subscriptions in their departments, money which they were supposed to hand over to the trade-union officials." (p. 41)

⁴⁶ Eickhof, *Theorie der Gewerkschaftsentwicklung*, pp. 17–8.

their networks and repertoires of collective action, as well as the consultation structures and information flows within the organization.⁴⁷

Strikes are the ultimate test of the ability to control a domain. If the domain withstands a confrontation with the employer or employers, it is solid enough to establish a permanent organization. That is the deeper reason why strikes have so often resulted in trade unions: experience proved that organizing was possible and effective. Conversely, a group of employees *technically* able to stage a strike may nevertheless decide against this option, for example because a strike would displease, or harm, the general public. One example is that of hospital nurses, who were typically difficult to organize in the past, because nurses assumed that unionization would inevitably lead to hospital strikes. Moreover, the idea “that a hospital worker might desert her ‘calling’ and leave a patient on the operating table to join a picket line was a frightening prospect to both patients and the community at large.”⁴⁸

Internal Threats to the Domain of Control

A union’s success in stabilizing control over its domain depends partly on its own ability to organize, and partly on external influences over which the organization has little or no control. I will first itemize the kinds of *internal* risks that trade unions face.

To serve as effective coordinator of the domain, the trade union obviously needs to cultivate loyalty and cooperation from its members. Factors influencing such cooperation may include normative aspects (ideological commitment), coercion (as with rackets), as well as “economic” factors related to a cost-benefit analysis of membership and activity.⁴⁹ These economic factors include:

⁴⁷ Ganz, “Resources and Resourcefulness.”

⁴⁸ Reverby, “Hospital Organizing,” p. 1054. See also McKersie and Brown, “Non-professional Hospital Workers.”

⁴⁹ On normative and coercive aspects, see Etzioni, *Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*, pp. 59–65. On the material costs and benefits, see: Olson, *Logic of Collective Action*, pp. 66–97; Eickhof, *Theorie der Gewerkschaftsentwicklung*, pp. 44–53; Crouch, *Trade Unions*, pp. 55–70.

- *The relative burdens of membership.* The “costs” can include not just entrance fees and dues, but also a required investment in time (depending on the frequency of meetings, the rotation of delegate duties, and the availability of paid officials) plus other possible costs (the danger of losing one’s job, ending up in prison, etc.).
- *The relative burdens of non-membership.* Potential members who refuse to join may face certain risks as well. For instance, they may lose their job if the company becomes a closed shop, i.e. an arrangement where the employer makes union membership a condition for employment.⁵⁰
- *Whether membership offers selective benefits.*⁵¹ Goods and services available to members have included travel money (*viaticum*) for artisans and journeymen unable to find work in one city, and therefore forced to move to another city; labor mediation for members looking for work;⁵² insurance plans (sickness and other funds for members – see also Chapter 6); legal counselling in the event of individual labor conflicts; and additional opportunities, like access to holiday homes, discounts on household appliances, services etc.

How effective such means can be, depends on the rate of labor turnover. If members work at a certain establishment or in a certain occupation only briefly, their union loyalty is much more difficult to cultivate or maintain than if the rank and file is stable and sedentary. Workers with strong rural links were often difficult to organize permanently, because they were frequently short-term migrants, who performed wage labor to reach a certain financial “target”; as soon as they had accumulated that amount, they returned to their villages of origin.⁵³

⁵⁰ Spielmans, “Dilemma of the Closed Shop,” p. 13. Spielmans rightly argues that formally speaking the closed shop is “the exact opposite” of the so-called yellow-dog contract, under which the employer *prohibits* workers from joining a trade union (Ibid.). Typologies of closed shops are elaborated in Anon., “Closed Shop and Check Off,” and in Allen, *Power in Trade Unions*, p. 36.

⁵¹ In Romance countries, trade unions with selective benefits are aptly called trade unions with multiple bases (*bases multiples*).

⁵² In this case, trade union activities would overlap with those of the labor exchanges. Sometimes, in France and Italy, around 1900, trade unions actually merged with established labor exchanges.

⁵³ The phenomenon of *target working* is often decontextualized in colonial discourse and used as an ideology of legitimation. See Cohen, *Labour and Politics in Nigeria*, p. 189, and by the same author, “Resistance.” Survival strategies which combine (“free” or “unfree”) wage labor with other activities have meantime received much attention

Organizational finances are a second internal aspect. The operating account of a trade union can be pictured as follows:

Table 11.2
Trade-Union Operating Account

<i>Revenues</i>	<i>Expenditures</i>
Entrance fees	Personnel
Dues	Material Expenses
Donations	Strike payments
Subventions	Benefit payments
Contributions to Benefit Schemes	
	<i>Savings</i>
Total	Total

Excepting “mushroom” organizations, *financial stability* is always crucial for trade unions. It depends, as the chart indicates, on several factors. Where organizations become the autonomous “property” of rank and file members, donations from favorably disposed members of the social elite and state subsidies will usually decrease, while member’s entrance fees, dues, and contributions to benefit schemes will account for the largest share of the total revenues. Trade union dues are always a somewhat risky investment, since their return is never fixed in advance. Whether members pay their dues regularly, depends on whether they are consistently able and willing to make this risky investment. It depends on the amount and “permanence” of their income, and on their self-discipline. The first factor complicates organizing among seasonal workers, casual laborers, and the like. The second factor is also closely related to seasonal influences. On Java in the 1910s, the managers of the railway and tram workers’ union regularly complained of “the difficulty of squeezing dues out of [the members] on a regular month to month basis” – because members “could see little tangible benefit.”⁵⁴ In Manila in the 1920s, many cigar makers considered themselves union members, although they paid no dues. They argued “that there was no need for that because they would readily contribute to a strike fund if there were a

in the literature. See also Chapter 14 and, among others, Agier, “Usines, familles et ouvriers”; Delgado, “Industrial Stagnation”; Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, pp. 90–9; Smith, “Peasant Time and Factory Time”; Quataert, *Miners and the State*, Chapter 5; Upadhyay, “Myth of the Indolent Worker.”

⁵⁴ Ingleson, *In Search of Justice*, p. 81.

strike. In the meantime, they needed their money for family expenses."⁵⁵ In early twentieth-century Argentina, many union members defaulted on their dues. "The union and left-wing press carried frequent appeals to *morosos* ('shirkers') throughout the period to regularize their position with their respective union."⁵⁶

The stability of union revenues correlates closely with the strength of the ties between individual members and the organization. If these ties are strong, payment discipline is likely to be reasonably good as well. If members fall behind in their dues payments, the union can obviously impose sanctions (reprimands, expulsion). How effective sanctions are in turn depends partly on financial expenses which defaulting members incurred in the past. A defaulting member who had paid a relatively high entrance fee risks losing that money through expulsion. Upon rejoining, the initial fee might have to be paid again, plus any arrears – overall, a powerful incentive to comply with the membership requirements.⁵⁷ A similar economic logic applies to members participating in union benefit schemes who lose their funds if they leave the union.⁵⁸

Some trade unions cannot offer selective benefits to members, so that they risk turning into "mushroom" organizations unintentionally. But they can apply a different method, known as a *check-off*, where employers withhold union dues from pay packets, and pay them directly to the union. This happened for example in Nigeria, where many workers did not pay union dues regularly, since "for all they care, there need be no union when there is no wages or other serious problem to agitate about."⁵⁹ Such a practice obviously does little to strengthen members' ties with their union, and moreover shifts the balance of power towards the employer, inasmuch as the union becomes dependent for its funds on the co-operation of the employer.

⁵⁵ Kerkvliet, *Manila Workers' Unions*, p. 56.

⁵⁶ Thompson, "Trade Union Organisation," p. 165.

⁵⁷ Shister, "Logic of Union Growth," p. 416.

⁵⁸ The existence of benefit schemes can also lead to remarkable unintended consequences. In the United States during the 1950s, "there were Stagehand locals which refused to merge or admit new members, despite an aging, rapidly declining membership. Why? Because in the glory days of vaudeville these locals had accumulated large treasuries and were reluctant to share them now." Strauss, "Issues in Union Structure," p. 11.

⁵⁹ Yesufu, *Introduction to Industrial Relations*, p. 71.

Whether a union's expenditures are in reasonable proportion to its revenues depends partly on *external influences* (a lockout by the employer, for example), discussed in more detail below. As long as the union is in control of its own financial fate, everything else depends on the quality of its management. Often it is inadequate. Incompetent administration is a problem which affected many early trade unions in the North Atlantic region, as well as in the capitalist periphery. A study about the Cameroon Development Corporation Workers' Union in the late 1940s and early 1950s concludes, for example, that the books were in a state of disarray, membership records were incomplete, and that the financial position of the organization was in general "much worse than might have been expected from the amount of support being given to the union by its members."⁶⁰ Because of such difficulties, workers sometimes relinquish control over their organization's affairs to outsiders, hoping that management will improve thereby. Partho Datta reports that, shortly after World War I, officials in charge of several trade unions in the greater Calcutta region were outsiders, while workers themselves acted as junior management. He surmises that, although these workers organized independently, they nevertheless entrusted the negotiations and arbitration to outsiders.⁶¹

Fraud is another management problem, and it occurs on all continents. In his memoirs, Sommerville describes a drastic case in London during the 1830s:

[The] chief leader of the tailors, finding that funds did not flow into his treasury so fast as he had expected, [...] cleared out the treasury, filled his pockets and a carpet-bag, and took shipping for the Continent. His defrauded constituents, however, had their eyes upon him; they pursued; the packet was still on the English coast; they took a boat, got on board, got hold of the orator, laid him on his back on the deck, and took all the money they could, except as much as would carry him into another country, to hide his shame, and save them the shame of returning with him, and prosecuting him in London.⁶²

⁶⁰ Warmington, *West African Trade Union*, p. 33.

⁶¹ Datta, "Strikes in the Greater Calcutta Region," p. 69.

⁶² Sommerville, *Autobiography*, pp. 390–1. After the tailors' strike (which ended in defeat), others applied the lessons learned from this incident: "The bakers [...] accumulated a fund to sustain them on strike; but finding that the unions, after the fall of

Organizational discipline is of critical importance. Effective organization depends on whether officials do their duty, and on whether members attend meetings. Many organizations have tried to encourage such discipline through a vast system of penalties, a remarkable imitation of sanctions imposed by employers on their staff.⁶³

External Threats to the Domain of Control

A union's control over its domain can face both economic and non-economic *external* threats.

Economic influences

Many different factors (e.g. business cycles, concentration trends in corporate industry, or shifts on the world market) may expand or reduce the labor-market segment that the union aims to control, thus forcing the organization to adapt.

- *Reductions* in the size of a labor-market segment typically result from any of three causes: increased labor productivity, enabling fewer people to achieve the same output; declining effective demand, which leads to diminished production; or partial or complete plant relocation. In all three cases, jobs will disappear. A shrinking labor-market segment ordinarily leaves a union with five options: (i) resist reduction of the segment, (ii) become smaller, (iii) merge with one or more other unions in a similar domain, (iv) merge with one or more unions in adjacent domains, or (v) disband.

the tailors, were going down, they resolved, in a public assembly, not to strike work, but to spend the funds, that their executive might have no temptation; and, as the readiest, and most generally agreeable manner of getting rid of the funds, was to have a series of jollifications at public-houses, they proceeded accordingly, and so saved their office-bearers from following the example of the officers of certain other trades." (Ibid., p. 391.)

⁶³ On the homology of company rules and union rules, see: Braun, *Sozialer und kultureller Wandel*, Chapter VI.

Resisting a reduction of the labor-market segment is often the most obvious defensive strategy. But it is compromised by the union's weakened bargaining position. Especially if the employing company is about to shut down anyway, a work stoppage alone will be of little use. Staging a sit-in to prevent the workplace from being dismantled may be more effective.⁶⁴ If a plant is to be relocated, the union may try to organize the workforce at the new site to protect its domain. In some cases, political lobbying may yield results, or there may be a campaign to convince "redundant" union members to emigrate.⁶⁵ If all efforts are unsuccessful, however, the union will need to accept the reduced domain, and may even have to disband – unless the domain can be expanded again through other channels. One possible course of action is to merge with unions in identical labor-market segments at other places (known as *commensual* mergers) or to team up with unions in adjacent labor-market segments (known as *symbiotic* mergers).⁶⁶

- *Expansion* of a labor-market segment usually arises from an increase in effective demand, with concurrent growth in the number of jobs through de-skilling the labor process, new business starts in the same sector and/or the immigration of "cheap" labor. Just as with a reduction in the size of the labor-market segment, unions have several options in this situation: (i) block or reverse expansion of the segment, (ii) grow to keep up with the expansion, (iii) merge with one or more other unions with a similar domain, or (iv) close down.⁶⁷ Blocking expansion of the segment may in the first instance consist of curtailing the mobility of commodities. A union may lobby the state to set up a tollgate, or establish quotas, complicating the import of competing foreign products, or it may organize a boycott of these products. De-skilling and the import of cheap labor may be countered through pressure for immigration controls, i.e. the state prevents low-priced labor from entering the country. Alternatively, unions may construct a dual labor market, by declaring part of the labor market "inferior" with racial, ethnic, age or gender criteria and so exclude people from

⁶⁴ See e.g., Cacassus and Clark, "Une alternative au chômage."

⁶⁵ Erickson, "Encouragement of Emigration"; Clements, "Trade Unions and Emigration"; Matsumura, *Labour Aristocracy Revisited*, p. 117.

⁶⁶ Freeman and Brittain, "Union Merger Process."

⁶⁷ Symbiotic mergers appear less obvious in this case.

certain types of work.⁶⁸ If all these approaches prove ineffective, unions may try to control the expanded labor-market segment by convincing co-workers who are not yet organized to join, or by merging with other unions in the same segment. In a seminal essay, John R. Commons demonstrates how the original locally organized trade unions of American shoemakers had to keep adapting – and especially expanding – their organizations as their product market gradually became nationwide.⁶⁹ If all such efforts fail to yield enough positive results, the union will most likely fold.

Non-economic influences

Resistance by the authorities, entrepreneurs or third parties may prevent unions from maintaining control over their domain. Legal measures may outlaw unions, or make it extremely difficult for them to continue their activities with any effect. In the nineteenth century, this situation applied throughout Europe (as illustrated by the French *Loi Le Chapelier*, the British Combination Laws, etc.) and it still applies in many countries even today.⁷⁰ Both under repressive laws and sometimes despite the laws, unions have been violently repressed, their funds confiscated and their leaders arrested.

If trade unions are legalized, employers may nevertheless try to prevent or discourage their employees from joining.⁷¹ One strategy is to intimidate workers, for example by threatening to sack them if they join. Prominent activists may be dismissed, or even all union members, or they may be blacklisted.

⁶⁸ My interpretation here is based on the analysis in Bonacich, “Past, Present, and Future,” pp. 30–4. A well-known example of a gendered division is the exclusion of women from the mining industry in Britain. The male-dominated trade unions were decisive in getting the Bill to this effect passed in 1842. Metcalfe, “Manning the Mines,” pp. 77–82.

⁶⁹ Commons, “American Shoemakers.”

⁷⁰ See the reports of the International Labor Organization in Geneva. A long-term world-wide trend appears to augur recognition of the trade unions, which should not, however, tempt us to adopt any simple stage theory, such as the one elaborated by Goetz Briefs, Otto Kahn-Freund and others. See e.g., Bender, “Der Weg zur legalen Befestigung.”

⁷¹ On this subject, see also Roy, “Repression and Incorporation.” Erik Wright hypothesizes that a curvilinear link exists between the power of the working class (on the labor market, in the labor process, and in politics) and capitalist resistance to workers’ organizations. Capitalists benefit greatly from a highly disorganized working class; once the power of workers’ organizations exceeds a certain threshold, however, capitalists will have reason to work with these organizations. This hypothesis seems compatible with the historical course of events with respect to trade unions. Wright, “Working-Class Power.”

During the early years of the German Mine Workers Federation, many miners refused to join the union, fearing repression, but they nevertheless subscribed to the union newspaper.⁷² As a formalized method of employer intimidation, the so-called *yellow dog contract* is “a promise, made by workers as a condition of employment, not to belong to a union during the period of employment, or not to engage in certain specified activities, such as collective bargaining or striking, without which the formal right to belong to a union is wholly valueless.”⁷³ Overt or covert violence occurs as well. Such violence can be directed against individual employees, or large groups of union members. In the 1960s, some employers in Japan arranged for physical attacks against employees who tried to set up a trade union. “Workers reported being kicked, having lit cigarettes put to their skin, and being threatened with worse violence.”⁷⁴ In contemporary India, employers still beat their “insubordinate” agricultural workers to death occasionally.⁷⁵ Business owners have also mobilized militias and gangs of thugs to break strikes and suppress other forms of resistance. Sometimes they block trade unions by refusing to negotiate, while at the same time improving working conditions and the standard of living of employees. In several cases, large companies took the next step by establishing company unions (yellow unions) to reduce support for autonomous trade unions. In addition, employers wage propaganda campaigns against the unions, and try to turn the general public against them, for example by

⁷² Hue, *Bergarbeiter*, II, p. 488.

⁷³ Seidman, “Yellow Dog Contract,” p. 348. A well-known case, which gave rise to a famous legal ruling by the US Supreme Court on 10 September 1917, was the yellow dog contract of the Hitchman Coal & Coke Company: “I am employed by and work for the Hitchman Coal & Coke Company with the express understanding that I am not a member of the United Mine Workers of America, and will not become so while an employee of the Hitchman Coal & Coke Company; that the Hitchman Coal & Coke Company is run non-union and agrees with me that it will run non-union while I am in its employ. If at any time I am employed by the Hitchman Coal & Coke Company I want to become connected with the United Mine Workers of America or any affiliated organization, I agree to withdraw from the employment of said company, and agree that while I am in the employ of that company I will not make any efforts amongst its employees to bring about the unionizing of that mine against the company’s wish. I have either read the above or heard the same read.” Seidman, “Yellow Dog Contract,” pp. 357–8.

⁷⁴ Turner, *Japanese Workers in Protest*, p. 35.

⁷⁵ Breman, “Silencing the Voice of Agricultural Labourers.”

referring to “the red menace.” They have also tried to block employee actions through espionage.⁷⁶

Trade unions may also have other competitors: organizations with partially overlapping functions. In the 1950s, for example, some Nigerian trade unions had to compete with tribal organizations offering far more selective incentives (“death benefits, assistance regarding marriage expenses and during the illness of a member, repatriation of the destitute, etc.”).⁷⁷ Finally, trade unions may encounter more sinister enemies. When the National Union of Mineworkers tried to establish itself in the South African gold mines in the mid-1980s, it became entangled in a protracted, violent struggle against the *Marashea* (the “Russians”): criminal Basotho gangs who had ruled the compounds for decades through their strict control over the women in their areas. “Russian” miners regularly paid dues, and spent part of their income at the places where they attended meetings. The arrival of the NUM threatened the position of the “Russians,” who did everything possible to obstruct trade union activists, up to murder.⁷⁸

A new union that experiences repression, violence, or aggression can respond in four main ways. A first option is *overt resistance*, for example by filing legal proceedings, or setting up a paramilitary organization.⁷⁹ Secondly, the organization can *disguise* itself to appear less threatening to outsiders; some unions have posed as mutual insurance societies (see Chapter 6). Thirdly, the organization may move *part* of its operations *underground*. The British Miners’ Association of the 1840s had to rely on its travelling “lecturers” (salaried by the union) to maintain its organization at the local level. “Often persecution by the owners was so intense that merely to hold a union membership card was enough to get a miner the sack and eviction from his cottage. So men had to be discreet about professing their beliefs. It was only the lecturers,

⁷⁶ The commercially organized forms of espionage among employees in the United States are especially well known. See e.g. Jeffrey-Jones, “Profits over Class”; Hyde, “Undercover and Underground.”

⁷⁷ Yesufu, *Introduction to Industrial Relations*, pp. 67–8.

⁷⁸ Kynoch, “*Marashea* on the Mines,” pp. 95–100.

⁷⁹ Some American unions in the first half of the twentieth century “could not mobilize the physical resources necessary to protect pickets and other members of the union from the assaults by hired mercenaries. Women members and foreign workers might not be able to resist, and considering that the police refused to offer any protection, the only defense available to the union was employing its own strong-arm men to protect its pickets.” Taft, *Corruption and Racketeering*, pp. 11–2.

with nothing to lose, who could come out in open defiance of the masters. By the power of personal example, lecturers banished timidity and imbued workers with the will to resist. They were the backbone of the organisation."⁸⁰ Fourthly, some unions have *gone underground completely*. In many countries, it was the most usual course of action during the early years of the union movement. Even in so-called advanced capitalist countries, however, underground operations may become necessary. From February 1969, for example, workers at a Japanese camera factory trying to start an enterprise union decided to observe the following rules, after their efforts met with violent resistance: "(1) union members should not interact with one another in the workplace; (2) new members are to be known only to the chairman and the secretary; (3) the existence of the union is to remain secret at the time of recruitment, so each individual is recruited as one of just two employees interested in the formation of a union; and (4) use of strict precautions when going to and from a meeting."⁸¹

Each of these options will obviously affect the organizational structure. In unions which move all or part of their operations underground, the regular members generally stop being informed of the activities of the organization as a whole, so that much of the union's internal power is centralized.

Expansion of the domain of control

In an ever-expanding capitalist economy, maintaining union power requires expanding its domain gradually, either *horizontally* (through endogenous expansion, collaboration with other unions, or setting up new unions with the same domain elsewhere) or *vertically* (through endogenous expansion, collaboration with other unions, or setting up new unions with adjacent domains in the same region). If the union exists only locally, the need will arise (i) to work with other local unions, (ii) to establish fraternal organizations or affiliates in other places, or (iii) to join an established, larger trade union.⁸² Unions organized nationally may benefit from international cooperation.

⁸⁰ Challinor and Ripley, *Miners' Association*, p. 75.

⁸¹ Turner, *Japanese Workers in Protest*, p. 35.

⁸² Studies on such processes are rare. Nevertheless, see Hedström, "Contagious Collectivities."

Four forces motivate union expansion. Firstly, the constant increase in the *scale of production* within capitalism which turns local markets into national ones, and national ones into international and even transcontinental ones. Not only do product markets expand, but the labor force becomes geographically more mobile as well.⁸³ Second, *organizational finance* can demand expansion. Locally organized copper miners in the United States during the 1890s had great difficulty maintaining strikes due to insufficient funds. And although miners from other places often wanted to contribute financial support, there was “no formal machinery for collecting and transferring moneys between the independent local unions.” This was one of the reasons why the Western Federation of Miners was established in 1893.⁸⁴ Sometimes *prestige* motivates expansion. The first “national” trade unions established in Britain in the 1830s were primarily short-lived, fictitious, and premature organizations, intended mainly to impress their own rank and file and the employers.⁸⁵ Finally, *political influence* causes expansion. The establishment of the International Labor Organization in 1919, for example, led the member countries to send workers’ representatives to the annual conferences in Geneva. In some countries lacking a national trade union confederation, one was quickly established for that very reason. In India, for example, the All-India Trade Union Congress was established in 1920. Despite this organization’s “relatively small following,” it was “the sole representative organisation of the workers throughout India.”⁸⁶

Large organizations resulting from circumstances other than real organizing (for example prestige considerations or political pressures) were rather fragile, especially during the initial years of their existence. Generally, it seems unions expanded more easily when, in addition to members in different locations having greater common interests, the mutual trust between different groups of workers increased. This trust grew as people knew each other longer. Establishing the national British Miners’ Association in 1842–3 was facilitated by the existence of more longstanding informal ties between collieries:

⁸³ Lloyd Ulman has even argued (*contra* John R. Commons) that “the existence of a national market for labor – as distinct from a national market for products – proved in fact to have been a sufficient cause for the rise of national unions.” Ulman, *Rise of the National Trade Union*, p. 49.

⁸⁴ Hildebrand and Mangum, *Capital and Labor in American Copper*, p. 121.

⁸⁵ Cole, “Study of British Trade Union History.”

⁸⁶ Purcell and Hallsworth, *Report on Labour Conditions in India*, p. 12.

“It was, to some extent, a question of strengthening, and making more durable, already existing links.”⁸⁷ Conversely, regional differences greatly complicated the trend toward nationalization. Tensions arose between Scottish and English miners in the British Miners’ Association in the 1840s. “The Scottish unions, on the whole, were powerful and rich. Their dues, when dispatched to Newcastle, were used to help sick union organisations in English coal-fields. The Scots, therefore, put money in and had little, or nothing, to show for it. Naturally, many thought they would be stronger without their English brethren.”⁸⁸

When the ties between unionists in different locations remained formal, and therefore weak, group egoism or the self-interest of local officials could undermine efforts to work together. Established in 1909, the Philippine Tobacco Factory Workers’ Union (Unión de Tabaqueros Filipina – UTF) consisted mainly of autonomous branches in separate factories. Representatives of those branches gathered only a few times a year, and did not feel deep and lasting loyalty toward the central body:

In 1924–1925, for example, a few section officers at the factories of La Flor de la Isabela and La Clementina refused to support a strike that the UTF had officially endorsed. These section leaders recruited strike breakers and they themselves returned to work allegedly because they wanted to ingratiate themselves to the managers in order to be appointed factory foremen. In other cases section officers did the opposite – they encouraged strikes without consulting the central officers. In the most extreme cases, they guided their sections out of the union either to be completely autonomous or to join another union which they believed could better secure benefits for members.”⁸⁹

Precarious democracy

To establish a stable union that will stay effective as its domain expands, its internal balance of power is very important. The initial domain of a new trade union is nearly always relatively small, with a rank and file concen-

⁸⁷ Challinor and Ripley, *Miners’ Association*, p. 67.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁸⁹ Kerkvliet, *Manila Workers’ Unions*, p. 56.

trated in one place and/or with one employer. Admittedly, as noted earlier, some organizations already had a large, nation-wide domain when they were founded. Such organizations, however, usually resulted from non-economic, external pressure.

Really small unions nearly always have either a direct-democratic or autocratic structure. The smaller a union, the more homogeneous its membership, the more transparent the interests of members and officials, and the greater the direct-democratic influence of the rank-and-file will tend to be.⁹⁰ A century ago, Sidney and Beatrice Webb provided an unparalleled description of the operations of direct-democratic unions in nineteenth-century Britain.⁹¹ Autocratic unions usually arise when the founder is one person who aims to retain full control over “his” or “her” initiative. Stephen Large describes how the Japanese trade union *Yūaikai*, established in 1912 and camouflaged as a mutual insurance society, was run by its founder Suzuki Bunji: “From his offices [...] Suzuki Bunji maintained a firm personal control over the movement during its initial growth in the 1912–16 period. He had conceived the *Yūaikai*, named it, selected its leaders, recruited the services of distinguished sympathizers, dominated the formulation of *Yūaikai* goals and programs, delegated authority in the movement, represented the *Yūaikai* in dealing with business and political leaders, and even personally designed the *Yūaikai* emblem.”⁹² In nearly all cases, the indirect-democratic form arose only derivatively, either when the further growth of a union’s domain precluded a functioning direct democracy, or when an autocratic union became more democratic.

Even in relatively small unions, a heterogeneous membership quickly leads to differences in power. Women members, for example, are often less influential than male ones. As early as 1914, the Austrian social democrat Adolf Braun noted a few important background factors. Firstly, women workers had a double workload, because they did housework in addition to their paid job: “While male workers start and finish working and take their breaks at set times, the hours of female workers are very frequently, one might even say as a rule, unlimited. When female workers come home from the plant with its set working hours, they find manifold tasks awaiting them, often for people they must care for in addition to themselves, with respect to cleaning,

⁹⁰ Eickhof, *Theorie der Gewerkschaftsentwicklung*, pp. 25–6.

⁹¹ Webb and Webb, *Industrial Democracy*.

⁹² Large, *Yūaikai*, p. 29.

clothing, cooking, and often not for themselves alone but for others as well, not only for their husbands and children but also for subtenants, lodgers and the like."⁹³ Secondly, most union meetings took place in the evening, outside working hours. "Arriving home late, the road home from the meeting, across long distances at night, often through poorly lit areas, presents no problem for male workers but does for female ones. This is why often even female workers recruited as members of the industrial organizations have greater difficulty becoming fully involved than their male counterparts."⁹⁴ Thirdly, psychological factors played a role: "[Female workers] nowadays no longer find attending meetings so extraordinary and therefore difficult. Even that, however, is harder for them than for male workers; they are less likely to take an active part in the meeting or to participate as speakers, to express views that differ from those proposed at the meeting."⁹⁵

Other factors are mentioned in more recent literature:⁹⁶ some authors, for example, note that women had more difficulty paying their dues on time, because they usually earned far less than men, and because their dependent status (usually as wives or daughters) meant they lacked full control over the expenditure of their earnings.⁹⁷ Sometimes ethno-cultural influences were relevant as well. In some communities, a woman could not attend an evening meeting without being escorted by a man, while in other communities women had important economic responsibilities, and were considered responsible for their own affairs.⁹⁸ Factors unrelated to gender can promote power differences within unions as well, such as religion, race, political beliefs, age, education, or region. Wherever they enter the picture, complex interlocking hierarchies can result.⁹⁹

⁹³ Braun, *Gewerkschaften*, p. 192.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* "[A]rguably the style of meetings was conducted in a masculine mode which was alien to women. The arcane procedures of minute-making and formulating resolution and the formal mode of address at trade union meetings would be quite familiar to women, who may have found them intimidating and daunting." Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*, p. 110.

⁹⁶ See also: Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*; Wertheimer, *We Were There*; Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*.

⁹⁷ Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*, p. 108.

⁹⁸ Maxine Schwartz Seller depicts this contrast between Southern Italian and East-European Jewish women in the United States in "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," pp. 259 and 267.

⁹⁹ Frager, "Labour History and the Interlocking Hierarchies."

Structural Shifts in the Internal Relationships

The growing union domain eventually creates three interrelated, structural organizational consequences. Firstly, the inevitable increase in the scale of organizing necessitates greater coordination of the activities of more and more branches and work sites. This coordination can be achieved in three ways:¹⁰⁰

- *Coalitions* in which small unions work together *ad hoc*, but remain independent units. The coalitions have no overall authority, all decisions being made by their member organizations.
- *Federations* in which individual unions retain their own objectives, but a separate body provides for systematic consultation among affiliated unions. The consultative body has no independent decision-making authority, and must submit all proposals to the affiliated unions for approval first.
- *Unitary organizations*: the affiliated unions are completely integrated in a larger coordinating organization responsible for the general policy and program of all affiliates. The extent of centralization can vary widely in unitary organizations. In some situations, lower branches have a great deal of autonomy with broadly defined limits, while in others the central leadership controls all details of the organizational process.

Secondly, as controlling the domain becomes more difficult, full-time union officials (“professionals”) are needed to support the organization as a whole. Historically these professionals have often been recruited in a relatively “spontaneous” or *ad hoc* manner. Possible candidates included “the activist workman briefly financed by his fellows as a ‘delegate’” or “the victimized strike-leader or committee-member who continued to be supported by his society.”¹⁰¹ Professionalization may already occur in relatively small unions. In an organization with two hundred members, if each member contributes 0.5 percent of his or her earnings, enough funds exist to appoint one full-time official.

¹⁰⁰ My distinctions are similar to Warren, “Interorganizational Field,” pp. 404–5.

¹⁰¹ Turner, *Trade Union Growth*, p. 215.

At least four factors can promote professionalization as the union domain expands:

- The *number of work sites* within the domain, affecting the number of contacts that must be maintained and the caseload of organizers.
- The *communicational distance* between the work sites, i.e. the amount of time and energy required to maintain contact among workers in the domain.¹⁰²
- The *nature of work sites*, i.e. whether the work sites are relatively permanent (e.g. factories) or move constantly (e.g. construction sites).
- The *relative mobility of the workers*, i.e. the frequency with which employees change work sites and/or employers across a certain area.

To illustrate, Robert Max Jackson describes how in New York City during the 1880s the carpenters' union confronted a geographically dispersed industry and constantly changing work sites. This situation complicated the supervision of city-wide compliance with union rules. "Walking delegates" were therefore appointed to handle the problem. These professionals (the first one began work in 1883) continuously moved between work sites to inspect working conditions. At first, they only gathered information about non-compliance by contractors or speculators. Soon, however, their duties expanded; they were authorized to organize strikes at sites where the commissioning agents violated regulations. From there, their power increased to the point where they were no longer controlled by the union members: "Very soon their position as roving intermediaries allowed business agents [i.e. the walking delegates] to become the focal point of labor contracting. They possessed a virtually monopoly over the knowledge and contacts needed by both contractors seeking hands and journeymen seeking jobs. For similar reasons

¹⁰² Two elements are essential here. On the one hand, there is the dispersion of work sites. At one extreme, all workers from the domain work at the same place and for the same company. In this case dispersion is virtually nil. At the other extreme, there is total fragmentation of the workers in the domain, for example because they all work from home – more or less complete dispersion. On the other hand, means of communication and transport are relevant, since they determine the difficulty or ease of overcoming dispersion.

they also became the links for communication and cooperation between the various building trades."¹⁰³

High membership turnover also caused professionalization. Klaus Schönhoven argues that, in early twentieth century Germany, the appointment of full-time union officials was explained by strong fluctuations in union membership: "Because of the high turnover in the membership of organizations, the establishment and expansion of bureaucratic systems necessitated the appointment of paid officials. In many union confederations and branches, they were crucial for the survival of the local chapters. As a stable, settled nucleus, such officials guaranteed continuity of regional union operations, and their organizational experience was indispensable for the new members joining the associations every year."¹⁰⁴

Thirdly, professionalization leads to anonymization of relationships within the union. Early, small-scale unions often already had elaborate regulations. But professionalization leads to a depersonalized system of rules, i.e. a bureaucracy.¹⁰⁵ The official is transformed from a "commercial traveller in the class struggle" into an "employee equipped with technical knowledge."¹⁰⁶ Professionals also develop their own social dynamics, which American industrial relations specialist George Strauss describes as follows: "the goals of many union officers are reasonably clear: above all to preserve their jobs (job opportunities for defeated officers are slim) and, if possible, to increase their prestige and income."¹⁰⁷ This goal displacement was already noted by Robert Michels in the early twentieth century: "every organ of the collectivity, brought into existence through the need for the division of labour, creates for

¹⁰³ Jackson, *Formation of Craft Labor Markets*, p. 190. See also Strauss, "Business Agents in the Building Trades."

¹⁰⁴ Schönhoven, "Gewerkschaftswachstum," p. 32.

¹⁰⁵ I am not using the term "trade-union bureaucracy" here in the sense of some Marxist theoreticians, who by definition label professionals working for unions as "bureaucrats" (e.g. Mandel, *Power and Money*, Chapter 2). Richard Hyman rightly notes that "the notion of 'bureaucracy' has some theoretical coherence within Weberian sociology; but the career structure, authority patterns and bases of legitimacy of full-time union officialdom bear little relation to Weber's 'ideal type'. The term 'trade union bureaucrat' is typically a derogatory epithet rather than an aid to scientific analysis; insofar as it has any interpretative significance it is to imply a *common* situation – social, ideological, functional – among full-time officialdom as a whole which differentiates them radically from the rest of membership." Hyman, "British Trade Unionism," p. 73.

¹⁰⁶ Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 301.

¹⁰⁷ Strauss, "Issues in Union Structure," pp. 6–7.

itself, as soon as it becomes consolidated, interests peculiar to itself. The existence of these special interests involves a necessary conflict with the interests of the collectivity. Nay, more, social strata fulfilling peculiar functions tend to become isolated, to produce organs fitted for the defence of their own peculiar interests."¹⁰⁸

As the union domain expands, the emerging organizational structure can take one of three main forms: a federative structure, a decentralized unitary structure, or a centralized structure. Professionalization occurs in each of them. In Argentina, the Confederación de Ferrocarrileros, the country's first nationally organized industrial union, "allowed the branches considerable autonomy and [...] supplemented its representative federal structure with provisions for referenda on certain matters. It maintained with some justification, that organising staff who met daily in a single factory or workshop was a good deal easier than running a national union of diverse trades, many members of which were geographically isolated."¹⁰⁹ Seymour Lipset demonstrated that the influence of professionals in centralized structures need not be greater than in federalized structures. He calculated that in the early 1960s, the ratio of full-time union officials to members in the United States was 1: 300, compared with 1: 900 in Australia, 1: 2,000 in Britain and 1: 2,200 in Norway. American trade unions were far more decentralized than trade unions in the other countries. In the United States, union meetings were often attended exclusively by paid officials,¹¹⁰ something inconceivable in many other countries. Bureaucratization of unions also changes the type of union officials. These representatives *may* be, but are not always, the same individuals as the professionals described above. Professionals can also be subordinate to the representatives.

Although professionalization is therefore quite compatible with federative structures, this process nonetheless promotes the transition to unitary structures, because the transaction costs of a unitary organization are proportionately lower. After all, the principal communications are between the branches and the central office, rather than among the local chapters.¹¹¹ Decomplexification of the union domain coincides with the disappearance of the inter-

¹⁰⁸ Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 389.

¹⁰⁹ Thompson, "Trade Union Organisation," p. 162.

¹¹⁰ Lipset, "Trade Unions and Social Structure."

¹¹¹ Williamson, *Markets and Hierarchies*.

nal direct democracy, provided that such a system actually exists. A growing membership, dispersed across ever more work sites with large communicational distances from each other, virtually precludes regular decision-making by all members on all matters of importance. Inevitably, a system of representation will emerge, in which the rank and file cedes areas of authority, temporarily or permanently, to elected representatives. The measure of indirect influence that the members retain in that case will depend partly on the extent to which the professionals are elected democratically.

Collective bargaining

The “collective bargaining” concept (devised by the Webbs) is in fact the opposite of “individual bargaining.” While the latter term refers to negotiations conducted by *individual* employees with their employer, the former refers to negotiations involving a *group* of employees. Very broadly speaking, *every* workers’ collective action involving negotiations with the employer is a form of collective bargaining. Ordinarily, however, the scope of collective bargaining is restricted to negotiations by a group of employees with one or more employers, which culminate in a collective agreement – a written or an informal contract which both parties agree to observe for a specific period (e.g., a year), regardless of whether this contract is, or is not, legally enforceable.

Collective labor agreements are reached only under certain conditions. Firstly, it may be that neither the employers nor the unions can prevail. Take for example the case of a single large union negotiating with several employers, without the employers combining in one representative organization. Such a situation is conceivable, if the employers expect the costs of forming a coalition to exceed the benefits. In such a case, the union may be able to stipulate its conditions unilaterally. Conversely, if an employer realizes he can easily withstand any union pressure to negotiate, he will rarely be inclined to negotiate. In other words, unions must be in a position to threaten to industrial action; they must have a “recognized *potential* of power,” as a consequence of which “concessions are likely to be made not because members have struck, but in order to avoid a strike.”¹¹² Generally, therefore, a certain *power balance* is

¹¹² Offe and Wiesenthal, “Two Logics of Collective Action,” p. 216.

assumed to exist between the two parties. Secondly, employers must be willing to surrender at least a part of their sovereignty in the operating rules of the firm.¹¹³ Thirdly, unions do not expect a radical change of the balance of power in the short term. Fourthly, the negotiating union typically uses professional negotiators. Although collective agreements can be reached by direct-democratic unions in theory, they are much more likely to be achieved by unions with full-time officials. After all, negotiations for collective agreements normally require union negotiators who are available for weeks or months at a time, and who have sufficient expertise. Gerald Crompton's observation that collective bargaining in Britain led to "an increase in the numbers and influence of full-time officials" confirms this thesis.¹¹⁴ Fifthly, negotiators for both sides need to be firmly in control of their rank and file, to ensure that all keep to their side of the bargain when the contract is signed.¹¹⁵ Finally, existing legal and political institutions should allow trade unions sufficient freedom to operate.¹¹⁶

On the whole, rather few cases in which employers and trade unions are pitched against each other meet *all* these criteria. This is part of the explanation why only a minor fraction of the world's labor force works on the basis of collective employment agreements.

Interactions with authorities

Often state authorities try to intervene in the internal affairs of the unions. In the Territory of Papua New Guinea in the 1960s, the government insisted that existing unions should establish a federation, because "a central body was potentially a more efficient party to tripartite processes of the infant system

¹¹³ The term "sovereignty" is used in Derber, *American Idea of Industrial Democracy*, Section III.

¹¹⁴ Crompton, "Issues in British Trade Union Organization," p. 253.

¹¹⁵ Several authors note that collective bargaining can lead to severe tensions between professionals and the rank and file. John Laslett, for example, has written: "The notion of contract implies a recognition by the union of its responsibilities for the enforcement of the agreement, which sometimes placed even radical union leadership in the seemingly anomalous position of having to act against its own constituency, when the contract was violated by the members of the rank and file. Thus the price which the union had to pay for the benefits it received was to become part of the productive system itself." Laslett, *Labor and the Left*, p. 297.

¹¹⁶ Sturmtal, "Industrial Relations Strategies," pp. 9–10.

of conciliation and arbitration than the tiny regional workers' associations."¹¹⁷ Where possible, political parties also tend to use trade unions to expand or consolidate their sphere of influence. Such parties need not be socialist, communist, or laborist, and may just as easily espouse Christian democratic, populist, or socially conscious liberal principles. In some cases, parties have even encouraged the nation-wide establishment and centralization of trade unions, to create new "electoral vehicles".¹¹⁸

Conversely, unions soon have to take a stand with respect to political parties and state intervention. It may be one of condemnation or rejection, as with anarchist and revolutionary-syndicalist organizations explicitly opposed to the political establishment as such. Alternatively, the stand may be more favorable, and lead to active involvement by unions in the political process. Unions may lobby local or central authorities to get acts or regulations passed which force employers to adopt or stop certain practices. This strategy is often followed only when other legal action is impossible, or insufficiently accessible, or requires too much time or money.

If unions decide to intervene by means of political action, they can pursue three kinds of approaches. Firstly, they can take direct action themselves, for example by submitting petitions to the authorities, organizing mass demonstrations, or staging political strikes. Secondly, trade unions can strongly influence important political actors. Sometimes close ties between trade unions and political parties facilitate this, as shown by labor parties or communist parties in many West-European countries during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It may include lobbying in political circles, and efforts to convince union members to vote for certain political parties. In different countries, all kinds of strategies are pursued to this end. Unions in the United States today try to register voters and provide resources (money, staff time, volunteers) for the campaigns of pro-union candidates for federal office.¹¹⁹ Thirdly, unions may form their own political party, or transform themselves into broader, semi-political organizations. Famous examples include the American Knights of Labor and the Polish *Solidarność*.¹²⁰ Alternatively, unions can establish

¹¹⁷ Hess, "Papua New Guinea's First Peak Union Council," p. 33.

¹¹⁸ Candland, "Trade Unionism and Industrial Restructuring," p. 70.

¹¹⁹ Freeman and Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?*, pp. 192-3.

¹²⁰ Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*, Chapter 2; Tatur, *Solidarność als Modernisierungsbewegung*.

political parties that work with the unions as independent organizations. The earliest examples of such independent organizations were probably the local Working Men's Parties in Pennsylvania and New York during the 1820s and 1830s. In the "Great Depression" (1870s–90s), the first nation-wide parties established by unions appeared. Sometimes the defeat of a major strike caused the formation of a workers' political party to gain more influence. This happened for example in Australia, where the defeat of the Great Strike of 1890 appears to have been "the single most important inspiration" for the establishment of Labor Parties during the 1890s.¹²¹ In other cases, the origin of workers' parties was less dramatic, such as in Sweden, where unions established the Social Democratic Workers' Party in 1889.¹²²

Whatever course unions choose, state regulation of union affairs and growing involvement by unions in national politics act as powerful stimuli for nationwide union confederations. Such confederations may serve as workers' representative both vis-à-vis the state, political parties and employers' confederations.¹²³

Centralization, bureaucratization, opposition

Although collective bargaining is conducive to professionalization of unions, it does not *automatically* lead to a confederation. Herbert A. Turner notes that "the decentralized [British] cotton unions produced the nineteenth century's most extensive and elaborate bargaining system, and its most efficient strike organization. Nor was it essential to political action – rather the reverse, since a merely federal relationship permits groups which are unwilling to merge for other purposes to associate for particular legislative demands: the Miners' Federation of Great Britain was probably the most effective agency of political pressure that any section of the British workers has so far

¹²¹ Scates, *New Australia*, p. 76. This interpretation is also supported in Markey, "Australia," p. 595. Compare also the establishment of the British Independent Labour Party in 1893, as an indirect consequence of the strikes of 1889–90. On that subject, see e.g. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, pp. 57–75.

¹²² Simonson, "Sweden," p. 96.

¹²³ If trade unions are unable to reverse or change certain trends through direct confrontations with employers or indirectly via the state, they may work with fourth parties in their own country (e.g. the Catholic Church) or with supra-national bodies (e.g. the International Labor Organization in Geneva).

developed.”¹²⁴ Unions may organize their political activities through federal and professionalized channels as well.

Although professionalization, collective bargaining, and political interventions are therefore not *intrinsically* incompatible with a federal structure, these three processes virtually always coincide with organizational centralization, which I interpret as “the vertical distribution of power – both formal and informal – among various union levels, from federations to the shop floor.”¹²⁵ One possible explanation for this coincidence is that federalism requires stronger grass-roots participation than centralism does. Whenever rank and file influence in the organization diminishes for whatever reason, the center ensuring organizational continuity will intervene on behalf of the absent members. And when internal power advances to a higher level in the hierarchy as a result, this shift is rarely reversible. From this perspective, a step toward centralization is comparable to opening the floodgates: easy to open, but virtually impossible to shut afterwards. In the longer term, the process is cumulative: the transition from a federal to a central structure more or less inches along.

Takao Matsumura’s study of nineteenth-century British flint glass makers shows how surreptitious the transition from federation to center can be. The first step was to designate one of the local branches of the trade union federation as a “general branch”, through a vote among all the members. The chapter selected would then run the entire organization for three years. After that period, the “general branch” might transfer to another city, and so on. At the same time, a General Secretary was elected – initially an unpaid official. As the activities of the federation expanded, however, this position became paid (professional). It became apparent that “it [was] utterly impossible for any Central Secretary who follow[ed] his work as a glass-maker to keep such a set of books as [were] kept by other societies, and [were] absolutely necessary as a safeguard for the Society’s interests [...]” The position of permanent secretary, however, proved difficult to combine with a geographically mobile head office: “Who is to pay for the removing of his wife, family and furniture? He cannot do it out of his wages, and it takes a deal of money to take a family from Birmingham to Glasgow.”¹²⁶ This led to pressure to set up a permanent

¹²⁴ Turner, *Trade Union Growth*, p. 215.

¹²⁵ Strauss, “Issues in Union Structure”, p. 24.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Matsumura, *Labour Aristocracy Revisited*, p. 90.

head office, and convert the federation into a unitary structure – within which directly-democratic decision-making continued for some time. Centralization also very importantly entails the transfer of financial authority, which may be a similarly surreptitious process. At first, branches have full control over their budgets, then they start to pay a contribution to the central administration, and this contribution gradually increases to the point where the center has effective control.¹²⁷

As an organization grows and becomes more centralized, members lose influence in how it is run. “Centralization clearly reduces opportunities for individual members to participate *directly* in making key decisions.”¹²⁸ As with bureaucratization and anonymization, this loss of influence may meet with resistance. Under a collective agreement, the union leadership has a moral (and sometimes a legal) obligation to ensure that workers do not go on strike, so long as employers comply with the agreements made. In some cases, however, the rank and file become dissatisfied with the agreement and want to reopen negotiations, even although the term of the agreement has not yet expired. This may lead to a genuine *wildcat strike*, a strike “in which the formal union leaders have actually lost control and the strike is led by individuals whose position in the formal structure does not prescribe such a role for them.”¹²⁹

Eventually, new unions may be organized which claim to have closer ties with the rank and file members. In the United States in the 1940s and 50s, many local independent unions were founded. Their membership grew from 162,000 in 1939 to 709,000 in 1956. The main cause of this remarkable trend was regional wage differentials. National unions tried to standardize wages within their jurisdictions; but workers in areas where wages exceeded the standard rates of pay were inclined to arrange locally independent representation, to retain their regional advantages which national unions sought to

¹²⁷ Thompson, “Trade Union Organisation,” p. 166. The reverse was also possible: “It was, however, almost as common for delegates at congresses to allege that some branch or other had invented members and bumped up its subscriptions temporarily to increase its entitlement to delegates. Again, this was especially a feature of times of controversy [...]” (Ibid.)

¹²⁸ Strauss, “Issues in Union Structure,” p. 32.

¹²⁹ Gouldner, *Wildcat Strike*, p. 93. Alternatively, the union leadership may organize a *pseudo-wildcat*, which is “a strike in which the formal union leaders pretend to have little control over the situation, but actually exert concealed influence on its course.” (Ibid.)

eliminate.¹³⁰ Likewise, workers aiming to retain their skill differentials, or to oppose central authority on political, ethnic, economic or religious grounds, may object to centralization. This leads to the phenomenon of “breakaway unions” which split from the national organization, or operate outside it. So despite the constant drive toward centralization, counter-currents can also emerge, reversing the trend at certain critical moments in industrial relations.

¹³⁰ Troy, “Local Independent and National Unions,” p. 489.

Chapter Twelve

Labor internationalism

The words “proletarian” and “internationalism” were not usually joined together in one phrase until the First World War.¹ Since that time, the expression “proletarian internationalism” has often been abused, justifying oppression and foreign military intervention by governments in a way which reduces the whole idea to empty rhetoric. If we are to use the concept again today in its proper sense, it seems advisable that we apply it to activities “from below,” excluding the activities of governments, but including the autonomous activities of subaltern workers in full.

“Proletarian internationalism” suggests associations with “socialism” and “communism,” and with efforts to abolish world capitalism. Consistent with these connotations, those who use the concept to refer to workers’ activities normally mean *the collective actions of a group of workers in one country who set aside their short-term interests as a national group on behalf of a group of workers in another country, in order to promote their long-term interests as members of a transnational class.*² Instances of “proletarian internationalism” in this sense have occurred many times. The

¹ Friedemann and Hölscher, “Internationale, International, Internationalismus.”

² I am aware of the fact that in North America “internationalism” may also refer to inter-ethnic solidarity in one country. This form of solidarity is however not discussed in the present chapter.

question however is whether any narrow interpretation of the concept does real justice to the internationalist impulse. First and foremost, it fails to encompass the most numerous forms of cross-border workers' solidarity; after all, in addition to "strategic internationalism," there are at least four other reasons why groups of workers in different countries would jointly undertake promotion of their shared interests:

- *Identity of group interests in the short term:* The living and working conditions of workers in two or more countries change in such a way, that their interests become more or less identical, giving rise to the possibility of a joint promotion of interests. In such instances, trade unions need to do no more than 'total up', as it were, the individual interests involved.
- *Identity of group interests in the longer term:* Workers in one country support the interests of workers in a worse situation elsewhere, and forego the prospect of short-term success on their own, expecting that they could or would eventually find themselves in the same bad situation. In this case, they try to influence the improvement of the situation of foreign workers which in time could prove to be their own situation.
- *Indirect identity of group interests:* Workers in one country support improvement in the position of workers in another country facing conditions inferior to their own, because such an improvement constitutes a precondition for the successful promotion of their own interests.
- *Normative involvement:* Workers support fellow workers abroad whose treatment by the state or by employers conflicts with the standards of justice and decency they themselves uphold. No material interests of their own are involved here. Humanitarian or political considerations may play a part, while cultural and religious influences (e.g. Islam or Christianity) may likewise be unifying factors.³

³ An important example was the solidarity shown by British and French workers with the North during the American Civil War. About the question of how extensive this support really was, opinions have differed for a long time. See on this issue: Bernstein, "Opposition of French Labor"; d'A. Jones, "History of a Myth"; Greenleaf, "British Labour Against American Slavery"; Harrison, "British Labour and the Confederacy"; Harrison, "British Labor and American Slavery"; Sancton, "Myth of French Worker Support"; Park, "English Workingmen and the American Civil War"; Wright, "Bradford and the American Civil War."

Normative involvement also creates a link to a further widening of the more limited concept of internationalism. Workers may feel solidarity with groups that are not primarily concerned with workers' interests, but seek to achieve other emancipatory goals. Solidarity of this kind can take many forms. Examples include the support given by the International Working Men's Association (IWMA, later also known as the First International) to Poland's struggle for freedom after the insurrection of 1863, and similarly that of Australian and Indian longshoremen for Indonesia's fight for independence in the 1940s. Moreover, normative involvement encompasses "long-distance nationalism" on an ethnic basis, as exemplified by the emotional ties with Ireland existing among Irish workers in North America.⁴ Another variant is Pan-African solidarity which many African-Americans have felt for the people of sub-Saharan Africa since the Second World War, a solidarity in which the workers' struggle has occasionally played an important part.⁵

"Proletarian internationalism" in reality describes a more pluriform and less consistent phenomenon than is often supposed. It also includes solidarity with immigrant workers within one's *own* country. In this chapter I aim to sketch out only the long-term trends in the efforts of workers to develop *cross-border solidarity*, focusing on *trade-union activities*. I begin with the motives behind such activities, then trace different phases in the development of such solidarity from the early nineteenth century up to the present, and conclude with a few speculative remarks about the century ahead. Much of what I propose is however based only on incomplete evidence. Research into the real history of working-class internationalism is still in its infancy, notwithstanding the important advances made in recent years.⁶

A Grammar of motives

Cross-border solidarity may seem logical, but in practice it is not. Attempts at internationalism are invariably uncertain, because of the oppositional

⁴ Anderson, *Long Distance Nationalism*.

⁵ Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*.

⁶ Since the historiography of trade-union internationalism is far more advanced than the historiography of the world working class, I focus on the development of labor organizations here. In the longer term, however, that approach should be reversed, i.e. the development of the world working class will have to become the analytical background against which trade-union internationalism is analysed.

forces also involved. There can be many reasons for international cooperation. New motives have continually appeared over the years, and others have faded away. At least seven main *economic* motives can be distinguished. They are:

- *Countering the importation of foreign competitors.* Employers refusing local workers' demands for higher wages or better working conditions can try to attract cheaper labor from other countries, preferably countries closeby. Conflicts about this issue have often crystallized during strikes. Gérard Brey, for example, describes how building contractors in Spanish Galicia brought in workers from northern Portugal to break strikes in 1895. Fighting back in 1901, trade unions in the two countries set up the Unión Galaico-Portuguese, which organized solidarity so effectively that the building contractors stopped recruiting unorganized Portuguese labor after 1904. The union was subsequently dissolved.⁷
- *Creating institutional arrangements for transnational labor circulation,* which involves mainly skilled and highly-skilled workers seeking work in other countries. In the nineteenth century, European glovers for example plied their trade in an international labor market concentrated in cities like Grenoble, Prague, Brussels and Naples. For various reasons, some were itinerant, travelling from place to place in search of work. Because these highly-skilled workers numbered no more than a few thousand across the whole of Europe, they were able to set up trade unions at quite an early date, and to gain influence among glovers arriving from other countries. As early as 1871, the Vienna glovers' union established contact with their German counterpart, and somewhat later with similar organizations in Prague and Scandinavia.⁸
- *Control of cross-border labor processes.* Some groups of transport workers (e.g. seamen) travel constantly from one country to another, and are therefore organized on a multinational basis already. It follows that collective activities relating to their working conditions straightaway have a transnational dimension. It is in this section of the working class that cross-border soli-

⁷ Brey, "Une tentative d'internationalisme concret."

⁸ Deinhardt, "Die internationalen Beziehungen der Gewerkschaften," p. 837; and more general, Logue, "'Da blev jeg svend og så tog jeg på valsen'."

parity has long been relatively highly developed. Thus the International Transport Workers' Federation has frequently played a leading role in transnational collective action.⁹

- *Reducing competition between workers in the same industries in different countries.* In the early 1990s, the American United Electrical Workers (UE) began to work together with the Mexican-based Authentic Workers Front. A UE representative explained the move in an interview: "We lost something like 15,000 members in the last few years; this is a large amount for a union of our size. We had to increasingly face companies comparing our wages to those in Mexico during negotiations. Then it became clear to us we just do not want Mexicans to earn more, or that we feel sorry for them. We realized that if Mexican wages did not come up, ours were going down fast. It was in our union's self-interest to try to raise standards of living in Mexico."¹⁰ The same reasoning prompted the 1950s decision of the United Steel Workers of America to support the Jamaican bauxite miners in their organizational efforts.¹¹
- *Lobbying international organizations.* Since 1919, when Western countries responded to the Bolshevik threat by establishing the International Labor Organization, a substantial part of the international trade union movement has sought to influence this tripartite organization's formulation of international labor standards.¹² When European unification began to take shape in the 1960s, European trade unions intensified their cooperation, to enable them to influence the new policy at the highest levels.¹³
- *The promotion of interests within multinational corporations.* In the course of the twentieth century, an increasing number of corporations established themselves in several or many different countries. This meant that workers in a number of countries were effectively under the same management, which

⁹ Simon, *Internationale Transportarbeiter-Föderation*; Reinalda, *International Transportworkers Federation*; Koch-Baumgarten, *Gewerkschaftsinternationalismus*.

¹⁰ Armbruster, "Cross-National Labor Organizing Strategies," p. 84.

¹¹ Harrod, *Trade Union Foreign Policy*, pp. 329–30.

¹² van der Linden, *International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*.

¹³ Elsner, *EWG*; Platzer, *Gewerkschaftspolitik ohne Grenzen?*; Portelli, "Confédération Européenne des Syndicats"; Windmuller, "European Regional Organizations."

called for cross-border cooperation. The result, especially from the 1960s onward, was the emergence of multinational collective bargaining.¹⁴

- *The exchange of information.* Trade union officials have long recognized the need for insight into the development of wages and prices, labor legislation, etc. in other countries. As the number and size of multinational corporations grew, the need for data on corporate policies followed. The International Metalworkers' Federation, for instance, "maintains files on more than 500 multinational companies. Such information has proven particularly valuable to IMF affiliates seeking to implement campaigns (increasingly global in extent) against corporations."¹⁵

In addition to *economic* motives, international cooperation may have a *political* background as well. As a rule, this takes the form of collective action aimed at promoting or opposing a particular political model. Political action of this kind may be unconnected with states. It occurred frequently between 1917 and 1921, a period which witnessed a world-wide upsurge of actions originating not so much from short-term self-interest, but from a desire to bring about a new and just social order.¹⁶ Similar examples are the international solidarity with Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War, and the international opposition to apartheid in South Africa. At the same time, trade unions sometimes identified with a particular state, so that their international activities were incorporated into the foreign policy pursued by that state, and served primarily to further state interests, as exemplified by the Red International of Labor Unions (1921–37), which quickly became an instrument of Soviet foreign policy.¹⁷ Conversely, for a large part of the twentieth century the American Federation of Labor (and later the AFL-CIO) was a loyal partner of the US Government, bent on proselytizing anti-communism throughout the world.¹⁸

¹⁴ Barnett and Muller, *Global Reach*, pp. 312–9; Bendiner, *International Labour Affairs*; Cox, "Labor and Transnational Relations."

¹⁵ Herod, "Labor as an Agent of Globalization," p. 183.

¹⁶ Wörner, "Rolle des IGB"; Thorpe, "The Workers Themselves."

¹⁷ Tostorff, *Profintern*.

¹⁸ Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy*; Carew, "American Labor Movement in Fizzland"; Waters Jr. and Daniels, "When You're Handed Money on a Platter."

All in all, the reasons why workers succeed in organizing international solidarity range across a wide spectrum. However, they do tend to be of an economic nature, and hence relate to short-term interests. There are also situations in which long-term interests are the dominant factor, especially in times of a clearly visible, intensified struggle between social classes internationally. In practice, the various motives can of course overlap, blurring the distinctions between different expressions of internationalism.

There are also many possible reasons why workers in specific situations do *not* wish to form international ties with other workers. Those reasons can be economic, political or cultural. In the economic sphere, *commodity chains* are a case in point. When a group of workers processes or distributes a product that has been processed or distributed by another group at a previous stage, the “later” group may benefit if the “earlier” group is paid a low wage. The less the latter earn, the lower will be the price of the product, and the greater the chance that it will find a ready market. Thus, if wage rises abroad raise local prices, it may actually disadvantage workers locally. The *political orientation* of trade unions can also impede certain forms of cross-border cooperation. For decades, the ideology of free trade unionism espoused by the AFL-CIO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions ruled out all possibility of cooperation with communist trade unions. Finally, cooperation between trade unions can also be hampered by *cultural-ideological influences* such as racism, nationalism or religion.

Internationalist sentiments are often ambivalent. Anti-communism, for example, was conducive to some forms of international cooperation, but obstructed others. Moreover, international cooperation is often enacted only when the means available at the national level are inadequate. A typical example is that of the United States window-glass workers in the 1880s, as described at the time by T.V. Powderly, the leader of the Knights of Labor: “In 1883 manufacturers of window glass entered into an agreement to import foreign workmen to take the places of American glass-blowers. Local Assembly No. 300 of the Knights of Labor had reached a stage in organization which approached nearer to perfection than any other association of workingmen in America. [...The] manufacturers became desirous of overthrowing the power of Local Assembly No. 300, so that they might secure the assistance of cheaper workmen from abroad, and through the presence in this country of more glass-blowers than could find employment, they hoped to render

the reduction of wages a task which would be easy of accomplishment.”¹⁹ L.A. 300 fought back with a dual strategy: it set about blocking the importation of skilled glaziers by political means, bringing pressure to bear on the Senate and the Congress, and at the same time directed efforts to the source, sending emissaries to Europe to persuade fellow workers there of the impropriety of their actions. The first part of their strategy was rewarded with success in 1885, when the US Senate passed the Foran Act prohibiting the import of “contract labor.” This rendered the second part of the strategy superfluous, and the organization soon recalled its representatives from Europe.

In reconstructing the historical development of “proletarian internationalism,” we should be aware that we are dealing with complicated, ever changing causal configurations. In each new historical epoch, different combinations of factors are important, as I will sketch out in what follows.

Five Stages of Development

First stage: the labor movement defines itself (pre-1848). In the first half of the nineteenth century, some highly-skilled wage-earners in the North-Atlantic region gradually acquired a consciousness that they formed a separate class with its own historic “mission,” that they personified technological and social progress while the greater part of the lower classes was reactionary, and destined for ultimate collapse. To appreciate the full significance of this new idea, one needs to realize that the concepts of “proletariat” and “working class” were originally by no means identical. The proletariat originally meant the estate of people without property, beyond honor.²⁰ Waged workers were only a *part* of this amorphous mass. According to the French nobleman Adolphe Granier de Cassagnac, writing in the 1830s, the proletariat was “the lowest rank, the deepest stratum of society” comprising four groups: “the workers, the beggars, the thieves and public women”: “The worker is a proletarian, because he works in order to live and earns a wage; the beggar is a proletarian, who does not want to work or cannot work, and begs in order to live; the thief is a proletarian, who does not want to work or beg, and, in

¹⁹ Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, p. 442; Barker, *Glassmakers*, pp. 179–80; Erickson, *American Industry and the European Immigrant*, pp. 145–58; Pelling, “Knights of Labor in Britain.”

²⁰ Conze, “Proletariat, Pöbel, Pauperismus,” p. 41.

order to make a living, steals; the prostitute is a proletarian, who neither wants to work, nor beg, nor steal, and, in order to live, sells her body.”²¹ Some years later, Heinrich Wilhelm Bensen distinguished seven categories of proletarians: apart from three groups of workers he also noted “the poor, who are bereft of support from the public purse, [...] the common soldiers, [...] gypsies, prostitutes, bandits etc.” and “the small servants of religious and secular origin.”²²

As capitalist relations crystallized more and more, the desire arose among “respectable” workers to distinguish themselves from the rest of the “proletariat.” The Communist League clearly articulated this in its *Manifesto*, placing “the modern working class – the proletarians”²³ between two social strata which it considered to be doomed in the capitalist process of social polarization: the petty bourgeoisie and the lumpenproletariat.

Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry. [...] The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative [...]. If by chance they are revolutionary, they are so only in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat, [...] they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat. The ‘dangerous class’, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.²⁴

Historically, the meaning of the concept “working class” was marked off in three ways: from the petty bourgeoisie, from the lumpenproletariat, and from the unfree workers. All three boundaries were moreover gendered – the “working class” being in principle conceived as comprising *male* breadwinners. It led to a stereotype which dominated the intellectual representation

²¹ Granier de Cassagnac, *Histoire des classes ouvrières*, p. 30.

²² Bensen, *Proletarier*, p. 344.

²³ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” p. 73.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

of the workers' movement for well over a century. Perceptive observers already knew early on that the real workers' movements of the day did not consist only (or indeed consisted at all) of the "pure workers" portrayed in the Communist Manifesto, but a very long time passed before this insight led to any new conclusions. The mainstream of the emerging labor movements in Western Europe evolved a self-image conducive to their internal cohesion, although in reality this meant the exclusion of large parts of the real proletariat. It was an image which predominated until the late twentieth century.

Second stage: sub-national internationalism (1848–1870s)

The first significant expressions of consciously organized internationalism occurred in London, the main centre of world capitalism during the lengthy period of economic growth from the late 1840s to the early 1870s. Shortly before that time, in the 1830s, a few groups of highly skilled English workers had already shown an interest in developments abroad. One of the first written expressions of workers' internationalism was a document endorsed by William Lovett's "Working Men's Association", dated 1 November 1836. In this document, *Address to the Belgian Working Classes*, the WMA stated its conviction "that our interests – nay, the interests of working men in all countries of the world – are identified." The Belgian "brethren" were advised "to form, if possible, a union with countries around you" because "a federation of the working classes of Belgium, Holland and the Provinces of the Rhine would form an admirable democracy."²⁵

This interest intensified after the uprisings of 1848, producing a number of small organizations with a multinational membership, such as the "Fraternal Democrats" and the "Communistische Arbeiter-Bildungs-Verein" (Communist Association for the Education of Working Men), which latter counted many non-Germans amongst its members.²⁶ A parallel development was the provision of international aid for workers' strikes, notably between England and the Continent. This aid generally took two forms:

²⁵ Lehnig, *From Buonarroti to Bakunin*, pp. 210–4.

²⁶ Lattek, "Beginnings of Socialist Internationalism"; idem, *Revolutionary Refugees*.

- *Financial aid for strikes in other countries*, either “intra-occupational” in the sense of support for workers in the same occupation, or wider in scope. The first variant seems to have been the more frequent. In 1852, and again in 1862, the London Society of Compositors sent funds to a sister organization in Paris; and Paris construction workers aided their London counterparts in 1860. Shortly before the establishment of the IWMA, the potters of Limoges appealed for help to potters in Staffordshire.²⁷ In the 1850s, there were even attempts to publish bilingual trade journals, such as the printers’ *Gutenberg* and the shoemakers’ *Innovator*.²⁸
- *Opposition to the use of strike-breakers by employers*. During several strikes in the nineteenth century, British employers tried to recruit strike-breakers from the Continent, for example “in the strikes by tin-plate workers in Wolverhampton in 1851 and Birmingham in 1853, and gas-stokers, bakers, cigar-makers, tailors and pianoforte-makers in London.”²⁹ In some cases their efforts were successfully foiled. “The London type-founders on strike in 1850 appealed to the Paris society, who agreed to stop men being recruited, and circularized all type-foundries in France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland to this effect.”³⁰

The establishment of the First International (the International Working Men’s Association, or IWMA) was to some extent an outgrowth of this development. In 1863, a number of English trade unionists drew up an address, *To the Workmen of France from the Working Men of England*, which contained the following statement:

A fraternity of peoples is highly necessary for the cause of labour, for we find that whenever we attempt to better our social conditions by reducing the hours of toil, or by raising the price of labour, our employers threaten us with bringing over Frenchmen, Germans, Belgians, and others to do our work at a reduced rate of wages; and we are sorry to say that this has been done, though not from any desire on the part of our continental brethren to injure us, but through a want of regular and systematic communications

²⁷ Merriman, *Red City*, pp. 112–4.

²⁸ Prothero, *Radical Artisans*, p. 116.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

between the industrious classes of all countries, which we hope to see speedily effected, as our principle is to bring up the wages of the ill-paid to as near a level as possible with that of those who are better remunerated, and not to allow our employers to play us off one against the other, and so drag us down to the lowest possible condition, suitable to their avaricious bargaining.³¹

Eight months later, the existence of the IWMA was a fact. Its first piece of activism concerned an attempt at strike-breaking in 1866. In April of that year, the London tailors organized themselves, demanding a wage increase of a penny an hour. The employers responded with a lock-out, and tried to recruit strike-breakers in Germany, which they had done on previous occasions. The IWMA helped to block their efforts in Hamburg and Berlin, thus contributing to the successful outcome of the tailors' action.³²

It is important to note that all cross-border solidarity in these cases was at a *sub-national* level. Because no national trade unions as yet existed, international contacts were always between local organizations in different countries. It was in fact a "sub-national internationalism."

Third stage: transition (1870s–90s)

In the early 1870s, the previous form of collective action faced increasing difficulties. Firstly, British trade unions were gradually managing to consolidate their operations at the national level as well. Beginning with the foundation of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in 1851, amalgamated unionism strode forward. In the leading industrial cities of Glasgow, Sheffield, Liverpool, Edinburgh, etc., and in London, permanent Trade Councils were established between 1858 and 1867, which in turn led to the foundation of the Trades' Union Council (TUC) in 1868. At about the same time and within the framework of the integration of the working class in bourgeois society, the labor movement gained some government recognition. The franchise was extended by the Reform Act of 1867; the Trade Union Act, improving the legal status of the unions, was in force from 1871, followed by an Amending Act in 1876. The overall effect proved detrimental to an active British inter-

³¹ *Beehive*, December 5, 1863.

³² Prothero, *Radical Artisans*, p. 116.

est in the IWMA, which by about 1870 became lukewarm anyway.³³ In other North Atlantic countries, the process of national consolidation continued, be it with some delay. After Switzerland and Canada, most other countries in the region followed within a few decades (Table 12.1).

Table 12.1
Founding years of some national trade-union confederations

1868	Great Britain	1898	Sweden
1880	Switzerland		Denmark
1883	Canada		Hungary
1886	USA		Belgium
1888	Spain	1903	Serbia
1890	Germany	1904	Bulgaria
1893	Austria	1906	The Netherlands
	The Netherlands		Italy
1895	France		Romania
1897	Czech Lands	1907	Finland
		1911	Greece

Another challenge in the early 1870s was a reversal of the upward trend of capitalism, inaugurating an era of slower economic growth. The following years up to about 1895 can be described as a period of retarded economic growth, stagnation and recession. A downturn appeared in the development of the British economy; the German and American economies were in a severe crisis; the French economy of the 'eighties was also in serious trouble. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 the working classes moreover entered into a closer relationship with their national governments. The intrusion of a nationalist and chauvinist attitude among ever-expanding social strata of workers was to a large extent the result of a conscious integration policy – expressed in primary education, military service, public ceremonies, mass production of public monuments, etc. – which, of course, appealed to certain desires of the working classes.³⁴

³³ "The membership of affiliated British trade unions never reached more than about 50,000, possibly less, out of a total trade-union membership at the time of perhaps 800,000. The unions which joined, such as the bricklayers, tailors, shoemakers, cabinetmakers etc., were mostly in declining or vulnerable handicraft trades, mainly in London [...] Nor were these very assiduous in attendance or payment of subscriptions. Interest soon dwindled and affiliations ceased." Musson, *British Trade Unions*, p. 58.

³⁴ van der Linden, "National Integration of European Working Classes."

This combination of circumstances undermined sub-national internationalism, as indicated by the decline of the First International after 1872. What followed was a transitional period in which the old form of internationalism crumbled away, while a new form was still no further than an embryonic stage.

Fourth stage: national internationalism (1890s–1960s)

Around the turn of the twentieth century, when the national consolidation of trade unions in the North Atlantic region was already far advanced, a new stage, that of nation-based internationalism, emerged. International cooperation now seemed to grow more or less as a matter of course out of practical activities, in three main areas.

Firstly, there was the area of workers in *highly skilled (artisan) occupations* who were internationally mobile. Amongst printers, for example, there were long-standing cross-national relationships, especially in certain regions sharing a common language (e.g. the French region comprising France, parts of Belgium and Switzerland); they had attended the conferences of fraternal trade organizations in other countries as early as the 1860s. Issues like the *viaticum* (travel money) loomed large in those years.³⁵

International migration was a second area of internationalist activity. Countries with fast-growing economies attracted hundreds of thousands of immigrants from less developed parts of the world. Chinese and Japanese migrated to California, Poles and Italians to Germany, etc. Trade unions in the recipient countries tried either to organize the new arrivals, or to exclude them from the national labor market. The German federation of construction workers for example sought to organize Italian immigrants, sometimes successfully.³⁶

A third area was *international transport*. Here the labor market and the labor process were inherently international, which facilitated collaboration. The tendency towards internationalism was particularly marked in this section of the working class, as shown by the large-scale international transport strike of 1911, and by the fact that branches of the British seamen's union (NAS&FU)

³⁵ Chauvet, *Ouvriers du livre en France*, pp. 632–4; idem, *Ouvriers du livre et du journal*, p. 245; Musson, *Typographical Association*, pp. 305–8.

³⁶ Schäfer, "Italienische 'Gastarbeiter'," pp. 208–10; Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerbeschäftigung*, pp. 68–70; del Fabbro, *Transalpini*.

existed briefly in the early 1890s in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.³⁷

The first cross-border organizations set up were international trade secretariats, i.e. federations of national trade unions representing different occupational groups. An important stimulus was the founding of the Second International in 1889 as a cooperative mechanism for socialists (and anarchists until 1896). The congresses held by the new International were important meeting places for trade union leaders from different countries.

Table 12.2
Founding years of International Trade Secretariats

1889	Typographers and printers	1898	Foundry workers
	Hatters	1900	Carpenters
	Cigar makers and tobacco workers	1902	Stone workers
	Shoemakers	1903	Construction workers
1890	Miners	1904	Wood workers
1892	Glass workers	1905	Porcelain and china workers
1893	Tailors	1906	Public service workers
	Metal workers	1907	Book binders
	Railway workers		Hairdressers
1894	Textile workers	1908	Factory workers
	Furriers		Hotel workers
1896	Lithographers	1910	Post office workers
	Brewery workers	1911	Painters
1897	Transport workers		

Source: Dreyfus, "Emergence of an International Trade Union Organization," pp. 36–9.

Although there are publications on the history of some of these trade secretariats,³⁸ little is known about most of them. Many of them existed only on paper, or confined their activities to correspondence with member organizations. Trade unions affiliated to the secretariats were initially almost exclusively European and, to a lesser extent, North American.

³⁷ Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, pp. 51–2.

³⁸ Herrmann, *Geschichte des Internationalen Bergarbeiterverbandes*; Koch-Baumgarten, *Gewerkschaftsinternationalismus*; Carl and Köbele, *Auf der Suche nach Solidarität*; Kulemann, "Internationale Organisation der Buchdrucker"; Nyström and Rütters, *History of the IUF*; Rebérioux, "Naissance du Secrétariat typographique international"; Reinalda, *International Transportworkers Federation*; Rütters, *Chancen internationaler Gewerkschaftspolitik*; idem, "Histoire et développement des secrétariats professionnels internationaux"; idem, *Internationale Bergarbeiterverband*; Schneider, *Anfänge*; Schnorbach, *Lehrer im internationalen Gewerkschaftsbund*; Simon, *Internationale Transportarbeiter-Föderation*.

With the establishment of the international trade secretariats well under way, international cooperation between national trade union confederations gathered pace. In 1903, the International Secretariat of National Trade Union Confederations (ISNTUC) was established. Following preparatory meetings of trade unionists from various countries in Copenhagen (1901) and Stuttgart (1902), an international centre was set up in Dublin in 1903 under the aegis of Carl Legien, the leader of the German trade union movement. At the urging of the AFL, it became the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in 1913. The ISNTUC and the IFTU was primarily focused on the North Atlantic region until well into the twentieth century.³⁹

The years between 1889 and 1903 were of exceptional importance for the rise of an international trade union movement, because the structures devised in those years persisted, largely unchanged, throughout the twentieth century. Labor economist James Scoville rightly observes that “the initial structure of the labor movement exercises an impact on the future course of its evolution.” He attributes this to the persistence of ideology formed at the beginning, the survival imperative of institutions, and the labor movement’s influence on the surrounding society, which subsequently reverberates on the movement.⁴⁰

So in fact a course of events occurring a century ago endowed the international trade union movement enduringly with its characteristic dual structure of international trade secretariats and international confederations (with changing names). Yet it is not altogether the most logical structure. The international trade secretariats could have formed an international federation of their own. Had they done so, only one international umbrella organization would exist today, an arrangement that would probably have been more effective. Reorganizing the movement along these lines was indeed suggested by a few individuals (e.g. the Dutch labor leader Edo Fimmen in the 1920s) but to no avail. The forces of institutional inertia prevailed. Why did the international trade secretariats not form their own federation at the outset? One possible explanation is that they were focused on directly economic matters (the worldwide problems of certain industries), whereas the international confederations were more politically oriented. The activities of the secretari-

³⁹ Van Goethem, *Amsterdam International*.

⁴⁰ Scoville, “Some Determinants of the Structure of Labor Movements,” p. 74.

ats and the confederations nevertheless often overlapped, causing tensions between them.

While the structure consolidated at the beginning of the twentieth century remained unchanged for many decades, several significant shifts did occur over the years *within* the structure. Prior to the First World War, Germany occupied the dominant position. In 1913, the headquarters of at least seventeen of the twenty-eight trade secretariats were in that country. The major exceptions were the miners and textile workers, whose headquarters were in Manchester.⁴¹ After 1918, Great Britain and the USA assumed the leading role. Whereas the German trade union movement had stood more or less “outside” its own state, in the post-war years the TUC and AFL(-CIO) entered into close collaboration with their respective states. For a while, collaboration between the US labor federation and the US government and big business was so close, that it was likened by some to a corporative structure, a *blocco storico* à la Antonio Gramsci.⁴² During the Second World War, the British TUC moved toward “a close relationship with the government in developing labour policy in the colonies,” often emulating the enlightened extension of a colonial power in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.⁴³ As Peter Weiler notes:

TUC activities [...] helped to perpetuate the British empire. In part, this effect was unintentional. The TUC urged colonial trade unions to follow the same moderate reformist path that it did at home, although reformism produced different results in the colonies than it did in Britain. British workers had at least the political possibility to change their society while colonial workers did not. Thus although reformism was not endorsed as part of a calculated strategy to preserve British rule, it inevitably had that effect. On another level, however, this effect was intended because British labor leaders accepted the idea of Britain’s imperial mission and rejected any violent attempts to end it.⁴⁴

In the course of the “national” phase of internationalism, the number of international trade secretariats was swelled by additional umbrella organizations, and dwindled as the result of amalgamation. The social-reformist

⁴¹ Dreyfus, “Emergence of an International Trade Union Organization,” pp. 36–9.

⁴² Cox, “Labor and Hegemony.”

⁴³ Davies, “Politics of the TUC’s Colonial Policy,” p. 24.

⁴⁴ Weiler, “Forming Responsible Trade Unions,” p. 384.

mainstream of the IFTU and its successor after 1949, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), was in time confronted with a number of rivals. They included not only a syndicalist International calling itself, like the First International, the IWMA (since 1922) but also the communist Red International of Labor Unions (RILU, 1921–37) and the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU, since 1920).⁴⁵ In 1945, The IFTU joined forces with the communist trade unions in the WFTU, but their alliance ended with the onset of the Cold War. The ICFTU was founded in 1949, while the WFTU fell under communist domination.⁴⁶

In the inter-war years, interest in trade unionism increased in countries within the periphery and semi-periphery of the capitalist world economy. The RILU aimed to put down roots in those regions almost from the moment of its foundation in 1921. It was followed in this some years later, from about 1928, by the IFTU, in part to counter the rival communist organization, and to gain more influence in the colonial and semi-colonial countries.⁴⁷ Another factor was the concurrent growth of the labor movement in the Third World, making the question of what course it would pursue all the more urgent. The IFCTU followed the same path somewhat later. Until the Second World War, the IFCTU was solely oriented toward Europe, but this changed of necessity after 1945, in part because several of its former member organizations had disbanded or amalgamated with trade unions encompassing all ideologies (e.g. in Germany and Austria). The IFCTU set up a reasonably successful regional organization in Latin America (1954), and recruited support in Vietnam and Africa as well.⁴⁸

The IFTU and ICFTU were both dominated by the British TUC and the American AFL(-CIO), which gave them the reputation of “allies of colonialism and neo-colonialism” in the Third World. These suspicions were not entirely unfounded, because for many years the ICFTU tried to propagate a certain “model” of “proper unionism.” One of the aims formulated at the

⁴⁵ Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves*; idem, “Syndicalist Internationalism before World War II”; Pasture, *Histoire du syndicalisme chrétien international*; Tosstorff, *Profintern*. The IFCTU became the World Confederation of Labor (WCL) in 1968, and merged with the ICFTU in 2006, out of which the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) emerged.

⁴⁶ Carew, “False Dawn”; idem, “Towards a Free Trade Union Centre.”

⁴⁷ Post, *Revolution's Other World*, p. 49.

⁴⁸ Wahlers, *CLAT*; Pasture, *Histoire du syndicalisme chrétien international*.

time of its founding in 1949 was “to provide assistance in the establishment, maintenance and development of trade union organizations, particularly in economically and socially under-developed countries.”⁴⁹ It was assumed that “proper” trade unions would remain fully independent of political parties and states; concentrate on collective bargaining and lobbying for social security legislation; defend and promote parliamentary democracy. But these principles often proved difficult to apply in the so-called Third World.⁵⁰ Much later, Adolf Sturmthal observed that especially in the Anglo-American countries (whose trade unions dominated the ICFTU) there had been “a naïve belief in the universal applicability of some form of collective bargaining.”⁵¹ He listed a series of conditions for “a genuine collective bargaining system,” including “a legal and political system permitting the existence and functioning of reasonably *free* labor organizations” (a condition that was fully compatible with the early ICFTU views) and the requirement that “unions be more or less stable, reasonably well organized, and fairly evenly matched with the employers in bargaining strength.”⁵²

Effective unions have rarely if ever been organized by ‘non-committed’ workers, i.e. casual workers who change jobs frequently, return periodically to their native village, and have no specific industrial skill, even of a very simple kind. Yet even fully committed industrial workers with little or no skill are capable of engaging in effective collective bargaining only under certain conditions which are rarely found. In most (though by no means all) newly industrializing countries, large excess supplies of common labor are available for nonagricultural work. Not only are unskilled workers rarely capable of forming unions of their own under such conditions; if they succeed in doing so, their unions have little or no bargaining power.⁵³

⁴⁹ *Official Report*, p. 226.

⁵⁰ Sometimes they also seemed insincere. As regards the emphasis placed by the British TUC in the 1950s on the non-political nature of “proper” trade unionism, Davies has correctly observed: “Some of these sentiments sound odd in the context of the history of the British trade union movement, which had supported a general strike, maintained a close association with the Labour Party, and in its annual congresses regularly debated resolutions on a large number of issues outside the field of industrial relations” Davies, “Politics of the TUC’s Colonial Policy,” p. 26.

⁵¹ Sturmthal, “Industrial Relations Strategies,” p. 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 10. See also Chapter 11.

Fifth stage: a new transition (since the 1960s)

Since the 1960s, the international trade union movement has been confronted with many new challenges which together undermined the old model of “national internationalism.” Significant changes include the decolonization process; the new transnational division of labor; the emergence of regionalism and trading blocs, such as the European Union, NAFTA, ASEAN and Mercosur; the collapse of communist governments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; the rise of feminist movements; the growth of wage labor in the periphery and semi-periphery, both expanding the so-called “informal sector” with breathtaking speed and increasing the influence of women; and the digital electronics revolution.

The following major challenges currently facing international trade unionism are worth noting:

- The impressive growth of *foreign direct investment* in the core countries and the semi-periphery of the world economy, and of transnational corporations. In response to this development, World Corporation Councils were set up in the mid-1960s, notably in the chemical and automobile industries. Although many trade union militants had high expectations of these new bodies, they have been less effective than anticipated, because of conflicting interests between employees in different countries.⁵⁴
- The formation of *international trading blocs*. They led to a certain equalization of legal and political parameters, so that founding transnational trade union structures within each bloc was an obvious step. In NAFTA, this collaboration is not evolving primarily at the top level of national trade union confederations, but at the sub-national or branch level. In many cases, institutions other than trade unions (such as religious and human rights organizations) are also partners in projects of this kind. Examples include the 1980s Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladores, the Comité Frontizero de Obreras, and La Mujer Obrera.⁵⁵ Equally noteworthy in this context is the Council of Ford Workers, founded by the United Auto Workers.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Bendiner, *International Labour Affairs*; Olle and Wolter, “World Market Competition”; Tudyka, “Weltkonzernräte in der Krise.”

⁵⁵ Armbruster, “Cross-National Labor Organizing Strategies,” pp. 77–8, 80–2; also Borgers, “Challenges of Economic Globalization,” pp. 81–5; Carr, “Globalization from Below.”

⁵⁶ Bina and Davis, “Transnational Capital,” pp. 165–6.

- The formation of *new supranational institutions* to regulate the dynamics of the “new” capitalism. The foremost example is the World Trade Organization established in 1995.
- *Social and economic changes in the periphery and semi-periphery* of the capitalist world economy, facilitating the emergence of new, often militant, workers’ movements (“social movement unions”) in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines, Taiwan and South Korea.
- *New forms of rank-and-file trade unionism* outside the established channels, emerging since the 1970s, with international connections at the shop-floor level “bypassing altogether the secretariats, which they see as too often beholden to the bureaucracies of their various national affiliates.”⁵⁷ A well-known example is the Transnationals Information Exchange (TIE), a centre in which many research and activist labor groups exchange information on TNCs. Another example is the “counter foreign policy” existing since the early 1980s in the AFL-CIO.⁵⁸
- *Joint actions against TNCs* conducted over the past decade by trade unions representing particular occupations in different countries (e.g. coal miners, electrical workers).⁵⁹ When the French car-maker Renault announced the closure of its Belgian factory in February 1997, solidarity strikes and demonstrations were organized in France, Spain, Portugal and Slovenia, giving birth to the term “Euro-strike.”
- Spurred by the uneven development of trade unions in core and periphery countries, a growing tendency exists for international trade secretariats to engage in the *direct recruitment of members in the periphery*. (witness e.g. the activities of the secretariat for the service sector Union Network International, relating to IT specialists in India).⁶⁰
- The increasing number of activities carried out by *non-governmental organizations* (NGOs) representing “stakeholders” – activities that should, in theory, be the responsibility of the international trade union movement (for example, the struggle to regulate and abolish child labor).

⁵⁷ Herod, “Labor as an Agent of Globalization,” p. 184.

⁵⁸ Spalding, “Two Latin American Foreign Policies.”

⁵⁹ Herod, “Practice of International Labor Solidarity,” p. 342; Armbruster, “Cross Border Labor Organizing.”

⁶⁰ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8–9 September 2001.

All these challenges nowadays force the international trade union movement to review its aims and activities. Such a review is made all the more necessary because the changing composition of the world's wage-earning working class is highlighting the relative weakness of the movement globally. In 2008, the affiliated membership of the ITUC (a merger of the ICFTU and the WCL – the successor of the Christian ICFTU) stood at some 168 million workers, i.e. between five and ten per cent of the world's wage and salary earners. That is to say, the huge majority of wage-earners in the world are not even reached by the traditional trade union movement. It would of course be wrong to say that this majority lacks representative organizations altogether – alternative organizational models have sprung up here and there – but this reality certainly illustrates the shortcomings of the present situation.

Speculations about the future

The periodization I suggest can be related to “long waves” of faster and slower growth in the history of capitalism, as pictured in Table 12.3.

Table 12.3
Long waves and types of trade-union internationalism

1825–48	Down	Demarcation of “Working Class”		Geographical Focus on North-Atlantic Region
1848–73	Up	Sub-National Internationalism	British Hegemony	
1873–94	Down	First Transition		
1894–1917	Up	National Internationalism	German Hegemony	
1917–40	Down		British-American (+ Temporary Russian) Hegemony	
1940–68	Up			
1968–	Down	Second Transition		

It is obvious from this tabulation that international trade unionism does not exactly follow the same rhythms as the global accumulation of capital. For instance, hegemonic influence within the international labor movement is not synchronic with hegemonic influence within the world system; and national internationalism was dominant during only one and a half long waves.⁶¹

In the light of the developments over the past hundred and fifty years, I think that the current prolonged transitional phase can lead to an entirely new stage, that of *transnational internationalism*. The contours of this new form of trade union internationalism are still vague, but several minimum prerequisites are already clearly apparent:

- The target group has to be demarcated anew. The first-phase demarcation of the working classes was extremely narrow and Eurocentric, and needs to be revised and expanded.⁶² A considerable number of trade unions in the periphery and semi-periphery of the world economy have now abandoned the old demarcation, and recruit all kinds of subaltern workers.
- There can be no doubt that the newly-defined target group will no longer be dominated by white male workers in the North Atlantic region, but include women and people of color, many in forms of self-employment, precarious jobs, or debt bondage. Trade unions will need to change their operations drastically to assist these “new” workers effectively in advancing their interests. Doing so implies ending the centrality of collective bargaining strategies in trade union work.⁶³
- The dual structure of the international trade union movement – collaboration of national confederations plus international trade secretariats (which are nowadays called “Global Union Federations”) – is a problematic relic of the past which is likely to be discarded. Probably the best option would be a new unitary structure facilitating the inclusion of the “new” target groups in the international trade secretariats.

⁶¹ My periodization does not imply that sub-national and national internationalism are mutually exclusive. Cross-border solidarity can take various forms. For instance, the international solidarity with the strike staged by the Liverpool dockers in the 1990s was to a large extent sub-national. See Castree, “Geographic Scale and Grass-Roots Internationalism.”

⁶² See also Antunes, *Sentidos do trabalho*, pp. 101–17.

⁶³ See Hensman, “Organizing Against the Odds.”

- The somewhat autocratic approach still prevailing in the international trade union movement will need to be replaced by a democratic approach, and greater participation of the rank-and-file workers. The possibilities offered by the internet and mobile phones are a positive contribution to a renewed structure of this kind.⁶⁴
- While lobbying governments and transnational organizations has to date been the principal activity of international trade union bodies (with the notable exception of the anti-apartheid campaign of the 1980s), and efforts are made to cultivate the goodwill of governments,⁶⁵ effective action requires much greater effort in active measures, such as boycotts, strikes, and so on, which in turn demands a substantial strengthening of internal structures. As Dimitris Stevis rightly observes, international labor organizations are “not simply sleeping giants, but fundamentally weak intersocietal federations.”⁶⁶

The question remains whether the existing international trade union movement can meet these challenges. During the first transitional phase of the late nineteenth century, the difficulties were so immense that the old organizations simply collapsed. Only a quarter of a century later, i.e. after a gap spanning a whole generation, did it become possible again to build new international organizations. Of course, unions in the “sub-national” phase were often still extremely fragile, and lacked organizational experience. In the current transitional phase, there is more chance that existing organizational forms will manage to adapt.

However, it seems likely that the emerging transnational internationalism will be a difficult, protracted process, interspersed with failed experiments and moments of deep crisis. Organizational structures, customs and habits persisting across a whole century are not easily changed, at least not until it becomes very clear in practice that change is absolutely necessary. Moreover, it is very unlikely that new structures and patterns will be shaped through reforms from above, via the central leadership. If history teaches us anything in this respect, it is that trade union structures almost never develop smoothly

⁶⁴ Lee, *Labour Movement and the Internet*.

⁶⁵ Greenfield, “ICFTU and the Politics of Compromise.”

⁶⁶ Stevis, “International Labor Organizations,” p. 66.

by means of “piecemeal engineering”. Their characteristics emerge mostly in response to real conflicts, or as an outcome of risky experiments in adverse or wholly new situations. Pressure from below (through competitive networks, alternative action models, etc.) will be a very important factor in deciding that outcome.

What kinds of pressure there will be, and whether they will be sufficient to bring about major positive changes, no one can say yet with certainty.

Insights from adjacent disciplines

Chapter Thirteen

World-system theory

In September 1976, the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations opened its doors at the State University of New York – Binghamton. The new institution went off to a flying start; after just three months, it presented its “Proposed Research Programs” in a substantial booklet. In the summer of 1977, the first issue of its journal *Review* was published. That same year, a section on the “Political Economy of World-Systems” (PEWS) inspired by the Braudel Center was established within the American Sociological Association. The PEWS section has held annual conferences and published their proceedings ever since. From 1979, the Center has also sponsored a book series called “Studies in Modern Capitalism” together with the *Maison des sciences de l’homme* of Paris, published by Cambridge University Press.

All this tempestuous activity was made possible by the fact that its director Immanuel Wallerstein, the moving spirit of the new institution, had been at work since 1967 on its most important theoretical foundations.¹ Key concepts of his “world-system

¹ The following works provide information about Wallerstein’s intellectual career: Jewsiewicki, “African Prism of Immanuel Wallerstein”; Lentini, “Immanuel Wallerstein”; and Goldfrank, “Paradigm Regained?.”

theory” had already been presented in a number of his scholarly articles.² His magnum opus, *The Modern World-System* – published in 1974 as the first part of what became a projected four-volume work – was a learned and innovative study in which the new concepts were put to work.

Wallerstein was driven by his distaste for “the often-unquestioned a priori assumptions” that have reigned in the social sciences since the mid-nineteenth century. His own research and that of the Braudel Center associates signify a “protest” against this old “meta-paradigm”.³ Thus, the world-system approach draws together five schools of thought: Marx’s vision of capitalism as a global reality from its very beginnings; the historiography of the *Annales* school (and above all of Fernand Braudel himself); sociological thinking about social systems analyzing the mutual coherence and functionality of all their elements; “long wave” theory in economics; and “dependency theory”, which postulates relations of structural dependency between the “periphery” of the capitalist world economy and its “core” (metropolitan) regions.

The essentials of the world-system approach have been described already many times in the literature, and are nowadays textbook knowledge. In brief, it is argued that since the sixteenth century the European (capitalist) world system has extended to the whole world. The system is characterized by *one* international division of labor and *multiple* political territories (states). It is an *interdependent* whole consisting of a core, a periphery exploited by the core through unequal exchange in world trade, and a semi-periphery with an economic location halfway between the core and periphery. The system is also historically *dynamic*; upward mobility occurs through which a peripheral region can over time become a semi-peripheral or core region, but there is also downward mobility. Within the core region, fierce rivalry occurs among states striving for global hegemony and influence. On three occasions, one core state succeeded in becoming *hegemonic* in world commerce: the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States after 1945. The world system develops in “long cycles” of rise and fall. It is *capitalist*, i.e. its economy is based on market production for

² Wallerstein, “Three Paths of National Development”; idem, “Imperialism and Capitalism”; idem, “Dependence in an Interdependent World”; idem, “Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System”; idem, “Class-Formation in the Capitalist World Economy”; idem, “Failed Transitions.”

³ Wallerstein, “World-Systems Analysis.”

profit. Since the nineteenth century, virtually every corner of the world has been integrated into the system, even including apparently feudal or “socialist” regions.

This grand theory became one of the most discussed contributions to the social sciences in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The first volume of *The Modern World-System* stimulated many responses from leading scholars,⁴ and in subsequent writings, Wallerstein often tried to incorporate their criticisms where they struck him as relevant. In the second volume of *The Modern World-System* (1980), for example, he considers several objections which Theda Skocpol and Robert Brenner made to the first volume.⁵ Many of his colleagues and students have also made adjustments, broadened or rethought the theory. The accumulated literature broadly sharing the perspective of “world-system thought,” as I describe it, is nowadays very extensive but in no sense homogeneous in theoretical positions.⁶ The overarching vision permits considerable flexibility and pluralism among its supporters.

Perhaps the most important objection advanced by its critics is that the approach is anachronistic: it projects characteristics of nineteenth- and twentieth-century world capitalism back on the three preceding centuries, or even earlier. International trade with colonies was indeed one of the foundations of economic growth in Western Europe, but only from the late eighteenth century on. “Between 1450 and 1750, historians now generally agree, core-periphery trade was neither extensive nor unusually profitable, and as few industries relied upon imported raw materials, foreign trade exerted little

⁴ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System I*. The most important reviews were probably, in chronological order: Skocpol, “Wallerstein’s World Capitalist System”; Dupuy and Fitzgerald, “Contribution to the Critique of the World-System Perspective”; Brenner, “Origins of Capitalist Development”; Murray, “Recent Views on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism,” especially pp. 73f.; Gourevitch, “International System and Regime Formation”; Modelski, “Long Cycle of Global Politics”; Hunt, “Rise of Feudalism in Eastern Europe”; Worsley, “One World or Three”; Zolberg, “Origins of the Modern World System”; Aronowitz, “Metatheoretical Critique.”

⁵ For an extended account see: Garst, “Wallerstein and His Critics.” In general, Wallerstein and his colleagues have always had an open-minded attitude, which is visible in the critical responses that they have published in their own journal. The editorial policy statement of the *Review* says: “We invite contributions of articles that fall within the general perspective, very loosely defined, of the journal, or articles that are specifically critical of the perspective.”

⁶ In this chapter I do not discuss the competing world-system theories that have been formulated since the late 1970s. On this topic see e.g.: Thompson, *Contending Approaches to World-System Analysis*.

pressure toward specialization in the domestic economies.”⁷ Partly for this reason, Wallerstein’s notion of “unequal exchange” is polyvalent.⁸ The theory’s anachronistic character also means that it relies on an overly broad, subjective definition of “capitalism,” namely market-oriented production for profit. On top of that, the whole construction is structuralist and functionalist in character, and tends to reduce political processes to economic ones.⁹ But I do not want to discuss all these objections in detail here. As Steve Stern rightly comments: “Wallerstein’s work raises provocative and weighty issues and contributes specific historical and theoretical insights whose value should not be overlooked even if one concludes that the general paradigm is fundamentally flawed.”¹⁰ Undeniably Wallerstein and other scholars associated with the Fernand Braudel Center have had an exceptionally stimulating impact on numerous fields of study across three decades.

In this chapter, my aim is to show how their contributions can be useful for the further development of Global Labor History, a labor history that studies labor relations and labor movements from a transnational or even transcontinental perspective. In fact, supporters of the world-system approach have published many studies on labor movements, workers and other “objective” proletarians since 1976. I think these contributions provide new insights from which labor and working class historians can benefit, even if they do not, or not completely, subscribe to the theoretical assumptions of the world-system approach.

⁷ DuPlessis, “Partial Transition to World-Systems Analysis,” here p. 20. See also: O’Brien, “European Economic Development”; Wallerstein, “Comment on O’Brien”; O’Brien and Prados de la Escosura, “Costs and Benefits of European Imperialism.”

⁸ Some of Wallerstein’s colleagues admit this. See also the far-reaching criticisms in Busch, “Mythen über den Weltmarkt.”

⁹ These objections can be found in e.g. Brenner, “Origins of Capitalist Development”; Aronowitz, “Metatheoretical Critique”; Zolberg, “‘World’ and ‘System’”; Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation*, pp. 29–45; Zeitlin, *Civil Wars in Chile*, pp. 222–37.

¹⁰ Stern, “Reply,” p. 889, note. Compare Skocpol’s hypothesis that “the true contribution of *The Modern World-System* will lie, not in the proliferation of empirical research based uncritically upon it, but in the theoretical controversies and advances it can spark among its friends.” Skocpol, “Wallerstein’s World Capitalist System,” p. 1076.

The coherence of “modes of labor control”¹¹

With characteristic boldness, Wallerstein drew up a new definition of the proletariat. In his eyes, proletarians are all those “who yield part of the value they have created to others” and “In this sense there exists [sic] in the capitalist mode of production only bourgeois and proletarians. The polarity is structural.”¹² This approach “eliminates as a *defining* characteristic of the proletarian the payment of *wages* to the producer.”¹³ The key criterion is that labor products are *commodified*, and he recognizes that this commodification can occur in many different ways. A diversity of “modes of labor control” therefore exists within the modern world system. Wallerstein distinguishes several modes of this kind, including slavery (a “kind of indefinitely lasting work obligation of one person to another from which the worker may not unilaterally withdraw”);¹⁴ “coerced cash-crop labor” (i.e. “a system of agricultural labor control wherein the peasants are required by some legal process enforced by the state to labor at least part of the time on a large domain producing some product for sale on the world market”),¹⁵ self-employment and share-cropping.

The many different kinds of proletarians can be grouped in two categories: those who must relinquish *all* the value that they produce, and those who must relinquish *part* of that value. Both these groups can be further subdivided into those who in return receive nothing, and those who receive goods, money, or goods plus money. In this way, a matrix can be constructed with eight categories, only one of which consists of “typical” wage laborers (Table 13.1):

¹¹ As far as I know, the concept “modes of labor control” appears only in Wallerstein’s “middle period,” from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. In later writings he no longer used this concept (it is not to be found in e.g. volume III of *The Modern World-System*). See also Martin, “Global Social Structure?,” p. 244.

¹² Wallerstein, “Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-Economy,” p. 289.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, III, p. 164.

¹⁵ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, I, p. 91.

Table 13.1
Wallerstein's eight proletarian types

	Nothing in return	Goods in return	Money in return	Goods + money in return
Yield part of the value created				
Yield all of the value created			Classical worker	

Source: Wallerstein, "Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-Economy," pp. 289–90. Note: Wallerstein himself did not fill in the boxes.

Because economic relations vary between the core, the periphery and the semi-periphery, the combinations of modes of labor control that prevail in each of these spheres also vary. The core areas have integrated economies with relatively capital-intensive production and high levels of productivity, in which wage labor and medium-sized yeomen predominate.¹⁶ The periphery features export-driven commerce with relatively weakly developed domestic markets and highly labor-intensive production, in which slavery and coerced cash-cropping labor predominate. The semi-periphery trades with both core areas and the periphery, and has on average moderately capital-intensive and moderately labor-intensive production; share-cropping among other forms plays a major role.¹⁷ Variations in the predominant modes of labor control are thus an essential feature of the capitalist world system: "Free labor is indeed a defining feature of capitalism, but not free labor throughout the productive enterprises. Free labor is the form of labor control used for skilled work in core countries whereas coerced labor is used for less skilled work in peripheral areas. The combination thereof is the essence of capitalism. When labor is everywhere free, we shall have socialism."¹⁸

It is, above all, the market mechanism of supply and demand which determines the specific "mix" of modes of labor control in a given region. "It is always a choice [for the employer] about the optimal combination of machin-

¹⁶ Wallerstein, "Three Paths of National Development," p. 38.

¹⁷ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, I; idem, "Three Paths of National Development." See also Chase-Dunn and Rubinson, "Toward a Structural Perspective on the World-System," pp. 456–7.

¹⁸ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, I, p. 127.

ery (dead labor) and living labor."¹⁹ The employer considers which alternative is "optimal and politically possible *in the short run*": (a) wage labor, (b) coerced cash-crop labor, (c) slavery, (d) share-cropping, (e) tenancy or (f) additional machinery.²⁰ Although Wallerstein never *systematically* explained how employers select their favorite modes of labor control, various passages in his work provide indications:

- He argues, for example, that tenancy is in principle more profitable than share-cropping (no supervision costs, no problem with the peasant's work incentives). But tenants "have fixed contracts and gain at moments of inflation, at least to the extent that the contracts are relatively long-term. Of course, the reverse is true when the market declines." Tenancy is thus riskier for the landowner than share-cropping. "It follows that sharecropping is most likely to be considered in areas of specialized agriculture where the risks of variance outweigh the transaction costs."²¹
- When labor supply is plentiful, "share-cropping is probably more profitable than coerced cash-cropping." However, "Although sharecropping had the disadvantage, compared to coerced cash-cropping, of greater difficulty in supervision, it had the advantage of encouraging the peasant's efforts to increase productivity, provided of course the peasant would continue to work for the seignior without legal compulsion. In short, when labor is plentiful, sharecropping is probably more profitable than coerced cash-cropping."²²
- Coerced cash-crop labor is in turn cheaper than slavery. The employer must pay an "initial outlay" for slaves *and* "the coerced cash-crop workers and their cousins produced part of their 'wages' in the form of food crops on land outside the control of the employer, which were thereupon deducted from the labor costs of the employer." Therefore: "The total of the recurrent cost of labor was *higher* if one used slave labor than if one used coerced cash-crop labor."²³ Slavery was for this reason a last resort, only introduced on a large scale when coerced cash-crop labor was not feasible for one reason or another.

¹⁹ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, II, p. 174, note.

²⁰ Compare *ibid.*

²¹ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, I, p. 105.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

- Wage labor is proportionally even more expensive, because wages for free wage labor must cover the full costs of providing for proletarian families, whereas in other modes the proletarians themselves pay part of the costs of keeping themselves alive. “[If] the wage-income work is but a small proportion of total household income, the employer of the wage worker is able to pay a *subminimal* hourly wage, forcing the other ‘components’ of total household income to ‘make up’ the difference between the wage paid and the minimum needed for survival. Thus the work required to obtain supra-minimal income from subsistence labor or petty commodity production in order to ‘average out’ at a minimum level for the whole household serves in effect as a ‘subsidy’ for the employer of the wage laborer.”²⁴

Capitalists therefore resort to hiring wage labor only if they cannot mobilize labor power in any other way. That is “why wage labor has *never* been the exclusive, and until recently not even the principal, form of labor in the capitalist world-economy.”²⁵ One important reason why employers have made use of wage labor despite its high cost is *skill*. “[More] skilled labor can insist on less juridical coercion.”²⁶ This explains why free wage labor is dominant in capital- (and thus skill-)intensive branches of the world economy. Slavery by contrast is convenient for unskilled labor processes with a “small *per capita* profit,” which is compensated by “the large quantity of production.”²⁷

- The “overall world-wide *percentage* of wage labor as a form of labor has been steadily increasing throughout the history of the capitalist world-economy.”²⁸ Wallerstein explains this as an effect of regularly occurring bottlenecks of “inadequate world demand”: through the transformation of non-waged labor into waged labor “the portion of produced value the producer keeps” increases, resulting in an increase of world demand.²⁹

²⁴ Wallerstein, “Marx and History,” p. 130.

²⁵ Wallerstein, “Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-Economy,” p. 290.

²⁶ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, I, p. 101.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁸ Wallerstein, “Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-Economy,” p. 291.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 290. Wallerstein frequently maintains that coerced laborers have little effective demand. For instance, “The tropical colonies were a weak market precisely because they tended to use coerced labor [...]” *Modern World-System*, II, p. 103.

“[R]epeated stagnations of the world-economy lead to discontinuous but necessary (that is, step-like) increases of the purchasing power of some (each time new) sector of the (world) population.”³⁰ Workers themselves make a major contribution to this growing demand through their collective action: “Workers organize themselves in various ways and thereby achieve some of their demands, which in fact permits them to reach the threshold of a true wage-based minimum income. That is, by their own efforts, workers become proletarianized, and then shout victory!”³¹

Wallerstein’s opinions about modes of labor control stimulated further research; in the past decades, the Braudel Center’s collaborators and friends have produced a large quantity of publications in which modes of labor control in various parts of the world are reconstructed. But in most cases, the world-systemic *coherence* between different forms of exploitation remains unexamined, nor is there any attempt to give a systematic explanation of *why* a particular “mix” of modes of labor control arose. The writers are often content to demonstrate that the contours of the history of a particular part of the world have been shaped by the capitalist world-economy.

Martin Murray, for example, published an impressive book about colonial Indochina, in which much attention is devoted to labor control. He shows that in the first decades of their rule, French colonists “found it impractical and even hopeless to rely upon market forces to generate adequate supplies of labor-power.” They were therefore “compelled to apply outright coercion in order to initiate economic activities that could not have been accomplished by market pressures alone.”³² But he does not answer the question of why colonists resorted in this situation to *corvée* labor, rather than to another unfree mode of labor control. Such lacunae – the result of a lack of systematic historical comparisons – are often found in studies of this kind. In a number of cases, the references to the “world-system approach” remain quite superficial; what they show is mainly that developments in a particular region cannot be understood without taking account of international linkages.³³ But there are also studies that take the analysis further. Here are some examples:

³⁰ Wallerstein, “Marx and History,” pp. 130–1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³² Murray, *Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina*, pp. 84–5.

³³ See e.g. Weiskel, “Labor in the Emergent Periphery”; Almaguer, “Interpreting Chicano History”; Martin, “Beyond the Peasant to Proletarian Debate.” To avoid

- Dale Tomich studied the contradictions arising from the decline of slavery in the Western Hemisphere during the first half of the nineteenth century: on the one hand, Britain abolished slavery, but on the other hand slavery expanded massively in the Americas. Tomich sees a causal link between these two developments: the destruction of slavery within the British Empire led to the intensification of slavery elsewhere. The demand for coffee, sugar and cotton mushroomed; and, since British colonies were producing these goods at relatively high prices thanks to abolition, production by slaves flourished in Cuba, Brazil and the United States. This production was financed to a large extent by London-based financial institutions, because this “second slavery” (as Tomich calls it) provided outlets for surplus British capital. It also “consolidated a new international division of labor and provided important raw materials and foodstuffs for industrializing core powers.”³⁴
- Ann Forsythe and Roberto Korzeniewicz show how changes in the European core influenced labor relations in the Argentinian periphery. When England’s woolen industry introduced innovations in the second half of the nineteenth century, entrepreneurs in the Continent were forced to mechanize and adopt factory production methods. The technological changes and increased competition had two consequences. On the one hand, demand grew for Argentinean wool as a raw material, and on the other hand the supply of European woolen goods in Argentina became cheaper. This dual development destroyed the traditional cohesion between wool production and wool processing in Argentina and stimulated shepherding; domestic, handicraft textile production virtually collapsed in the 1870s and 1880s. Parallel with these shifts, the gendered division of labor changed in both Europe and Argentina. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the call for a family wage resounded more and more loudly.³⁵
- Arthur Alderson and Stephen Sanderson draw on secondary sources in order to examine household patterns in early modern Europe from Wallerstein’s perspective. They conclude that the different “modes of labor control” correlate fairly closely with different household patterns. In some-

misunderstandings I should emphasize that all these studies are useful contributions to the writing of labor history.

³⁴ Tomich, “‘Second Slavery,’” p. 115.

³⁵ Forsythe and Korzeniewicz, “Gender Relations in the World Economy.”

what schematic terms, the freer a mode of labor control is, the less complex household structure becomes. In core countries (the Netherlands and England) proletarian household structure was predominantly simple. This was quite rational, they explain, since it “makes no sense for farm laborers who are working for wages to have large families for the simple reason that, under conditions of landlessness, family members become economic liabilities rather than assets (or at least are more of a liability than an asset).”³⁶ In the Eastern European periphery with its large landholdings, by contrast, households were very complex, because this “meant more labor to work the land, which meant a better opportunity to meet subsistence needs and to respond to the demands for surplus imposed by landlords.”³⁷ Finally, in the share-cropping semi-periphery (Austria, Germany, France, Italy), there was a combination of simple and complex households. Computing the ratio of simple to complex households in the three zones, Alderson and Sanderson find that “the ratio in the core is approximately 5.9: 1, that in the periphery the ratio is roughly 1.1: 1 (or 0.7: 1 if the atypical cases are omitted); and that in the semiperiphery the ratio is about 1.6: 1.”³⁸

- In a case study, Torry Dickinson investigates Wallerstein’s thesis that the proportion of non-wage income depends on the location of working class households in the different zones of the world system. She hypothesizes that (i) working-class households in the core receive higher wage incomes than households in the periphery, and that (ii) these higher wage incomes cover a greater portion of the costs of their maintenance. Using sources including the archival records of Philadelphia’s workhouse (the House of Industry), Dickinson tested this hypothesis for the post-1830 period. During this period, the US climbed up the world hierarchy from the periphery to a hegemonic core position, and according to Dickinson this development was reflected in gender and age divisions in households. As the share of wages in household income grew, not only did the importance of informal work and self-employment decrease, but more polarized work relations also developed between men and women and between children and adults. Dickinson concludes that new ideas about gender and age evolved

³⁶ Alderson and Sanderson, “Historic European Household Structures,” p. 425.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 427–8.

precisely from the time when more than two-thirds of household income consisted of wages. At this “‘two-thirds’ wage-earning turning point,” families sent their children to school, women began to define themselves through the domestic sphere and men began to consider themselves the main breadwinners.³⁹

Workers’ collective action

Strategies of resistance and survival of subaltern groups or classes never occupied a central place in Wallerstein’s world-system approach. There is little analysis to be found in his writings about, for example, the interaction between slave rebellions and modes of slave exploitation. His neglect of social protest is sometimes even compounded by negative evaluations of it, particularly as far as workers’ movements are concerned. Already early on Wallerstein admired Frantz Fanon, a theorist well-known for his lack of appreciation for the rising workers’ movements in colonial countries.⁴⁰ Generalizing Fanon’s perspective, Wallerstein declares: “Has it not been true [...] of the majority of workers’ movements that their strength and their cadres have been drawn from a segment of the working population which was somewhat ‘better off,’ whether this segment were technically independent artisans or more highly paid skilled (and/or craft) wage workers? The search for those who truly had nothing to lose but their chains [...] leads us today to what is variously called the subproletariat, the lumpenproletariat, the unskilled (often immigrant) workers, the marginal, the chronically unemployed.”⁴¹

Alongside this argument about social stratification, Wallerstein offers a second reason for his low opinion of labor movements. Thanks to their form of

³⁹ Dickinson, *Common Wealth*; idem, “Gender Division within the U.S. Working Class.” Joan Smith endorses Dickinson’s thesis, but adds her own surmise that the intensity of unwaged domestic labor is much less affected by wage levels: “It is precisely this relative independence from wage levels that forces all but the most wealthy families into privatized household labor and extends the duration of this labor more or less to the same degree, whether or not there is the same amount of available time to accomplish it.” She admits that empirical evidence for this hypothesis is still lacking. Smith, “Nonwage Labor and Subsistence,” p. 81.

⁴⁰ Wallerstein, “Fanon, Frantz”; idem, “Fanon and the Revolutionary Class.”

⁴¹ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, III, p. 108.

organization, he maintains, they are in reality powerless in face of the world system. The capitalist economy is a world economy, and the working class *an sich* [in itself] is therefore by definition a world class. On the other hand, “classes *für sich* [for themselves] organize themselves (or perhaps one should say disorganize themselves) at the level of the territorial states,”⁴² because political power is organized in the capitalist world system through states. The world working class is therefore the victim of a fundamental, insoluble dilemma, which makes it impossible for its “movements” to operate effectively on a global scale.

But not all of Wallerstein’s co-thinkers followed the exactly same opinion on this point. Perhaps inspired by the work of James Cronin and Ernest Mandel (who suggested a causal relationship between Kondratiev waves and the periodic remaking of working classes),⁴³ some of the Braudel Center’s collaborators formed a Research Working Group on World Labor in 1980 (which, incidentally, seems to have had some initial difficulties in finding its feet). In 1985, the group drafted a research proposal. They observed that the two dominant paradigms in US labor history (Marxism and the Wisconsin School of John Commons, Selig Perlman and others) failed to understand either the trajectory of labor movements or the multi-faceted working class cultures in advanced capitalist countries. A major part of the problem, the group argued, was the unit of analysis: both of these traditional paradigms focused on national and local labor movements, and usually covered “short periods of time and narrow areas of global space.”⁴⁴ The group pointed out that in the aftermath of World Wars I and II, and in the late 1960s/early 1970s, huge transnational waves of conflict between labor and capital broke out. This suggested “that a common set of social processes link together labor movements in various national locales.”⁴⁵ By studying these transnational waves of conflict, national labor histories could be put in a different perspective:

⁴² Wallerstein, “How Do We Know Class Struggle When We See It?,” p. 105. This is a reply to Ira Gerstein’s “Theories of the World Economy and Imperialism.”

⁴³ Cronin, “Stages, Cycles, and Insurgencies”; Mandel, *Long Waves of Capitalist Development*, esp. Chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Research Working Group on World Labor, “Global Patterns of Labor Movements,” p. 138.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

We are no by no means advocating that the investigation of the world labor movement somehow supersedes the analysis of national labor movements (just as no one would claim that studies of national labor movements supersede the study of local movements). Quite the contrary. We are suggesting that an analysis of the trajectory of labor-capital conflict at a world level can assist in reinterpreting the studies of labor movements at the national and local levels. If global processes of accumulation and of struggle have shaped the pattern of conflict in all locales (although most certainly not in a homogeneous fashion), then the insights from world-level analysis should be brought to bear on these conflicts.⁴⁶

These initial theses were later specified in the following two central research premises:

1. Social conflict (and particularly labor-capital conflict) is a central process driving the historical evolution of the world-system. Major waves of labor unrest provoke periods of major worldwide social, political, and economic restructuring. The latter restructuring creates, over time, new working classes and new waves of struggle; and
2. Workers' and workers' movements located in different states/regions are linked to each other by the world-scale division of labor and interstate system. A major wave of labor unrest in one location can set off a chain of processes (e.g., capital relocation) that has a profound impact on the lives of workers, both in the original site of unrest, and in distant locations throughout the world-system.⁴⁷

To analyze global patterns in labor militancy more carefully, the group set up a database, using the indexes of *The Times* (London) (from 1906 on) and *The New York Times* (from 1870 on).⁴⁸ Information on the year, type of action, country, city and industry was recorded for every mention of labor unrest anywhere in the world. To begin with, all the numerical data assembled in this way for the period 1870–1985 was used in further analyses.⁴⁹ Later the *combined* series of data from both newspapers for the period 1906–90 were

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Silver, "Labor Unrest and World-Systems Analysis," p. 11.

⁴⁸ The index to *The Times* of London begins in 1906. See also Dangler, "The *Times* (London) and the *New York Times*."

⁴⁹ See Silver, "Class Struggle and Kondratieff Waves."

used as the basis for a “maximum” series, that is, the maximum number of incidents of labor unrest mentioned in *both* of the two sources (83,964 cases).⁵⁰ After regional reliability studies were done with positive results,⁵¹ the group began identifying waves of labor unrest. The provisional results were remarkable. The group observed that there was no strong evidence of any close connection between labor unrest and so-called long waves (Kondratievs).⁵² Table 13.2 below gives growth rates (mean standardized slopes) and mean levels of intensity. The theories of Cronin, Mandel and Screpanti⁵³ had suggested that growth rates should rise in phases of economic expansion and decline in recessive phases. But the data do not confirm such an interpretation. Rather, they indicate that, on a global scale, the late nineteenth century “reveals more of a straight upward trend than any Kondratieff-related alteration of phases.”⁵⁴

Table 13.2
The intensity of world-scale labor unrest according to the World Labor Research Working Group, Braudel Center

Year	Economic activity	Index of intensity of labor unrest (1914–48 = 100)			Growth rates (%)		
		World	Core	Non-core	World	Core	Non-core
1872–93	Down	2	10	0.2	8	7	12
1893–1917	Up	9	18	5	9	8	9
1917–40	Down	105	106	107	–5	–6	–4
1940–68	Up	143	96	195	2	0	4
1968–85	Down	110	58	174	0	–5	4

Source: “Class Struggle and Kondratieff Waves,” p. 285; idem, “World-Scale Patterns of Labor-Capital Conflict,” p. 157. The index of “intensity of labor unrest” is the multiplication of an index of acuteness (the number of reports of labor unrest per year) and an index of extension (the number of countries in which labor unrest is reported per year).

An article published in 1992 (based on the old database for the whole period 1870–1985) concludes that four short periods stand out as “explosions” of

⁵⁰ Silver, “Labor Unrest.”

⁵¹ The reliability studies were published in *Review*, 18 (1995), issue 1. They concerned Italy (Giovanni Arrighi); China (Mark Selden); South Africa (Mark Beittel); Argentina (Roberto M. Korzeniewicz); Egypt (Donald Quataert); the United States (Melvyn Dubofsky); and Germany (John Casparis and Giovanni Arrighi).

⁵² Silver, “World-Scale Patterns of Labor-Capital Conflict”; idem, “Class Struggle and Kondratieff Waves.”

⁵³ Screpanti, “Long Economic Cycles”; idem, “Long Cycles in Strike Activity.”

⁵⁴ Silver, “Class Struggle and Kondratieff Waves,” p. 285.

labor unrest: the years 1889–90, 1911–12, 1919–20 and 1946–48. In each of these periods, “class-struggle intensity had to be at least double the average of the preceding five years for two or more consecutive years. This criteria had to be met for the world-scale index *and* for the indices of the core and non-core countries taken separately for at least one year in each set.”⁵⁵ In another analysis published three years later, using the maximum series for 1906–90 and a somewhat different definition of “years of explosion,” only the years 1919–20 and 1946–47 were presented as explosions on a world scale, though other years were added separately for the core, semi-periphery and periphery (Table 13.3).⁵⁶

Table 13.3
“Explosion” years of labor unrest, 1906–90

World	Core	Semiperiphery	Periphery
1919–20	1912 1918–20	1913 1919–20	1925 1927–29
1946–47	1932 1937 1946–7	1936 1946 1950–51 1959 1965	1946 1949 1953–56 1959 1962 1981

Source: Silver, “World-Scale Patterns of Labor-Capital Conflict,” p. 172.

The Working Group’s later analyses seem to have focused above all on the years 1919–20 and 1946–47. These two social explosions have in common that they followed world wars, and reached peak levels (2,085 mentions of labor unrest in 1919–20; 1,469 in 1946–47).⁵⁷ But inversely, it was also the case that labor unrest declined at the beginning of the world wars. More specifically, the data support three apparently contradictory hypotheses:

⁵⁵ Silver, “Class Struggle and Kondratieff Waves,” p. 285.

⁵⁶ In this 1995 report, “years of explosion” were defined as “years in which the number of mentions/waves was equal to twice the mean of the mentions/waves series.” (Silver, “World-Scale Patterns,” p. 189).

⁵⁷ Silver, “World-Scale Patterns,” p. 159.

- Firstly, it seems as if “involvement in war increases social cohesion at the national level and thus brings about internal peace,” because governments use “combinations of repression and cooptation” in order “to ensure the cooperation of workers in the war effort.”⁵⁸ This hypothesis is backed up by the work of Douglas Hibbs and Charles Tilly;⁵⁹ but Hibbs and Tilly limited their analyses to Western Europe and North America, while the Working Group provides reasons to conclude that “the decline in militancy during the world wars was far more general.”⁶⁰ “The roots of this decline may be the same for metropolitan and colonial countries. Indeed, at the time of the Second World War, colonial and semicolonial countries had become tightly integrated into the resource supply-lines of the imperial powers.”⁶¹
- Secondly, the Working Group suggests that “involvement in war increases social conflict at the national level and increases the chances of revolution.”⁶² This hypothesis is of course already familiar from the writings of Leon Trotsky, for example, and from scholars such as Charles Tilly and others.⁶³ In both world wars, the “calming” effect of repression and co-optation wore off after a few years, and social unrest grew. After the wars ended, rebelliousness increased enormously, above all because “the demands made by workers and other citizens on the state increase, at the same time as the states’ ability to satisfy and/or repress those demands decreases.”⁶⁴ Outbursts of labor unrest also took place in (semi-)peripheral regions. This fits with Walter Goldfrank’s hypothesis (see below) that war and instability in core countries open up space for social conflict in the periphery and semi-periphery.
- Thirdly, the Working Group concludes that “social conflict at the national level encourages governments to involve themselves in interstate wars.”⁶⁵ Evidence for this claim is found in the growing labor unrest *preceding* the world wars. According to the Working Group’s data, there were “explosions” in the world system’s core in 1912 and 1937, and in the semi-periphery

⁵⁸ Silver, “World-Scale Patterns,” pp. 162–4.

⁵⁹ Hibbs, “Political Economy of Long-Run Trends”; Tilly, “Introduction.”

⁶⁰ Silver, “World-Scale Patterns,” p. 163.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 162, 164–9.

⁶³ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, pp. 189–222.

⁶⁴ Silver, “World-Scale Patterns,” p. 165.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

in 1913 and 1936. Given that the world wars originated in the core and semi-periphery, and that explosions of unrest occurred “in the immediate *pre*-world war years in the core and semiperiphery,” this suggests that “when multiple countries experience explosions of social conflict at the national level, governments and capitalists seek solutions to internal tensions through means that increase the likelihood of world war.”⁶⁶

Table 13.3 also shows that there were no more explosions *after* 1947 in the core, but that they did occur in the periphery and semi-periphery. The Working Group sees this as a reflection of the US’s rise to hegemonic power. While repression of radical workers’ groups was accompanied in core countries by co-optation via Fordist mass consumption, the growth of the working class in non-core countries led to very different developments.⁶⁷

The Working Group’s contributions are thought-provoking and suggestive. But some methodological doubts remain. For example, how valid are data series based on the *London Times* and *The New York Times*? Two critics have noted that as a result of their “ideological perception” these two newspapers only pay attention to some workers’ struggles, and not others.⁶⁸ But one might also ask why only English-language newspapers were used. Why was the definition of “years of explosion” changed between the two publications, and why was this change not justified to their readers? Why were explosions in 1912–13 (but not in 1914) and in 1936–37 (but not in 1938–39) treated as evidence that world wars are caused in part by social unrest? Other substantive questions also arise. For example, what explains the worldwide fracture in the average levels of intensity of labor unrest after 1917 (Table 13.2)? Is the disappearance of explosions of labor unrest in the core after 1947 (Table 13.3) really the consequence of US hegemony, or are there also other causes?

Parallel with their activities in the Working Group, members also published other studies of workers’ collective action. Differences in emphasis have become visible between the historians’ work and that of the sociologists. Melvyn Dubofsky, for example, a leading labor historian, hesitates

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 174–182.

⁶⁸ Meynen and Scholliers, “Comment,” p. 299.

to generalize quickly. While he occasionally mentions “persistent patterns or relationships,” he notes nonetheless that “in most areas [...] serendipity and inconsistency prevail.”⁶⁹ Sociologists like Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver by contrast are not afraid to sketch out broad outlines, and summarize developments across a century and a half in a few general hypotheses. However, these differences do not prevent the different contributions from complementing each other, or from further emphasizing the importance of wars and Kondratiev waves:

- The role of wars in the development of workers’ collective action is frequently emphasized. In a study of labor movements in North America (1873–1970) Dubofsky distinguishes five major surges in union membership and strikes: 1885–86, 1898–1903, 1916–19, 1941–45 and 1951–53. A comparative analysis brings him to the conclusion that neither economic cycles, nor economic concentration (merger movements), nor cycles of proletarianization can explain these surges. He does point out that the last four of the five surges were associated with wars: “the impact of war and its aftermath – economic, social, and political – is the factor (perhaps even the independent variable) most closely related with rises in union membership, strike rates, and all forms of worker militancy.”⁷⁰ In a comparative study of workers’ movements in China and Japan (1850–1950) Mark Selden reaches a similar conclusion, pointing to “the congruence of international cataclysm (the two World Wars) with the possibility for powerful working-class intervention in the historical process under very different historical conditions.”⁷¹
- Especially Arrighi and Silver emphasize the importance of Kondratiev waves. They base their periodization of labor movements in Western Europe and North America (1848–96, 1896–1948 and 1948–present) on these waves, and suggest all sorts of connections which could be investigated further. They point out, for example, that the modern labor movement emerged during the first long wave of economic growth (when Britain was the world hegemon). During the recessive phase of that wave – the Great Depression (1873–96) – through “intensifying competitive pressures” and “widened

⁶⁹ Dubofsky, “Workers’ Movements in North America,” p. 38.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Selden “Proletariat,” p. 111.

and deepened processes of proletarianization” with the corresponding multiplication of “occasions of conflict between labor and capital,” the conditions were created for “the labor movement in its modern form” with its national trade union federations and working class parties. In the period 1896–1948 the labor movement in the core “reached its apogée as the central anti-systemic force.” Thereafter, a gradual weakening became apparent, clearly visible in the recessive Kondratiev from 1968 on, as European and Japanese firms, following the lead set by US capital, began to expand internationally. This intensified international competition, and led to the “cost-cutting race of the 1970s and 1980s” as well as to increased financial speculation. The main impact of these changes was “a limited but very real spread of mass misery to the core zone.” Cost-cutting took the forms of feminization of the waged labor force, plant relocation, automation and science-based technologies. The result was “a major reshuffling” of the world working class.⁷²

- The most important publication from the circles of the Working Group was Beverly Silver’s *Forces of Labor* (2003). In this study, themes from older publications obviously returned, such as the influence of world wars on labor unrest. But important new elements are also introduced. Using the examples of the textile and car industry, Silver aims to show that the inter-relationship between labor movements and capital has a definite logic. Depending on various factors (including product life cycles and inter-state conflicts) and driven by recurrent workers’ resistance, business develops at least four strategies in its attempt to maintain profitability: (i) the “spatial fix”, i.e. the geographical relocation to regions with cheaper and more docile workers; (ii) the “technological/organizational fix”, i.e. the transformation of labor processes; (iii) the “product fix”, i.e. the shift of capital to new industries and product lines; and (iv) de “financial fix”, i.e. the shift of capital from production and trade to money lending and speculation. All these responses to labor protest “undermined established customs and live-

⁷² Arrighi, “Marxist Century, American Century,” pp. 34, 36, 51. See also Arrighi, “Labor Movement in Twentieth Century Western Europe.” Arrighi and Silver also formulated other hypotheses about labor movements in core countries (e.g. about the link between the rise of continuous flow production and increased workplace bargaining power for workers), but these are not directly connected to the world-system approach. See e.g. Arrighi and Silver, “Labor Movements and Capital Migration.”

lihoods,” but they simultaneously “created and strengthened new working classes with strategic bargaining power in the expanding and profitable segments of the global economy.”⁷³

Indirect contributions

It is evident, then, that supporters of the world-system approach have assembled some insightful fragments of theory over the years, which are useful in the construction of a Global Labor History. This conclusion is in no way undermined by the fact that these fragments are not always equally coherent, and that, from a historian’s point of view, they are sometimes rather crudely formulated or need to be qualified more. Moreover, beyond the *direct* applications of the work of the Braudel Center and its sympathizers which are of interest to labor historians, there are also *indirect* applications that may be relevant. I will mention a few:

- *Commodity chains*. The division of labor between periphery, semi-periphery and core, with their different “modes of labor control” so central to Wallerstein’s approach, can also be interpreted in another way. It can be understood in relation to “commodity chains,” a concept in vogue in various forms since the 1960s (as in the French *filière* approach) and which has become internationally known since the 1990s, above all through the work of Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz.⁷⁴ In a 1986 essay, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein describe the concept “commodity chain” as “a network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity.”⁷⁵ Chase-Dunn is somewhat more precise, describing a commodity chain as “a tree-like sequence of production processes and exchanges by which a product for final consumption is produced. These linkages of raw materials, labor, the sustenance of labor, intermediate

⁷³ Silver, *Forces of Labor*, pp. 131–2. See also Arrighi, “Spatial and Other ‘Fixes’.”

⁷⁴ As early as the 1980s Hopkins and Wallerstein integrated this concept into their world-system theory. See their “Commodity Chains.” Gereffi and Korzeniewicz then tested the concept in a contemporary study: “Commodity Chains and Footwear Exports in the Semiperiphery.” The breakthrough came with an anthology that Gereffi and Korzeniewicz edited, *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*.

⁷⁵ Hopkins and Wallerstein, “Commodity Chains,” p. 159.

processing, final processing, transport, and final consumption materially connect most of the people within the contemporary world-system."⁷⁶

The essence of the idea is simple: every commodity emerges through a production process in which labor power and means of production have been "combined." The means of production themselves are in turn a product of a combination of labor power and other means of production. The labor force also consumes goods like clothes and food, which also have been produced through a combination of labor power and means of production. In short, the ultimate production process that results in a "finished product" is only the end point of a bundle of chains of production processes. This thought has until now mainly inspired contemporary economists, who have studied commodities including tourism, the service sector, fresh fruit and vegetables, cocaine, footwear, electronics, cars and semiconductors.⁷⁷ Historical case studies are still very much economically oriented.⁷⁸ Theoretical work in this area as well has very much focused on economic aspects, more particularly on current so-called globalization.⁷⁹

- *Colonialism.* Albert Bergesen and Ronald Schoenberg describe the long-term development of colonialism. They base their work on a study by David Henige dating colonial administrations for 412 colonies (including the years during which colonial governors held office) in the period 1415–1969.⁸⁰ Bergesen and Schoenberg calculated from Henige's work how many colonies were established, terminated and existed each year. Their results show clearly that colonialism unfolded in two waves (see Figure 13.1).

⁷⁶ Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation*, p. 346.

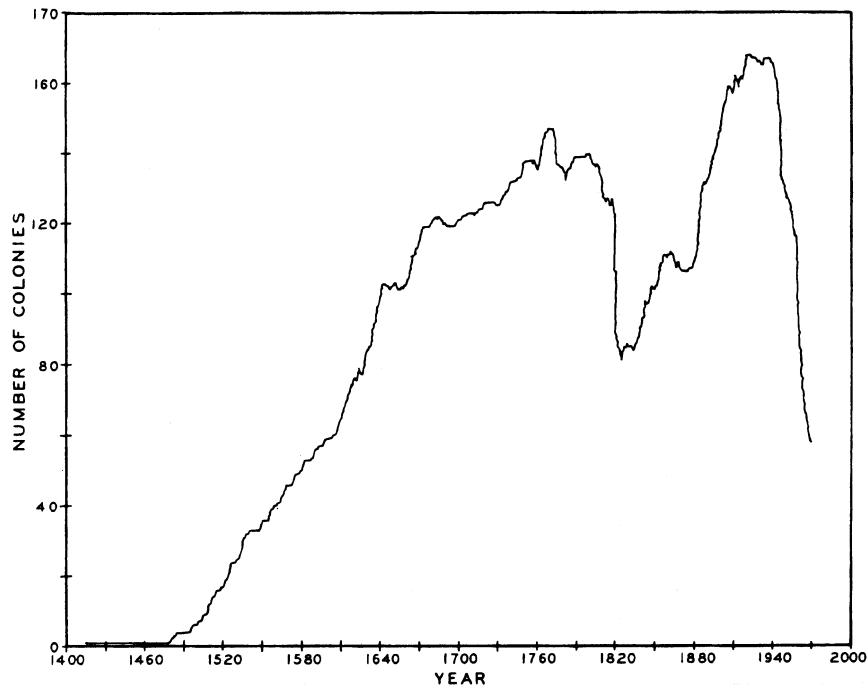
⁷⁷ See e.g. Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*. An extensive bibliography on commodity chains is available from Global Observatory's Resource Information (www.stile.lut.ac.uk/~gyobs/global).

⁷⁸ Özveren, "Shipbuilding"; Pelizzon, "Grain Flour"; Talbot, "Struggle for Control of a Commodity Chain"; Hunter, "Commodity Chains and Networks"; Duguid, "Networks and Knowledge."

⁷⁹ See Lauret, "Sur les études de filières agro-alimentaires"; Monfort, "A la recherche des filières de production"; Raikes, Jensen and Ponte, "Global Commodity Chain Analysis"; Lenz, Barbara. "Das Filière-Konzept als Analyseinstrument"; Leslie and Reimer, "Spatializing Commodity Chains."

⁸⁰ Henige, *Colonial Governors*.

Figure 13.1
The cumulative net number of colonies, 1415–1969



Source: Albert Bergesen and Ronald Schoenberg, "Long Waves of Colonial Expansion and Contraction, 1415–1969," in: Albert Bergesen (ed.), *Studies of the Modern World-System* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), p. 236.

The first wave began in 1415 (with the Portuguese colony in Ceuta, North Africa) and reached its peak in 1770 (147 distinct colonies) and its low point in 1825 (81 colonies). The second wave began in 1826, reached its peak in 1921 (168 colonies) and then declined to 58 colonies in 1969.⁸¹ Bergesen and Schoenberg note a clear correspondence between stability or instability in the core of the world system, and the expansion or contraction of colonies. In

⁸¹ Bergesen and Schoenberg, "Long Waves." See also Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation*, pp. 279–82, and Taylor, *Political Geography*, pp. 100–10. Chase-Dunn is of course right in saying that "Bergesen and Schoenberg's operationalization treats each newly established colony equally, but surely some were more important than others in terms of the amount of territory or number of people subjugated. Unfortunately, only rough estimates of the territorial or population size of the colonial empires are available for earlier centuries. The use of the number of new colonies established is, however rough, the best continuous measure we have available at this time." (*Ibid.*, p. 280)

the periods 1500–1815, 1870–1945 and from 1973 to the present, the core was “multicentric” and unstable: no clear hegemonic power existed, and it led to protectionism and expanding colonialism. Colonialism is in this sense “an extra-economic mechanism for resetting the basic core-periphery division of labor in times of disorder and stress.”⁸² By contrast, when there *has* been a hegemonic power in the core (“unicentricity”), then “the more explicit political regulation of core-periphery relations collapses, as seen in the waves of decolonization.”⁸³ They argue this happened during the *Pax Britannica* (1815–70) and again in the *Pax Americana* (1945–73). Their thesis stimulated further scholarly discussion.⁸⁴

- *Revolutions.* Walter Goldfrank claims that “a tolerant or permissive world context” is important for the occurrence of revolutions. He distinguishes three different favorable scenarios: “First, when the cat’s away, the mice will play: the preoccupation of major powers in war or serious internal difficulty increases the likelihood of revolution. This holds both in a general sense for the World-System as a whole, and in its specific application to instances of revolution in societies dominated by a single power. Second, when major powers balance one another, especially if that balance is antagonistic, the likelihood of revolution is increased. Third, if rebel movements receive greater outside support than their enemies do, the likelihood of revolution is increased.” At the same time, Goldfrank observes “that ‘outside intervention’ in support of the old order may deepen and further the revolutionary process if it comes too little or too late; this is the lesson the U.S. drew from Cuba and put to use in Guatemala, Venezuela, and Chile.”⁸⁵ David Kowalewski gathered and analyzed data on revolutions in the periphery and interventions from the core in 34 peripheral nations over a 165-year period (1821–1986). He concludes that “core intervention is significantly conditioned by revolutions in the periphery. Over the *longue*

⁸² Bergesen and Schoenberg, “Long Waves,” p. 239.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ McGowan, “Pitfalls and Promise”; Bergesen, “How to Model”; Schoenberg, “Statistical Models Must Be Appropriate”; Boswell, “Colonial Empires”; Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation*, pp. 280–2.

⁸⁵ Goldfrank, “Theories of Revolution,” p. 149.

durée, the more revolution, the more intervention. The core-periphery structure, destabilized by revolution, is restabilized by intervention."⁸⁶

- *Religion*. Sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow argues that the rise and growth of religious movements in modern societies should be interpreted in conjunction with major changes in the transnational division of labor. "A population's place in the larger world order strongly affects the manner in which it defines the major problems of its existence, and therefore, the nature of its religious orientations. These religious orientations, for their part, channel the kinds of actions that people take, and therefore, affect their influence upon the world order."⁸⁷ Wuthnow distinguishes three kinds of periods that provoke intense religious activity. Firstly, *periods of expansion*, that is "periods in which the dominant world order has expanded rapidly to the point of producing strain in the basic institutions linking together core and periphery areas."⁸⁸ Secondly, *periods of polarization* between core and periphery. Third, *periods of reconstitution*, "periods in which newly stabilized patterns of world order are being reconstituted."⁸⁹ The kinds of religious activity generated in each period also vary depending on whether group power is rising or declining. Altogether, therefore, six different types of religious movements can be distinguished.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Kowalewski, "Core Intervention and Periphery Revolution," p. 86. See also Kowalewski's "Periphery Revolutions."

⁸⁷ Wuthnow, "World Order and Religious Movements," p. 60.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Wuthnow later partly worked out and modified these thoughts in a large book, but its references to the world order remain mainly implicit. In this book he discusses three "relatively abrupt, episodic ideological innovations": the Reformation, the Enlightenment and socialism. He concludes among other things that all of these broad changes in dominant ideologies were facilitated by "overall increases in the level of resources available in the social environment." More concretely, "Demographic, commercial, and political expansion opened the way for new elites to gain power and for new mechanisms of ideological production to emerge without fundamentally undermining established institutions (until later in the process)." *How* these effects of resource expansion worked out was closely related to intermediate factors such as "pre-existing patterns of social relations," "the particular kinds of resources available," and the "prevailing modes of appropriating and distributing resources." "In broad terms, the decisive effect of relatively rapid capitalist expansion in each period was to heighten the divisions between fractions of the ruling elite, and these divisions, in turn, supplied opportunities, resources, and motivation to the producers and disseminators of new ideologies." Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse*, pp. 546, 548, 573.

• *Utopias*. Relying on L.T. Sargent's annotated bibliography of British and American utopian literature,⁹¹ Kriss Drass and Edgar Kiser try to discover connections between the production of "eutopian" and "dystopian" literature in the period 1883–1975. ("Eutopias" create positive and "dystopias" negative images of alternative societies.) They conclude that "in periods of hegemony, a narrow, consensual ideological discourse dominates, while hegemonic decline brings dissensus (a widening scope of ideological discourse, in our terms) as the basic premises of the hegemonic period are openly questioned."⁹² Their explanation is relatively simple: "Periods of hegemony are periods of high consensus and relative stability in the world-system. Moreover, they are periods in which there is one clearly successful model in the system: the hegemonic nation. Other nations [...] will generally try to imitate the success of the hegemon."⁹³ As a result, "The eutopia is thought to exist already in the form of the hegemon," and dystopias are superfluous. If the stability of the system declines, however, then thinking about alternative societies is fostered and production of literary eutopias increases.⁹⁴

These five examples are, of course, only *indirectly* of interest to labor historians, yet they may have a heuristic value. Further research will probably make it necessary to revise or correct them. However, they provide an indication of the wealth of new questions and interpretations that the Braudel Center and its friends have generated in the last decades.

⁹¹ Sargent, *British and American Utopian Literature*.

⁹² Drass and Kiser, "Structural Roots of Visions of the Future," p. 433. See also Kiser and Drass, "Changes in the Core."

⁹³ Drass and Kiser, "Structural Roots", p. 425.

⁹⁴ Randy Blazak has noted a connection between Drass and Kiser's "literary cycle" and the rise and fall of "Bohemias" (enclaves "where artists, writers, students, and others can lead expressive, as opposed to instrumental lives"). Dominant bohemias "exist in core nations, but not in the hegemonic cities. When London dominated the economic world in the nineteenth century, Paris dominated the cultural world. Likewise, in the 1960s, while New York was the hegemonic city, San Francisco set the cultural trends." The vanguard Bohemian subculture flourishes in the later half of long economic upswings, coinciding with Drass and Kiser's dystopian phase. Blazak explains this as follows: "If the hegemonic cities represent the head of the core, cultural centers represent the heart. Bohemians are important cultural innovators creating new artistic trends and fashions. Blazak, "Rise and Fall of Bohemian Enclaves," p. 118.

Conclusion

I think the world-system approach can be an important source of inspiration for historians. Its special value is that it persistently tries to make connections visible among developments in different locations in the world, transcending parochial outlooks. Ironically, however, while Wallerstein and his co-thinkers strongly influenced sociologists and political scientists in the last 35 years – that influence is declining now – historians only rarely felt drawn to their ideas. Robert DuPlessis' observation in the late 1980s is still valid: "unlike, say, E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, whose publication marked a fundamental rupture in labor history and indeed in social history as a whole, forcing reconceptualizations among all who followed, irrespective of ideological or scholarly allegiance, the continuing discussion of Wallerstein's work is not indicative of its significant assimilation either by Marxists or by other historians."⁹⁵ This reluctance can probably be explained by three interrelated weaknesses of the world-system approach.

- Firstly, the world-system approach exhibits a strong penchant toward a monumental determinism, in the sense of conjuring up a vision of history in which the existing world division of labor completely determines and dominates other developments. In Brenner's summary: "as the world market expands, the eco-demographic characteristics of an area determine its specialization, what will be produced and the most appropriate method of coercion. This carries with it, in turn, a system of labor control and reward to labor. The result is maximal output everywhere, maximal growth for the system as a whole."⁹⁶ Such a view is implausible. In reality, the development of international capitalism is "more contingent – more constrained, buffeted, and driven by the force of independent causal 'motors' and by internal contradictions – than is suggested by Wallerstein's theoretical framework."⁹⁷ Sidney Mintz, for example, points out that "the integration of varied forms of labor-extraction *within* any component region addresses the way that region, as a totality, fits within the so-called world-system.

⁹⁵ DuPlessis, "Partial Transition", pp. 12–13.

⁹⁶ Brenner, "Origins of Capitalist Development", p. 58.

⁹⁷ Stern, "Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World System," p. 864.

There was give-and-take between the demands and initiatives originating with the metropolitan centers of the world-system, and the ensemble of labor forms typical of the local zones with which they enmeshed."⁹⁸ Some of Wallerstein's own collaborators have recently advanced similar criticisms. Giovanni Arrighi states flatly that world-system analysts cannot claim anymore that class relations and class conflicts are reducible to core-periphery relations. "The sooner world-systemists stop seeking an explanation for almost everything in core-periphery relations and their temporal equivalent – A-B phases of Kondratieffs and suchlike cycles – the better for the credibility of their analyses to anybody who is not already a true believer."⁹⁹

- Secondly, the theory's determinism remains implicitly Eurocentric, because it suggests that the requirements of the core capitalist regions will completely determine what happens in the periphery.

Clearly these two weaknesses are linked to each other. Many authors have pointed out that reality is in truth vastly more complicated. In his study of early modern viticulture, Tim Unwin stresses the need "to incorporate social, political and ideological factors alongside economic ones in any explanation of the emergence of a modern world-system."¹⁰⁰ Many other authors have put forward similar arguments.¹⁰¹

Steve Stern uses the example of labor relations in Spanish-American silver mines as a critical test of Wallerstein's theory. The theory would in this case imply that the world system's cycles and trends could explain the broad outlines of colonial Latin American labor relations. But Stern concludes that this would be an impermissible oversimplification: "historical explanation that reduces patterns of labor and economy in the periphery to a reflection of the capitalist world-system is one-dimensional and misleading – even for silver, the early world-system's most valued American treasure."¹⁰² Stern offers an alternative model, in which "three great motors" *together* explain the devel-

⁹⁸ Mintz, "So-Called World System," p. 254.

⁹⁹ Arrighi, "Capitalism and the Modern World-System," p. 121. See also Dale Tomich's critical remarks in his "Worlds of Capital, Worlds of Labor."

¹⁰⁰ Unwin, "Wine in the Early Modern World-System," p. 262.

¹⁰¹ Besides the contributions mentioned elsewhere in this article, see also Washbrook, "South Asia."

¹⁰² Stern, "Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World System," p. 858.

opment of peripheral labor relations: “the world-system, popular strategies of resistance and survival within the periphery, and the mercantile and elite interests joined to an American ‘center of gravity’.”¹⁰³ He adds that “Western Europe’s own internal divisions and competitions affected the political coherence and will of the ‘world-system,’ and that, within Spanish America, colonial elites and authorities pursued multiple goals and interests that sometimes divided them against themselves despite their shared interest in silver production.”¹⁰⁴ In recent years, this criticism has also been adopted to some extent by collaborators of the Braudel Center itself. William Martin, one of the Center’s prominent second-generation collaborators, wrote: “What we have not achieved, I think we must frankly admit, is a conceptual rendering of this world-wide, historical process of class formation – we remain still prisoners of an outward movement from Europe and the United States.”¹⁰⁵

- Thirdly, the loose definition of capitalism used by Wallerstein and his fellow thinkers, as “a system of production for sale in a market for profit and appropriation of this profit on the basis of individual or collective ownership,”¹⁰⁶ leads to *analytical confusion*. The exact meaning and scope of “production for sale in a market for profit” remains unclear. Gerald Cohen points out in another context that some further distinctions are required. “Within production for exchange-value, we can contrast the case where the producer or his exploiting superior seeks as high a return as he can obtain, which will be called production for *maximum* exchange-value, with the case where a limited exchange-value is sought, any more than which would be superfluous.” And further, “production for maximum exchange-value divides into that which does and that which does not subserve the accumulation of capital. A self-employed commodity producer who aims only to sustain himself as such may seek maximum exchange-value for his wares, yet devote to personal consumption whatever he receives in excess of what is needed to service and

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 857–8. As this quotation shows, Stern does not oppose the idea of a world system as such, but is only against treating it as an absolute. In his own words: “An explanation that ignores the world-system is as limited and reductionist as one derived from the world-system.” (Ibid., p. 863)

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 858.

¹⁰⁵ Martin, “Still Partners and Still Dissident,” p. 244.

¹⁰⁶ Wallerstein, “Dependence in an Interdependent World,” p. 66.

replace his means of production."¹⁰⁷ The absence of these differentiations relates to another point. Defining capitalism exclusively on the basis of sale for profit and appropriation of profit obscures the fact that capitalism is based on *competition* among commodity owners. Competition is, as Marx put it, "the basic law" of capitalism that "governs the general rate of profit."¹⁰⁸ These qualifications make clear not only that Wallerstein and his co-thinkers often take an extraordinarily sweeping (and therefore vague) view of the meaning of capitalism and its operational logics (implausibly including even the former Soviet Union as "capitalist"). It is also that a fundamental aspect of the dynamics of capitalism (the quest to maintain and increase profits forced on capital by constant competition) disappears from view. It is therefore unsurprising that most Marxian scholars have dissented from Wallerstein's school.

These failings suggest that the world-system approach would be much more persuasive (i) if it considered history as a relatively open-ended process, in which social formations are "shaped by a multitude of forces, in which no single force dominates, but shaped nonetheless in patterned, explicable ways,"¹⁰⁹ and (ii) if it treated capitalism less as a closed system, and more as a dynamic, contradictory process. Several authors, including Eric Wolf and Kay Trimberger, have maintained that a good alternative exists to Wallerstein's conceptualization of the Modern World-System: Ernest Mandel's theory of the capitalist world economy as "an articulated system of capitalist, semi-capitalist and pre-capitalist relations of production, linked to each other by capitalist relations of exchange and domination by the capitalist world market."¹¹⁰ Man-

¹⁰⁷ Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ Marx, *Capital*, III, pp. 127–8. See also Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 650: "Free competition is the relation of capital to itself as another capital, i.e. the real conduct of as capital"

¹⁰⁹ Smith, "Labor and International Capital," p. 152. Carol Smith added: "Labor and labor processes are given form by local class interests that are shaped by the *totality* of social life in a particular historical context; they are also given form by external economic and social processes, which impinge upon local interests in significant ways. If we are to account for variation as for similarity in the world-system periphery, we cannot neglect either side of the picture."

¹¹⁰ Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, pp. 48–9. Eric Wolf endorses this description and concludes: "Mandel's definition points in a direction different from the models of the capitalist system developed by A.G. Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein. [...] These models collapse the concept of the capitalist mode of production into the concept of

del attached much more weight to the historical impact of mass struggles, and considered the growth of the capitalist mode of production since the late eighteenth century as “a dialectical unity of three moments: (a) Ongoing capital accumulation in the domain of already capitalist processes of production; (b) Ongoing primitive accumulation of capital outside the domain of already capitalist processes of production; (c) Determination and limitation of the second moment by the first, i.e. struggle and competition between the second and the first moment.”¹¹¹

Such an approach diverges in three essential ways from world-system theory. Firstly, it identifies the driving force of capitalism not simply as the expansion of trade, but also as competition in the broadest sense.¹¹² Secondly, as a related point, it distinguishes the rise of the world *market* from the rise of a global capitalist *mode of production*. A world market (as developed since the fifteenth century) can connect diverse modes of production with each other through trade, without all those modes of production necessarily becoming capitalist.¹¹³ Thirdly, an approach of this kind recognizes that crucial qualitative differences exist in the modalities of labor regulation within global capitalism.¹¹⁴ Admittedly Mandel’s theory – which has not been subject to much *historical* elaboration – also requires serious modifications, however. His usual historical periodization of capitalist development (freely competitive capitalism – classical imperialism – late capitalism) is inadequately grounded,¹¹⁵ and assumes that “free wage labor” is the only possible form of labor-power commodification in a developed capitalist economy.

the capitalist world market.” Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, p. 297. See also Trimberger, “World Systems Analysis,” and van der Linden and Stutje, “Ernest Mandel.”

¹¹¹ Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, p. 47.

¹¹² Mandel, “Laws of Uneven Development,” p. 27.

¹¹³ On this point see a thinker whose approach resembles Mandel’s, Novack: “Problem of Transitional Formations”; idem, “Hybrid Formations.”

¹¹⁴ “But to draw from this the conclusion that the differences in form and degree of this exploitation have become secondary and insignificant or to argue that because exploitation is universal, it is also homogeneous, is to have a completely lopsided view of world reality under imperialism [...]” Mandel, “Laws of Uneven Development,” p. 22.

¹¹⁵ Massarat, *Hauptentwicklungsstadien*, pp. 147–56. Massarat’s book, virtually unknown in the English-speaking world, is a brilliant contribution to the theory of the capitalist world market.

In any event, I think it is high time for “nonbelievers” to engage in a constructive dialogue with the Braudel Center’s co-workers and sympathizers. More than a quarter of a century ago, Daniel Chirot and Thomas Hall quipped, “Those who dislike [world-system theory] more or less ignore it, and those who practice it tend to take its fundamental assertions as received truths.”¹¹⁶ This mutual lack of interest still predominates. What I have sketched out here suggests that such lack of dialogue is regrettable, because all those who seek to liberate labor history from its national limitations would benefit from an encounter with the world-system approach.

¹¹⁶ Chirot and Hall, “World-System Theory,” p. 97.

Chapter Fourteen

Entangled subsistence labor

Subsistence labor never received glowing reviews from development economists. Not so long ago Peter Bauer, an eminent scholar in the field, indeed declared resolutely: “Market-oriented economists and advocates of extensive state economic control are agreed on one matter, namely that advance from subsistence production to wider exchange is indispensable for a society’s escape from extreme poverty.”¹ In this dominant view – still widely held by anthropologists and historians as well – the subsistence sector and the market economy are *mutually exclusive alternatives*: their quantitative variations represent a zero-sum game in which the gain of one is at the expense of the other.

But is that really true? What real data do we rely upon when we depict the relationship between subsistence labor and capitalism in this way, and how much is that depiction simply an article of faith in modernization ideologies? Although it has yet to be integrated in the academic mainstream, vastly more is known about the topic than one might think at first sight. But, unfortunately, the growth of knowledge in the social sciences is rarely cumulative and linear; it is moreover susceptible to the intellectual fashions of the day. Very important insights may remain

¹ Bauer, *From Subsistence to Exchange*, p. 7; a similar remark appears on p. 45.

virtually unknown, for example because they deviate too much from the prevailing popular views, or because they happen to be published in the “wrong” places, at an inauspicious time, or in “unreadable” languages. I think the research about subsistence labor presented by the “Bielefeld School” in development sociology in the late 1970s and early 1980s suffered this fate. At the time, the members of this School mainly tended to publish in “unreadable” German.² Moreover, in addition to becoming geographically dispersed through the past two decades, participants in the original project ended up pursuing very different intellectual routes. As a result, the School was no longer identified as a distinct group.

This relative disregard for the Bielefeld contributions is unfortunate, because they uncovered very important insights about the survival strategies of the laboring poor in the past and the present. In this chapter, I will reconstruct these insights – not by summarizing the whole (and in some parts inconsistent) *oeuvre* of the Bielefelders, but rather by salvaging selected ideas that in my view are still very pertinent.

The movement known as the “Bielefeld School” existed from the 1970s until the early 1990s, but it focused on the question of subsistence labor only during the first half of this period. The School originated in 1974, when Hans-Dieter Evers, aged 38 at the time, was appointed Professor of Development Planning and Development Policy at the newly established university in Bielefeld, West Germany. Evers had worked in countries such as Australia, the United States and Singapore, and specialized in the sociology of South and Southeast Asia.³ Evers soon gathered several Phd candidates and post-doctoral students around him, and initiated a discussion with them to elaborate a new theoretical perspective, known in German as the *Verflechtungsansatz* (Entanglement Approach), in which the role of subsistence labor was crucial. This approach resulted in a large number of field studies, in countries such as Benin, Egypt,

² In English-speaking circles the School became known primarily through a conference organized with Immanuel Wallerstein’s Fernand Braudel Center (Binghamton, NY) that resulted in an edited volume: Smith, Wallerstein, and Evers, *Households and the World-Economy*.

³ In his doctoral thesis, Evers addressed the rise of a class of industrial entrepreneurs on Sri Lanka: *Kulturwandel in Ceylon*. His early publications in English included the two edited volumes *Loosely Structured Social Systems*, and *Modernization in South-East Asia*.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Thailand, and Venezuela.⁴ An essay collection published in 1979 offered an interim report about the research. It was quite influential in German-speaking countries.⁵ From the mid-1980s, however, many members of the first generation of “Bielefelders” dispersed to continue their careers elsewhere.

The School became known for its distinctive working style, which Thomas Bierschenk describes as follows: “Social development issues arising from general social sciences are captured in their cultural context through lengthy field research and extensive knowledge of indigenous languages and subjected to comparative study within the team. The outcome is a close rapprochement between development sociology and ethnology [...]; while development sociology usually gives rise to research questions, the research methods and the interest in holistic reflections are more likely to arise from ethnology.”⁶

The Entanglement Approach

The Entanglement Approach owed its origin to a critical evaluation of a French debate in the 1960s and early 1970s about the “articulation of modes of production” in Africa. This debate revolved around the idea that in penetrating pre-capitalist areas, capitalism did not destroy older modes of production, but rather incorporated them, transforming them over time.⁷ South African miners are a well-known case in point: their wages could be kept low, because they sustained themselves partly by the subsistence labor of their wives in their villages of origin. Claude Meillassoux observed: “The agricultural self-sustaining communities, because of their comprehensiveness and their *raison d'être*, are able to fulfil functions that capitalism prefers not

⁴ The most important monographs are: Bennholdt-Thomsen, *Bauern in Mexiko*; Clauss, *Economic and Social Change among the Simalungun Batak*; Elwert, *Bauern und Staat in Westafrika*; Stauth, *Fellachen im Nildelta*; von Werlhof, *Wenn die Bauern wiederkommen*; Korff, *Bangkok*; Wong, *Peasants in the Making*.

⁵ Arbeitsgemeinschaft Bielefelder Entwicklungssoziologen, *Subsistenzproduktion und Akkumulation*.

⁶ Bierschenk, *Hans-Dieter Evers*, p. 10.

⁷ The best-known protagonists in the debate were Claude Meillassoux, Pierre-Philippe Rey and Emmanuel Terray. For critical reviews in English of this debate, see: Bradby, “Destruction of Natural Economy,” and Foster-Carter, “Modes of Production Controversy.”

to assume in the underdeveloped countries: the functions of social security."⁸ Meillassoux explored this theory in his well-known book *Femmes, greniers et capitaux* (1975).⁹

French anthropologists implicitly assumed that the different modes of production involved were related, yet separate economic systems. The Bielefelders disagreed. In a retrospective, Evers later remarked that the French articulation debate had been "misleading," "as no separate economic systems existed: the same members of society produced both for the market and for their own use. Instead of the entanglement of different *modes* of production, the entanglement of different *forms* of production within a single mode of production, i.e. the capitalist one, was fundamental to the analysis."¹⁰ The Bielefelder Georg Elwert had previously observed in Benin "that the border between production sectors could cut across the individuals concerned. The same person might perform subsistence production at home, commodity production in the field and wage labor on a plantation; the relationship between these respective sectors and the development of their entanglement, however, depended on an accumulation mediated by the world market."¹¹ From this perspective, subsistence production is not a separate mode of production (as Marshall Sahlins suggested)¹² but is more likely to be organized within all kinds of different relations of production.¹³ The primary unit of analysis is the household, although this unit is not a stable and clearly delineated structure, as is apparent in part from the frequent cases of marital instability. It implies that, "for women and children in particular, units other than the household may, in times of crises, be crucial to their survival."¹⁴

In addition to the articulation debate, the international feminist debate about domestic labor emerging from the late 1960s also inspired the Bielefeld School. Margaret Benston had set the stage early on, when she highlighted the

⁸ Meillassoux, "From Reproduction to Production," p. 102.

⁹ Published in English as *Maidens, Meal and Money*. The analysis of South African migration appears in Part II. Harold Wolpe elaborated on Meillassoux's analysis in "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power."

¹⁰ Evers, "Subsistenzproduktion, Markt und Staat," p. 138. Also see Evers and Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism*, p. 140.

¹¹ Elwert, "Überleben in Krisen," p. 343.

¹² Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*.

¹³ Elwert and Wong, "Thesen zum Verhältnis von Subsistenzproduktion und Warenproduktion," p. 257.

¹⁴ Wong, "Limits of Using the Household," pp. 58–9.

importance of “household labor, including child care” in 1969. Benston highlighted the fact that the labor of housewives was *unpaid*, and therefore “valueless” and utterly lacking in prestige: “In structural terms, the closest thing to the condition of women is the condition of others who are or were also outside of commodity production, i.e., serfs and peasants.”¹⁵ In the 1970s, a very extensive and sophisticated debate took place about the political economy of domestic labor, which simmered on until well into the 1980s. It clarified to the Bielefelders that subsistence production was omnipresent; it was a “condition and part of all social production (and was therefore inherently social in its own right), it was also a precondition for perpetuating all forms of commodity production and wage labor, even the most sophisticated ones.”¹⁶ While some households did not perform subsistence labor, those households were the exception to the rule, and usually well-off. The only proletarian reproducing without performing subsistence labor was “the ‘yuppie’ (Young Urban Professional) who, as a leading executive climbing the hierarchical ladder of the multi-national company he works for, orders a sandwich for lunch, and in the evening meets his ‘yuppie-wife’ (who is likely to be a professor or a stockbroker) over dinner in a restaurant, while at the couple’s rented apartment the maid is doing the household chare.”¹⁷

So the core ideas of the Bielefeld project were formulated early on: (i) the laboring poor *combine different survival strategies* (and consequently different modes of production as well); (ii) in all cases, a necessary component of this mix of strategies is *subsistence labor*, i.e. labor directed not at the market but at self-sustenance; (iii) one individual may pursue several survival strategies at once. This theoretical foundation was clear from 1976–77. While Evers was the chief source of inspiration, some feminist members of the group (Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof) were also influenced by Maria Mies (not a member of the group).¹⁸ Their perspective differed significantly from that of the other Bielefelders.

¹⁵ Benston, “Political Economy of Women’s Liberation,” pp. 15–6.

¹⁶ Schiel and Stauth, “Subsistenzproduktion und Unterentwicklung,” p. 134.

¹⁷ Evers and Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism*, p. 139; Evers, “Schattenwirtschaft,” p. 360.

¹⁸ The most significant programmed publication in English by the development sociologist Maria Mies (b. 1931) is: *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*.

What is subsistence labor?

The core concept of subsistence labor was of interest to the Bielefelders not only for analytical reasons but also as a rudimentary version of a possible alternative to capitalism. In their program statement from 1977, they stated: "By elevating *subsistence reproduction* to a central position rather than economic growth, i.e. the extension of a market economy, we hope to contribute toward the development of a social theory, that is directed towards the satisfaction of basic human needs in the first place rather than capital accumulation."¹⁹

The Bielefelders were not always very forthcoming about their precise definition of subsistence labor. Sometimes they limited the concept's scope to production of use values, while at other times they extended it to include commercial activities as well, provided that the money earned through such activities returned directly to the household. And sometimes they restricted the concept to goods and services, whereas in other situations they expanded it to encompass producing and raising children. Overall, four descriptions appear to have resulted, as shown in Table 14.1.

Table 14.1
Four definitions of subsistence labor

	Production of use values	Production of use values plus petty commodity production and trade
Goods and services	I	II
Goods, services and childcare	III	IV

Definition I is used in Evers' work: "According to our definition, subsistence production comprises all production of goods and services intended not for the market but for personal consumption by the producers. Subsistence production is therefore focused on use value rather than on exchange value and is not directly driven by market and price mechanisms."²⁰

According to Definition II, in addition to the labor of housewives, subsistence labor comprises "production by small farmers, small artisans, peddling,

¹⁹ Bennholdt-Thomsen *et al.*, "Underdevelopment," p. 3.

²⁰ Evers, "Subsistenzproduktion und Hausarbeit," p. 471.

self-employment in the service sector, seasonal work, migrant labor, prostitution, etc.”²¹

Definition III is derived from Maria Mies, who describes subsistence production as “the *production of life* in its widest sense, the production of use values for the day-to-day sustenance as well as the production of new life.”²² According to Mies, the elements of subsistence labor include “a variety of human activities ranging from pregnancy, the birth of children, to production, processing and preparation of food, clothing, making a home, cleaning, as well as the satisfaction of emotional and sexual needs.”²³

Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen applies Definition IV in arguing that the product of subsistence labor is measured in terms of use values, even if this product ultimately becomes a commodity. “The housewife does not think (consciously at any rate) of her labour process as producing the commodity ‘labour power’. As far as she is concerned, she is rearing human beings and working for the well-being of her children and husband. In effect, what she is creating becomes a commodity. The same applies to peasants. Even when they cultivate cash-crops, a use-value oriented way of treating the crop prevails, and it is exactly this attitude which makes this form of agricultural production so profitable.”²⁴

Interpretations I and III appear to predominate in the studies of the Bielefeld School.²⁵ I prefer Definition III, as it clearly distinguishes between the production of use values and the production of commodities, and acknowledges that the reproduction of labor power in capitalism comprises three elements: “*sustenance* of the workers during periods of employment (i.e. *reconstitution* of immediate labour-power); *maintenance* during periods of unemployment

²¹ Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Entwicklungssoziologen, *Forschungskonzeption*, p. 5. See also Evers, *Urban and Rural Subsistence Reproduction*, p. 14.

²² *Lacemakers of Narsapur*, p. 3. This description is perfectly compatible with Meillassoux’s non-feminist one: “reproduction of life as a precondition to production.” Meillassoux, “From Reproduction to Production”, p. 101.

²³ Mies, “Capitalist Development and Subsistence Reproduction,” pp. 27–8.

²⁴ Bennholdt-Thomsen, “Subsistence Production and Extended Reproduction,” p. 20.

²⁵ The feminist conceptualizations of Bennholdt-Thomsen, Mies and von Werlhof have been a driving force behind debate. See Braig and Lentz, “Wider die Enthistorisierung der Marxschen Werttheorie”; Beer, “Marx auf die Füße gestellt?”; von Werlhof, “Lohn ist ein ‘Wert’, Leben nicht?”; Obermaier, “Strategien zur Förderung von Frauen in Entwicklungsländern”; Evers, “Subsistenzproduktion und Hausarbeit.”

(due to stoppages, ill-health, etc.); *replacement* by the breeding of offspring."²⁶ Whatever definition is preferred, however, two subsequent questions consistently arise.

Firstly, each of the definitions revolves around goods and services, but what are these goods and services? There are good reasons for the view that goods and services produced and consumed include both "circulating" consumer items, as well as "fixed" objects such as housing.²⁷ "In many societies, particularly in rural areas, houses are often built by villagers themselves. That means the provision of housing is again part of direct subsistence production." Moreover: "The house has to be cleaned, repaired and maintained in order to provide continuous living facilities."²⁸

Secondly, if we determine that the results of subsistence labor are for "personal use," *who* performs this subsistence labor, and *who* consumes the results? In his study of a village in South Benin (1976–78), Georg Elwert observes that individuals often perform subsistence labor for other individuals, including individuals outside the household: "Traditionally a large, but nowadays diminishing share of the labor performance and the goods is transferred outside the production unit. In the past, young men known as *donkpe dida* worked the fields of the elderly (*mexo*) who were unable to perform such work themselves anymore. Several *obligations* to help through performing labor or giving food to parents, parents-in-law and friends continue to this day."²⁹ From a different perspective, Wolfgang Clauss reached a similar conclusion based on research he conducted in North Sumatra: "Household members may not share all their income, and consumption at kinship, neighborhood or village feasts may provide a substantial share of total consumption."³⁰ In other words, we should recognize that not all subsistence labor occurs within households only for the benefit of those households.³¹

²⁶ Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money*, p. 100. I disagree, however, with the idea of labelling "the satisfaction of emotional and sexual needs" as subsistence labor, as Maria Mies does. Ursula Beer has rightly criticized this excessively broad interpretation as "labor metaphysics." See Beer, "Zur politischen Ökonomie der Frauenarbeit," p. 256.

²⁷ See also Chapter 10.

²⁸ Evers, *Urban and Rural Subsistence Reproduction*, pp. 3–5.

²⁹ Elwert, "Überleben in Krisen," p. 365.

³⁰ Clauss, *Economic and Social Change among the Simalungun Batak*, pp. 24–5.

³¹ Also see Wong, "Limits of Using the Household," p. 62.

Forms of entanglement

In their studies, the Bielefelders focused on households that combined subsistence labor with *either* commodity production (e.g. farmers that grew cash crops) *or* wage labor.³² Two different kinds of entanglements can therefore be distinguished:

Entanglement of petty commodity production and subsistence labor

The different combinations of subsistence labor and commodity production are infinite. At one end of the spectrum, households require little subsistence labor to survive, because the proceeds from the sale of self-produced commodities are sufficient. Households nevertheless continuing subsistence production in such situations probably do so, because the members value their use value (e.g. self-produced or home-grown food tastes better) or traditionalism. At the other end, some households are unable to survive without regular subsistence labor. Between the two extremes, households might be able to survive without subsistence labor under ordinary circumstances, but resort to subsistence labor during times of crisis.³³

Bennholdt-Thomsen analyzes the relationship between subsistence labor and market production in Rio Grande (Chiapas, Mexico), where products for personal consumption are set aside from those intended for sale. Farmers plant one section of their land with maize and beans (known as *milpa*) and another section with coffee. "This combination is the classical form in which small farmers produce mono-cultural products for the world market in developing countries all over the world: part of the land is set aside for growing basic staples."³⁴ They divide their farmland as follows: "About half the land is used for cultivating coffee plants, and the other half is reserved for the basic staples maize and beans. In addition, they control a specific section of an

³² Spatial considerations are relevant as well. Subsistence production and capitalist production may become entangled through migration, as has happened in South Africa, or through on-site combination. The Bielefelders have conducted little research on the migration scenario. But see Stauth, *Die Fellachen im Nildelta*, pp. 185–96, about the Tarahil system of Egyptian seasonal migrants that built the Suez Canal.

³³ Elwert and Wong, "Thesen zum Verhältnis von Subsistenzproduktion und Warenproduktion," p. 262.

³⁴ Bennholdt-Thomsen, *Bauern in Mexiko*, p. 79.

unusable slope or fallow land to gather firewood. In most cases, about half the land for cultivating maize and beans lies fallow as well.”³⁵ (Diagram 14.1)

Schema 14.1
Use of farmland in Rio Grande (Mexico)

cafetal (coffee)	milpa (maize and beans)	monte (brushwood)
	acahual (fallow)	

The Chiapas farmers seem to have entered the world coffee market around 1930. Their accession meant that subsistence production diminished. Previously, for example, they grew cotton to make clothes and sugar cane for their own sugar consumption. All this activity has disappeared.³⁶ The rise of commodity production has thus altered subsistence production. “Clearly, analyses of subsistence production should consistently consider cash crop production as well.”³⁷

Entanglement of wage labor and subsistence labor

In 1979, Evers examined combinations of wage labor and subsistence labor in Jakarta based on a questionnaire sent to 1,083 households comprising 5,789 persons.³⁸ Evers claimed that the sample reflected *kampung* dwellers of the Indonesian capital, who accounted for some eighty per cent of the total Jakarta population.³⁹ His original hypothesis had been that the importance of subsistence production was inversely proportional to household income, but this suspicion was only partially confirmed. “Indeed, for very poor households subsistence labor, although absolutely necessary for their survival, constituted a smaller consumption compared to somewhat ‘richer’ households. The access to land and resources, or the availability of ‘basic tools’ for domestic production like the sewing machine, the cooking stove or a bicycle, is as important as the contribution of income earners of the household with

³⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 81.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁸ See especially Evers, “Subsistence Production and the Jakarta ‘Floating Mass’”; Evers, “Contribution of Urban Subsistence Production”; Evers, Betke, and Pitomo, *Komplexität der Grundbedürfnisse*.

³⁹ Evers, “Contribution of Urban Subsistence Production,” p. 92.

wage-labor in the formal or informal sector."⁴⁰ Table 14.2 summarizes the most important quantitative findings in Evers' survey.

Table 14.2
Subsistence production in Jakarta kampungs, July–August 1979, as a percentage of the total value of consumption per household at local market prices

Subsistence Production	Number of Households (%)
0	54 (5.0)
0.1–10	231 (21.3)
10.1–20	435 (40.2)
20.1–30	220 (20.3)
30.1 and more	143 (13.2)
Total	1,083 (100.0)

Source: Evers, *Subsistence Production and Wage Labour in Jakarta*, p. 21.

On average, subsistence production covered 18% of the monthly household expenditure.⁴¹ These activities covered a broad range: "Vegetables grown on tiny plots between the kampung houses, chickens raised in makeshift huts, fishing at the beach or in urban rivers contribute not an insignificant part of food production. [...] Construction of houses and their maintenance accounts for another big share of subsistence production. Waste materials like old cases from nearby industries, nails, broken tiles etc. are collected and used for the construction of housing. Yearly floods and occasional heavy rainfalls make the reconstruction and repair of housing a permanent activity into which kampung dwellers have to invest a good deal of their labour."⁴² Transfers from the rural subsistence sector also occurred, as: "Gifts from relatives, part of the harvest of a plot of land, in which one still might have a share in one's home village, contribute to urban household income and explain the sheaves of paddy, dry fish, or bundles of vegetables one might see even in the most densely settled urban kampung."⁴³

As part of a parallel study in Bangkok slums, Rüdiger Korff examined the time invested in subsistence labor. He concluded that wage labor covered

⁴⁰ Evers and Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism*, p. 140.

⁴¹ Evers, *Subsistence Production and Wage Labour in Jakarta*, p. 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

about 24 percent of the consumption among lower income groups.⁴⁴ Both studies thus highlighted the importance of subsistence production as a survival strategy among urban wage earners in Southeast Asia.

Resources of subsistence labor

Subsistence production is a labor process like any other. Producing food and habitats requires resources, especially land, but also seeds, livestock and the like. Some of these resources need to be purchased in many cases, while others do not. Access to such resources largely determines the measure of self-sufficiency among the laboring poor. A study of Brazilian *favelas*, for example, suggests that the importance of subsistence production is inversely proportional to the population density: the higher the population density, the scarcer the resources.⁴⁵

Evers *et al.* describes four typical situations to indicate the variability of the relationship between subsistence labor and monetary income (obtained through petty commodity production and/or wage labor):⁴⁶

- In the first situation, households have extensive subsistence resources, for example arable land. Even if a few circulating means of production (e.g. salt or paraffin) need to be purchased, the share of subsistence activities in domestic consumption may be considerable – though the relative importance of subsistence income continuously diminishes as monetary income increases.⁴⁷
- The second situation corresponds roughly with the relationships found in the Jakarta slums: the very poorest have minimal monetary income and few subsistence resources. Many become beggars. Those who are somewhat better off have a higher monetary income, as well as a higher subsistence

⁴⁴ Evers and Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism*, p. 141. Korff, *Bangkok*; Idem, "Informeller Sektor oder Marktwirtschaft?"; Evers and Korff, *Urban Subsistence Production in Bangkok*.

⁴⁵ Elwert, Evers, and Wilkens, "Suche nach Sicherheit," p. 287.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Scholars observing this situation include Georg Elwert, who studied in Benin in the 1970s. Elwert and Wong, "Thesen zum Verhältnis von Subsistenzproduktion und Warenproduktion."

income. Among individuals who are still better off in material respects, the importance of subsistence labor decreases relative to the rise in monetary income. Researchers are apt to confuse this situation with the first one, because the lowest social stratum is often overlooked: “The cardboard hut inhabited by an old widow with no relatives is easy to disregard, and beggars sleeping on the pavements are not counted as residents.”⁴⁸ As regards Bangkok, Korff observes: “Talks about social and economic differentiation in the slum with several persons indicated that the households regarded as very poor are small households which lack sufficient labor. In these households nearly all labor power has to be used for earning an income so that there is simply no more time left for subsistence production. These households find themselves in the dilemma to have a low income and high expenditures because some services and goods provided through subsistence production in larger households have to be purchased by households with little available labor power.”⁴⁹

- In the third situation, households need to purchase many resources, before they can perform subsistence labor. In some cases, the very poorest farmers have to sell their entire harvest to purchase all consumer items, including food. The wealthier farmers can increase their harvest through double-cropping and use of tractors, and can afford to purchase the resources for subsistence production. This case usually leads to a specifically gendered division of labor, in which women become responsible for subsistence labor and men for monetary income. This practice occurs in Africa, where male employees of state-owned companies or large foreign firms earn relatively high wages, and are able to purchase tracts of land for their wives to farm.
- Finally, in the fourth situation, subsistence resources, such as land, are scarce, and only the more affluent can afford subsistence production. This happens on plantations, where the very poorest are forced to pay rent and purchase their food, and do not even have their own garden. The (male) overseers on the plantations, however, have plots of land which their wives farm.

⁴⁸ Elwert, Evers, and Wilkens, “Suche nach Sicherheit,” p. 288.

⁴⁹ Evers and Korff, *Urban Subsistence Production in Bangkok*, p. 22.

In combination, the different cases suggest a curvilinear association between monetary income and the relative importance of subsistence labor for the household.⁵⁰

The feminist perspective

The feminist wing of the Bielefeld School highlighted the gendered nature of the relationship between subsistence sector and market sector. Generally speaking, the feminist subsistence theoreticians (Bennholdt-Thomsen, Mies, and von Werlhof) presented a three-step argument:

- Firstly, they labelled subsistence labor (which, as stated, they perceive from a very broad perspective) as the domain of women. According to von Werlhof: "It is fundamental and typical for women to be non-wage laborers and typical for men to be wage labourers. (A female wage labourer is always simultaneously a non-wage labourer.)"⁵¹
- Secondly, they noted that female subsistence workers are therefore in a different class position than male wage workers or petty commodity producers. This is a "combined class position in which work as a whole [is] subsumed under capital," comparable to "the position of a tenant or small peasant," and "simultaneously" encompassing "slavery and serfdom."⁵²
- Thirdly, they regarded the quest to liberate subsistence labor from its capitalist incursion as the main objective in the fight against capitalism. Free subsistence labor breaks "the spiritual and cultural shackles of the growth ideology" and liberates women and nature.⁵³

This qualitatively different definition of subsistence labor makes a still more compelling case for the conclusion that capitalism *cannot exist* without subsistence labor.⁵⁴ If that is the case, we should analyse capitalism not as a

⁵⁰ Also see the contemporary Russian case study in Clarke *et al.*, "Myth of the Urban Peasant."

⁵¹ von Werlhof, "Women's Work," pp. 18–9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵³ Bennholdt-Thomsen, "Einleitung," p. 14.

⁵⁴ Claude Meillassoux suggests that, in the long term, even production of human life might undergo a capitalist reorganization. He regards the Nazis as pioneers in this

wage-labor relation, but as a *double* relation of wage-labor versus subsistence labor. When children are produced and raised through subsistence labor, the practice is a form of “continuing original accumulation.”⁵⁵

Importance for global labor history

The insights of the Bielefeld School are helpful in constructing an analytical context for a global historiography of labor relationships. True, the Bielefelders studied only labor relationships in which physical coercion was not an important factor, and therefore they had no sense of unfree labor (slavery, indentured labor). But extrapolating their analysis in order to apply it to these other labor relationships should be possible as well.

In this respect, we should distinguish clearly between the transition from subsistence labor to commodified labor on the one hand, and the commodification of subsistence labor as such on the other hand. In *the transition from subsistence labor to commodified labor*, survival of a family or household becomes progressively dependent on selling or leasing labor, or labor products, to others. This transition may arise from a lack of necessary resources for subsistence labor (as the Bielefelders have demonstrated), or from the presence of good social insurance. And this transition is reversible. Time and again, for example, working-class families respond to a major loss of income by increasing subsistence labor. They clearly applied this strategy during the de-industrialization process in Northern Italy in the seventeenth century, and have done so repeatedly since then, for example in periods of mass redundancies or underpayment, such as in Eastern Europe and Russia today.⁵⁶ The anthropologist June Nash emphasizes that this “step backward” is possible only

field. “The *Lebensborn* system, under cover of its racist ideology, was also a ruthless experiment in the capitalist production of labour-power through the gradual elimination of the family.” Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money*, p. 144. Fortunately, this dystopia still appears very remote.

⁵⁵ von Werlhof, “Women’s Work,” p. 18.

⁵⁶ Hersche, “Deindustrialisierung und Reagrarisierung”; Memon and Lee-Smith, “Urban Agriculture in Kenya”; Hofbauer, “Subsistenz in Osteuropa.” Also see Teodor Shanin’s inspiring note “Expoliary Economies.” A similar mechanism existed on slave plantations as well. As the proceeds of the cash crop diminished, slaves might be encouraged to devote more time to subsistence activities. See e.g. Mandle, “Plantation Economy.”

when sufficient subsistence resources are available. She describes how unemployed families in Pittsfield, Massachusetts have tried since the 1970s to make ends meet through activities such as gardening and fishing, although “there was a shrinking resource base, since the streams and lakes that had provided abundant fish were polluted by toxic wastes from the factories, and housing developments and malls had taken over the fields and woods on the western and southern borders.”⁵⁷

Commodification of subsistence labor as such refers to the fact that despite the production of use values through subsistence labor, components of the labor process may nonetheless be commodities. Like every labor process, subsistence labor may be broken down into three components: (i) the labor object (the “raw material”), (ii) the means of labor (“tools”), and (iii) labor power. Each of these three components may or may not have the commodity form (Figure 14.1).

Figure 14.1
Components of subsistence labor

	Not Commodified	Commodified
Labor object	A1	A2
Means of labor	B1	B2
Labor power	C1	C2

All these combinations seem to exist in practice. In one household, a wage-dependent cook might prepare home-grown vegetables on a store-bought stove (A1–B2–C2). In another household, the unpaid housewife manually washes and serves vegetables purchased on the market (A2–B1–C1). Over time, the trend has shifted from the left column (A1–B1–C1) to the right column (A2–B2–C2), although this shift is rarely complete. Some of the components of subsistence labor remain non-commodified in most cases. Subsistence labor using commodified components requires money, whereas subsistence labor using non-commodified components calls for other resources, such as land, seeds, and labor time.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Nash, “Global Integration and Subsistence Insecurity,” p. 21.

⁵⁸ This idea immediately raises the question as to what the value-theoretical relationship is between the subsistence and the market sector. Georg Elwert and Diana Wong have argued that *no* value transfer takes place from the subsistence sector to the commercial sector, and that the labor power of wage workers is therefore not sold “below its value.” “The labor theory of value requires only that a product be sold

The Bielefelders criticized the well-known Indian “mode of production debate” (1968–78), because the participants in this debate overlooked these complex gradations of subsistence labor.⁵⁹ In essence, this debate contrasted two views. At one side of the debate, authors associated share-cropping and other forms of dependent labor with feudal relationships; on the other side, authors inferred that capitalist relationships had emerged based on the presence of wage payments. They did not take into consideration that a substantial share of Indian farmers subsists “from self-produced material *pure* use values (i.e. ones that do not temporarily acquire an exchange value),” whereas in developed capitalism reproduction of labor power is far more market dependent: “While in the Indian case direct reproductive labor generates the material inputs for this reproduction as well, under capitalism such labor is limited to recycling and refinement, while the material inputs themselves are obtained on the market.”⁶⁰ Commodification of subsistence labor in South Asia was thus far less advanced than in developed capitalism.

Conclusion

The Bielefeld School’s main innovative achievement was its review of the *systematic* link between subsistence production and capitalism, after Meillassoux and other scholars had noted an *incidental* link. The prior absence of such an

for at least the sum of its factor costs. A contribution from subsistence production, however, is not a ‘cost’, as it derives by definition from purely use-value oriented production and therefore lacks any exchange value. Consequently, a wage that is ‘less than the minimum subsistence level’ for a migrant may be perfectly sufficient to cover the monetary *cost* of living, without the means necessary to stay alive (including self-produced use values) being even approximately covered by this wage.” Elwert and Wong, “Thesen zum Verhältnis von Subsistenzproduktion und Warenproduktion,” p. 266. Likewise, goods production does not involve a value transfer from subsistence, although there may of course be a non-monetary subvention. A purely immanent interpretation of the value theory is therefore insufficient for comprehending relationships in which subsistence labor is an important survival strategy.

⁵⁹ The most important contributions are published in Patnaik, *Agrarian Relations and Accumulation*.

⁶⁰ Evers and Schiel, “Expropriation der unmittelbaren Produzenten,” pp. 287–8. “The modes-of-production discussion is more concerned with a differentiation between a growing number of modes of production which are homogeneous in themselves, and its mosaic-like compilation does not help in defining the character of a social and economic formation.” von Werlhof, “Women’s Work,” p. 17.

initiative is in retrospect rather remarkable. Alexander Chayanov, for example, observed that the percentage of the commodified output was higher in some farmers' households in Russian villages than in others. He concluded from this pattern merely that two different "types" of households existed, namely those characterized by "natural economy" (subsistence production) and those driven by commodity production. The idea that both types might be combined systematically, but in changing compositions, does not appear to have occurred to Chayanov.⁶¹

The introduction of subsistence labor in the analysis of production relationships explains a few paradoxes:⁶²

- Commodity producers or wage workers who are able to survive largely by means of subsistence labor can take a far more flexible approach to the market than they could without major subsistence support. If money is required, small farmers with a subsistence base can sell their products at prices far lower than "normal" ones, and wage workers are by analogy able to accept far lower wages than "normal" as well.
- Producers who generate both commodities and means of subsistence are proletarianizing at a far slower pace than "normal," given the greater efficiency of capitalist large-scale industry. This slowness is attributable to their minimal monetary cost of living, which enables them to remain in business despite low cash revenues.
- In many cases, subsistence production continues, even where it has become less profitable than commodity production. As a form of insurance, after all, it enables households to survive in periods when commodity prices or money-wages are in decline.
- The relationship between the subsistence sector and resistance is an important issue that merits additional research. Janice Perlman has argued that workers and small farmers with a solid subsistence base can be mobilized for revolutionary activities more easily than people who have nothing to lose but their shackles.⁶³ The Bielefelders have also defended the view "that relatively strong subsistence production is a better reserve for surviving

⁶¹ Chayanov, *Theory of Peasant Economy*, pp. 123–5 and 25.

⁶² Also see Elwert and Wong, "Thesen zum Verhältnis von Subsistenzproduktion und Warenproduktion," pp. 267–8.

⁶³ Perlman, *Myth of Marginality*.

periods of struggle (including loss of income by going on strike).” In their view, “the effort to protect this specific subsistence base has been pivotal in many political conflicts.”⁶⁴

In the light of the findings of the Bielefeld school, Peter Bauer’s remark “that advance from subsistence production to wider exchange is indispensable for a society’s escape from extreme poverty” appears somewhat cynical. After all, if means of subsistence disappear without replacement by robust social insurance provisions, the likelihood of extreme poverty *increases*, rather than decreases. The great reluctance which small farmers and wage workers have shown in the past to abandon their own subsistence production is therefore entirely understandable.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Elwert, Evers, Wilkens, “Suche nach Sicherheit,” p. 289. Also see Hartmann, *Subsistenzkrise und Rebellion*, and of course Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant*.

⁶⁵ “Recent scholarship confirms that it was *subsistence adversity* (high taxes, chronic indebtedness, inadequate acreage, loss of subsidiary employment opportunities, enclosure of common resources, dissolution of patrimonial obligations, and so on) not entrepreneurial opportunity that typically promoted the turn to cash-crop cultivation.” Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p. 289.

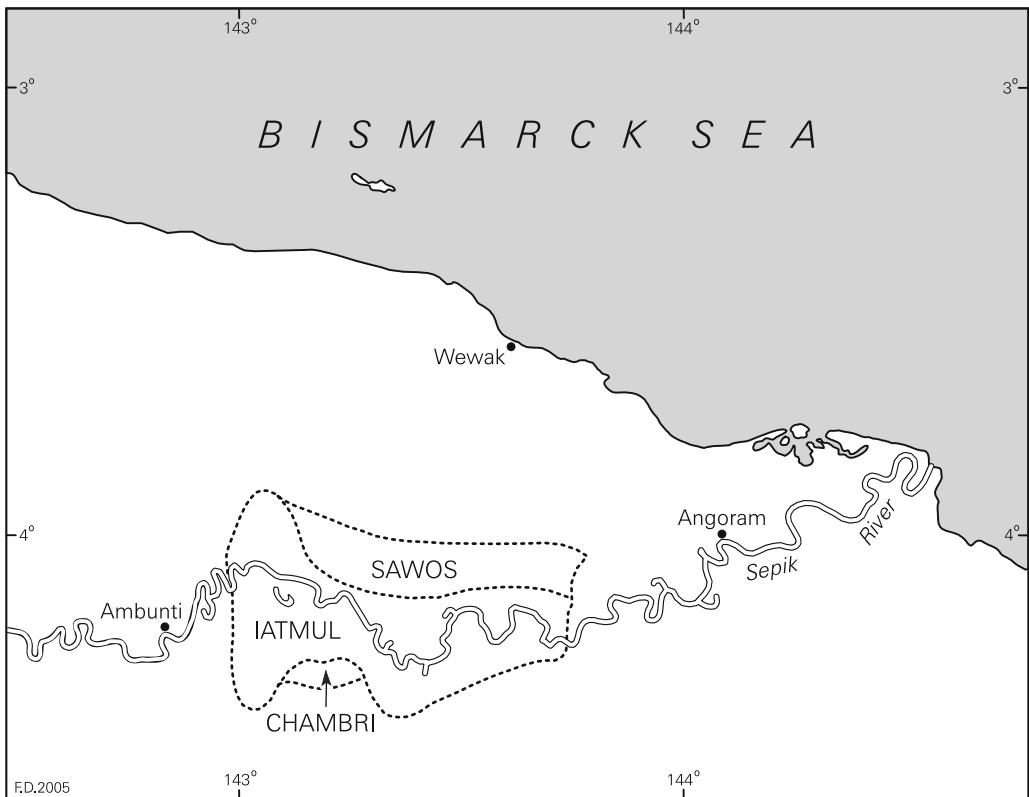
Chapter Fifteen

The Iatmul experience

In “decentering” their traditional approach, I think labor historians can benefit from ethnological studies. It is not uncommon for different ethnologists to visit and study a certain ethnic group or region over the course of several decades. And while the resulting publications vary in quality and cover a range of different aspects of the same local society, the *combination* of different works may shed light on longer-term developments – especially when the ethnological material is complemented by oral history, the memoirs of concerned officials and research in the archives of colonial states, missionary organizations and the like.

I will illustrate the idea in this chapter with ethnological findings about the Iatmul, a people in the Middle Sepik region (East Sepik Province) of Papua New Guinea that experienced progressively greater encounters with wage labor. The Iatmul lived near the Sepik River, and were thus fairly easy to reach by boat. In addition, they produced artistic wood-carvings. For both these reasons, the Iatmul became fairly well known by the first half of the twentieth century; over the years, they were visited both by art dealers and museum professionals and by missionaries, government officials and especially ethnologists from Germany, Britain, the United States and Switzerland. The reports drafted by these

Maps 15.1 and 15.2
 Papua New Guinea showing the East Sepik region and the area inhabited by the Iatmul people.



visitors over the course of nearly a century detail not only the lives of the Iatmul in the Sepik region, but also – at a later stage – the lives of Iatmul migrants in Rabaul and other cities. Ethnographers have also studied peoples living nearby the Iatmul, especially the Sawos and the Chambri, and have provided additional context-related information.¹ Most of the literature resulting from this research is published in English and German.

The Iatmul before incorporation²

At the start of the twentieth century, shortly after they were “discovered” by German settlers, the Iatmul lived in 20 to 30 villages with 100 to 300 inhabitants each, along the banks of the Sepik, the largest river of Papua New Guinea. Each village comprised fifteen to twenty clans. The right to certain economic resources (e.g. fishing water) pertained to clans, rather than to individuals. The society was exogamous: men and women from the same clan were not allowed to marry each other. Thus each marriage affirmed a relational, economic, political and ceremonial bond between two clans. This tradition connected every clan in a village with all other clans in that village. In addition, each village had generation cohorts with their own name, as well as one or several large “men’s houses”.³

The Iatmul operated a subsistence economy, dominated by women who supplied approximately eighty percent of the food products. In addition to catching fish daily, they produced fish traps, nets, bags and baskets, cared for the younger children and prepared meals. The men were primarily artisans.

¹ The German ethnologist Markus Schindlbeck studied the Sawo. His magnum opus is: *Sago bei den Sawos*. Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington, two ethnologists from the United States, studied the Chambri and published several articles and various books on the subject: Gewertz, *Sepik River Societies*; Errington and Gewertz, *Cultural Alternatives*; Gewertz and Errington, *Twisted Histories*; Gewertz and Errington, *Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea*.

² I am using the “incorporation” concept in the manner of Hall, “Incorporation in the World-System.” Hall has devised a typology of the stages that non-state societies experience along their path toward capitalist integration.

³ Stanek, “Neuguinea”; Weiss, “Kulturspezifik der Geschlechterdifferenz”; Wassmann, *Gesang an den Fliegenden Hund*, pp. 15–51. Because the Iatmul and neighboring peoples did not use script, their history from the nineteenth century and before has to be reconstructed from oral accounts, with all the resulting methodological problems. See Roscoe, “Who are the Ndu?,” and Roscoe and Newton, “Materials for a Iatmul Chronicle.”

They built houses, carved canoes and paddles, and made weapons and some of the work tools. Their woodcarvings were very artistic. Men and women gardened together. Margaret Mead later summarized the distribution of labor between women and men as follows:

Here the women work fairly steadily but cheerfully, in groups, without any sense of being inordinately driven. They are responsible for the daily catch of fish, for the fish that is taken to the market, for gathering firewood and carrying water, for cooking, and for plaiting the great cylindrical mosquito-basquets that are miniature rooms to protect human beings against the ravenous mosquitoes. For most of their waking hours they are occupied, and they display very little fatigue, or irritation against the continuous exactions of housekeeping and fishing. Men's work however, is almost entirely episodic – house-building, canoe-building, communal hunts for crocodile in the dry season or for small rodents by burning down the grassland, or devising the elaborate theatrical settings for ceremonial. [...] When tasks are performed, they are performed with a great display of energy and effort, the whole body is involved, and Iatmul males complain vigorously of being tired after such efforts.⁴

The Iatmul worked autonomously:

Whether a task is to be done or not, where it is to be done, how long it may take, how large the group is to be, and whether particular persons are to take part are matters to be decided by the individuals concerned in accordance with the situation at the moment. No one is entitled to dictate the tempo at which a job is done, or when the work must be finished; every working individual determines this himself. Communal decisions of short-term validity are reached in loose cooperation with other members of the group and in direct relation to technical necessities or personal needs. Work may be interrupted by intervals of relaxation, joking, or ritual, as desired.⁵

In a sense, the Iatmul formed a cohesive system with the neighboring Sawos and Chambri peoples. The Chambri supplied mosquito bags and stone

⁴ Mead, *Male and Female*, pp. 170–1.

⁵ Stanek, "Social Structure of the Iatmul," p. 266.

tools, while the Sawos provided sago in exchange for fish.⁶ The Iatmul also exchanged stone tools acquired from the Chambri for valuable shells (ritual money), which the Sawos had obtained indirectly from coastal residents, and used them for the bridal dowry.⁷ The Iatmul were central cogs within this mini-system: they were supremely powerful in violent conflicts, as they were more numerous than the Chambri and Sawos and had larger villages. They demonstrated their supremacy through occasional headhunting campaigns, especially against the Sawos.⁸ As Gregory Bateson notes, the Iatmul viewed headhunting as “the main source of pride of the village, while associated with the pride is prosperity, fertility and the male sexual act.” Men who brought home the head of an opponent received a hero’s welcome amid major festivities. “Every victory was celebrated by great dances and ceremonial which involved the whole village. The killer was the hero of these and he was at the same time the host at the feasts which accompany them.”⁹

The earliest reports about the Iatmul are from the German colonial era.¹⁰ Two expeditions were important: one in 1908–10, and another in 1912–3. The first expedition primarily provided insight into the material culture. The second, which included Richard Thurnwald (who later became a renowned ethnologist), yielded considerable social, geographic, and biological knowledge; the reports comprise information about trading practices, war customs, transport along waterways and over land, and production of sago and canoes. The information contained in the reports about the everyday cultures of the Sepik

⁶ Whether the exchanges between the Sawos and the Iatmul were equal, is a topic of debate. Measured in labor time, the exchange appears equal (Schindlbeck, *Sago bei den Sawos*, p. 552), although the labor intensity indicates an unequal exchange, as producing sago is harder work than catching fish (Gewertz, *Sepik River Societies*, pp. 21–2).

⁷ “The shells travelled from the coast, through trading arrangements between Arapesh, Abelam, and Sawos men, until they finally arrived in Iatmul territory.” Gewertz, *Sepik River Societies*, p. 104.

⁸ Gewertz offers a detailed and astute analysis of this system in *Sepik River Societies*, chapters 1 and 2. “In return for supplying the stone tools and mosquito bags which the Iatmul traded for these valuables [of the Sawos], the Chambri were allowed to remain unmolested.” Gewertz, *Sepik River Societies*, p. 80. The question as to whether this system of exchange arose primarily from “political” or “economic” motives is a subject of debate. See Bowden, “Historical Ethnography or Conjectural History?.”

⁹ Bateson, *Naven*, p. 141.

¹⁰ Fischer, *Hamburger Südsee-Expedition*; Schindlbeck, “Art of the Headhunters”; idem, “Deutsche wissenschaftliche Expeditionen”; Buschmann, “Colonizing Anthropology.”

residents is substantially less useful, as the descriptions are very “external” and superficial.¹¹

The reports reveal that these scholars served the colonialist cause. Expedition participant Walter Behrmann related: “To prepare the recruitment for European coastal plantations, we decided to bring a few people from Malu along on the boat trip to the coast [the main camp of the expedition was at Malu to the West of the Iatmul] to help them get used to being under European supervision for brief or extended periods. We convinced ten people from Malu to join us. We travelled with our fully loaded steamboat and several barges almost to the mouth [of the Sepik], where the native village of Karajundo is located.”¹² The Iatmul and the neighboring peoples remained entirely outside the scope of the German administration, and in this respect were an “external arena” (Thomas Hall).¹³

The beginnings of incorporation

This situation started to change in the 1920s, when at least three major transitions occurred.

Firstly, a *Pax Australiana* was established. As is known, German New Guinea officially became an Australian mandate (New Guinea Territory) in 1921. In the years that followed, the inland areas gradually came to be managed by patrols, with sweeping consequences. Headhunting was prohibited. Each village was assigned a “board,” comprising a chief and a sub-chief to serve as liaisons with the colonial powers.¹⁴ Thirdly, ethnic relations that had previously been fluid became fixed. “[The] Middle Sepik Iatmul, Chambri, Sawos, and Hills peoples were defined as belonging to particular cultural groups, liv-

¹¹ Otto Reche reported about the first expedition in *Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss*. He explains: “We had to restrict the essence of our study to superficial aspects of the material culture [..].” All operations were affected by one essential problem: “we had no interpreter familiar with the indigenous languages along the central part of the river; this complicated communicating with the natives enormously [..].” (p. 1) Walter Behrmann, *Im Stromgebiet des Sepik*, offers a report of the second expedition. Participants in the expedition produced a wealth of publications. See e.g.: Behrmann, “Verkehrs- und Handelsgeographie.”

¹² Behrmann, *Im Stromgebiet des Sepik*, p. 274.

¹³ “The [German] government’s writ ran out fifteen kilometres inland in most parts of the colony.” Griffin, Nelson and Firth, *Papua New Guinea*, p. 43.

¹⁴ After World War II, they were replaced by a “Local Government Council.”

ing within particular and limited territories, and in specific and permanently bounded villages. No longer could Nyaurengai become Korogo, or Korogo cease to exist, because these peoples and places had been fixed on maps and recorded in census books."¹⁵

Secondly, temporary labor migration began, when the labor reservoir from the coastal areas was gradually depleted.¹⁶ Recruiters tried to lure men with Western steel tools, since the League of Nations had decreed that they were not allowed to force anybody to work for them. Introduction of the head tax (effective in the 1930s) also served the purposes of the recruiters. "Patrol Officers were empowered to collect a Head Tax of 10 shillings a year from every able bodied man living in every pacified village. Certain categories of men were, however, exempt from the tax, and among these categories were men serving under indenture. The Head Tax, therefore, induced many men to sell their labor who may not have otherwise done so."¹⁷ Most of the migrant laborers were the younger men from the villages. The number of migrant laborers absent from the Sepik climbed from 152 in 1924–25 to 2,763 in 1937–38.¹⁸

At first, fewer Iatmul are believed to have joined this labor migration than, for example, the Chambri. Gewertz provides an interesting explanation for this difference. She argues that the traditional socio-economic system of the Iatmul was externally oriented. The Iatmul lived along the banks of the river, and were ahead of their neighbors in military and economic respects. "Their position on the Sepik River allowed them to continue in this entrepreneurial role after the European intrusion, as missionaries, patrol officers, and explorers willingly provided them with goods in return for safe passage." The Chambri, on the other hand, had always been one of the more vulnerable ethnic groups, and learnt to adapt to those more powerful than they were. "They had, however, become skilled at surviving through adapting to the needs of

¹⁵ Gewertz, *Sepik River Societies*, pp. 123–4.

¹⁶ Scaglione believes that recruitment policy proceeded through various stages: "In the Sepik area, recruitment was rather sporadic and limited in extent until around the turn of the century. After the German imperial government assumed administrative control from the Neu Guinea Kompagnie, attention turned toward copra plantations, trade, and the use of local labor. After coastal regions had been seriously depleted of labor potential, inland areas, which previously had been virtually ignored, were penetrated and organized for labor." Scaglione, "Reconstructing First Contact," p. 51.

¹⁷ Reed, *Making of Modern New Guinea*, p. 179.

¹⁸ Gewertz, *Sepik River Societies*, p. 112, based on 1924–38 Reports to the League of Nations on the administration of the Territory of New Guinea.

their superiors, an ability they readily transferred to European administrators and entrepreneurs. In other words, the Chambri accommodated to the destruction of their monopoly on the production of specialized commodities by adopting a pattern of circular migration. They thereby acquired from Europeans what they had heretofore acquired from the Iatmul – the valuables necessary to pay for prestige and, now, also necessary to pay taxes.¹⁹ While Gewertz's hypothesis suggests that accidents of geography and ecology play a key role in determining the fate of groups, one could perhaps also conclude that the ability of members of classless societies to adapt to heteronomous labor discipline varies, depending on whether those concerned are from a hegemonic or a subaltern ethnic group!

Thirdly, missionaries of the *Societas Verbi Divini* (SVD) settled in the area. This highly enterprising German-Dutch Catholic order intended that missionary posts should become financially self-sufficient by running plantations, sawmills and the like. With this objective in mind, the SVD fathers emphasized abstract labor discipline in their interactions with the local population.

The combination of these changes thoroughly transformed the region. The effective prohibition of headhunting from 1927 onward, for example, altered the balance of power between the Iatmul, the Chambri, and the Sawo. After all, the Chambri and the Sawo no longer had reason to fear violence on the part of the Iatmul. Moreover, the availability of steel axes and the like meant that the Iatmul no longer depended on stone tools produced by the Chambri, thereby depriving the Chambri of an important source of income. Village activities became commodified. Artifacts increasingly started to be sold to outsiders, and certain rituals (such as the initiation of men) became accessible to tourists for a fee.

During the early years of this transitional period, the anthropologist and social-psychologist Gregory Bateson (1904–80) stayed with the Iatmul several times. After a few visits to the region starting in the late 1920s, he published his first major article about the group and invented their name in the process (they had no designation of their own for their combined ethnic group).²⁰ After a subsequent fifteen-month stay in the early 1930s, he wrote his major work *Naven* about a ritual among the Iatmul in which women dressed as men

¹⁹ Gewertz, *Sepik River Societies*, p. 115.

²⁰ Bateson, "Social Structure of the Iatmul People."

and men as women.²¹ In 1938, Bateson visited the Iatmul for the last time, this time accompanied by his wife Margaret Mead, whom he had met on his first trip, when she was staying with the neighboring people the Chambri. The results of this study, however, remained largely unpublished, due to the outbreak of World War II.²²

Bateson based his approach on Durkheimian and especially cultural principles. He was particularly interested in the *Naven* ritual and its interpretation, in the context of gender roles and fictitious or real kinship. He aimed to abstract from Iatmul culture an *ethos*, that is “a culturally standardized system of organisation of the instincts and emotions of the individuals.”²³ Bateson’s descriptions provide virtually no information about politics, economics or labor. He mentions very briefly that headhunting had “disappeared so recently” that it was still “part of the natural setting of the ceremonies”;²⁴ and that the Iatmul recognize “no differentiation of rank or class,” although they consider gender differences to be immensely important.²⁵ Buried in a chapter about personality types, we learn something about the consequences of indentured labor. On this subject, Bateson explains: “At the present time, the villages of the Iatmul contain considerable numbers of young men who have recently returned to their homes after spending from three to five years as indentured laborers on European plantations and gold mines. They grew up as boys in the Iatmul ethos probably admiring it and probably believing that the ethos was ‘natural’ for men. Then they went away and lived for some years in the more disciplined and co-operative ethos of a labor line. Now they are returning to the ethos in which they grew up.”²⁶

While some readjusted quickly, others encountered serious difficulties: “As boys, they probably adopted the prevailing ethos because it was fashionable and was the only pattern offered to them. But now, when they have seen and lived in a different ethos, these men look askance at their native culture.

²¹ Bateson, *Naven*. The book elicited several reactions. See esp. Kessel, *Logic and Social Structure*; Houseman and Severi, *Naven or the Other Self*.

²² “Iatmul” is also spelled “Iatmül” or “Yatmül.” Regarding the field research from 1938, see Mead, *Blackberry Winter*, especially pp. 276–7, and Mead, *Letters from the Field*, pp. 212–38. See also Lipset, “Efficient Sample of One”; and Boon, *Affinities and Extremes*, pp. 172–97.

²³ Bateson, *Naven*, p. 118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

They are impatient of the buffooning of the older men and they treat the most important rituals with contempt. They are openly careless about the secrets of initiation."²⁷

The incipient disintegration of the established culture observed by Bateson continued during the years that followed. In late 1955 and early 1956, when the Swiss museum professional Alfred Bühler visited the Iatmul with the photographer René Gardi, he noticed, for example, that most of the "masks that had adorned the gables of houses, paintings and other cultic ornamentations of homes" had disappeared. He associated this change with a changing religious awareness.²⁸ Earning money had at first served primarily to pay the head tax (which has since been abolished), but from that point also enabled people to acquire modern import products. The massive temporary migration of young men to the plantations along the coast was the main reason: "The labor recruitment system that prevails to this day may have been the most significant factor in the hybridization, as well as the destruction of cultures. At their places of work, for example, the recruited natives mingle with all possible elements of the entire territory and at the same time interact more closely with white civilization than they possibly could anywhere else."²⁹ Upon returning to their native villages, very few of the young men were willing to reintegrate in their old surroundings.

The increased rebelliousness instigated by the cultural change is even more significant in the context of my analysis. Bühler determined that "the Sepik people, who in the past had been in great demand throughout the territory because of their physical strength and especially their reliability" had become *non grata* among many planters "for fear of their passion for inciting unrest."³⁰ In his view, most of the Sepik people believed that interactions with white people had been largely to their disadvantage. The attitude of protest arising from this discontent was manifested primarily through everyday cargo cults: "in several private homes and ceremonial houses we found tables decorated with flowers, in constant readiness to welcome the ancestors with

²⁷ Ibid., p. 168.

²⁸ Bühler, "Kulturkontakt und Kulturzerfall," p. 7. Regarding Bühler and Garni's journey, see also: Gardi, *Sepik*.

²⁹ Bühler, "Kulturkontakt und Kulturzerfall," p. 20.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

their goods.”³¹ In 1959, Bühler’s second expedition confirmed the progressive transformation of the old culture.³²

After incorporation

Other Swiss ethnographers travelled to the region before Bühler did.³³ And Bühler’s visits paved the way for long-lasting Swiss fascination with the Iatmul. The driving force behind this interest was Meinhard Schuster (b. 1930), who, after two expeditions for museum research in the Middle Sepik region during the 1960s,³⁴ conducted an ambitious research project there in the early 1970s. Schuster’s intention was to re-examine Bateson’s research. Since the 1930s, the Middle Sepik area had not been studied in depth in his view. He believed that Bateson’s work needed to be continued, and that the areas he had dealt with insufficiently ought to be covered in greater depth.³⁵

Between August 1972 and April 1974, six of Schuster’s doctoral students settled in villages along the Sepik for periods of six to eighteen months. The result comprised both dissertations and follow-up studies. The works by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (b. 1945), Milan Stanek (b. 1943) and Florence Weiss (b. 1945) are especially noteworthy. Stanek and Weiss visited the Iatmul not only in 1972–74, but also in 1979–80, 1984–85 and 1988–89. They wrote their Phd theses about the Iatmul village of Palimbei, and later investigated the fates of residents of that village who migrated to the city of Rabaul.³⁶ The different studies reveal to labor historians that after the initial stage of contact (in

³¹ Ibid., p. 12.

³² Bühler, “Sepik-Expedition.” On Bühler, see Meuli, “Alfred Bühler.”

³³ Schuster, “Ethnologische Feldforschung,” p. 173. Speiser, “Initiationszeremonie.”

³⁴ These expeditions took place in 1961 with Eike Haberland and in 1965–7 with Christian Kaufmann and Gisela Schuster. See Haberland and Schuster, *Sepik*; Schuster, “Vorläufiger Bericht.”

³⁵ Schuster, “Ethnologische Feldforschung,” p. 174. The responses to *Naven*, Bateson’s chief study about the Iatmul are reviewed in: Houseman and Severi, *Naven or the Other Self*, pp. 3–46.

³⁶ The most important publications in our context are: Hauser-Schäublin, *Frauen in Kararau*; Weiss, *Kinder schildern ihren Alltag*; Stanek, *Sozialordnung und Mythik*; Weiss, *Die dreisten Frauen*; Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*. In English, see also Stanek, “Social Structure of the Iatmul,” and Weiss, “Child’s Role in the Economy of Palimbei.” Other participating doctoral students were: Markus Schindlbeck, Jürg Schmid, and Jürg Wassmann. Their theses have been published as: Schindlbeck, *Sago bei den*

which the head tax was introduced, and head hunting prohibited), capitalism spread in the villages mainly through the circulation of commodities, and that the Iatmul proletarianized primarily through labor migration to the cities and plantations.

As regards the growth of a cash economy, all the available evidence indicates that the village economies gradually became monetized after World War II. This substantial growth in the influence of money was obviously attributable in part to the opportunity to purchase desired consumer goods. But this explanation is unsatisfactory. Hauser-Schäublin has calculated that the frequent fish-selling expeditions by Iatmul men in the early 1970s to the nearby town of Wewak were unprofitable. But what the net profit was played no major role. "Business meant any opportunity to sell something for money, no matter how great the financial expenditure (not to mention the time investment)."³⁷ This rising money-fetish among the Iatmul transformed gender relationships. On the one hand, the men became more powerful, because they sold both their own labor products (woodcarvings) *and* those of the women (fish, necklaces, handbags) in the city. On the other hand, polygamy was less prevalent than in Bateson's day, because the bride price was due in cash, and many men not living in the city therefore could not afford more than one wife.³⁸

Labor migration also proved to be a more complex process than initially believed. The trek to the cities, which gradually got under way after 1918 and surged after 1945,³⁹ did *not* result from immiseration in the villages.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, very large numbers of Iatmul moved to the cities. The works of Stanek and Weiss reveal the extent of the changes since the 1960s. While in the 1950s migration was only temporary, more or less permanent migration increased dramatically after that period. In November 1972, a census by Stanek in Palimbei revealed that 323 of the 765 villagers lived in the village itself or in

Sawos; Wassmann, *Gesang an den Fliegenden Hund*; Schmid and Kocher Schmid, *Söhne des Krokodils*.

³⁷ Hauser-Schäublin, *Frauen in Kararau*, pp. 37–8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 37–8, 131. See also Bateson, "Social Structure of the Iatmul People," p. 286.

³⁹ "Virtually all adult men now living in Palimbei have spent brief or extended periods at urban settlements or missionary posts. Some have worked there, while others merely visited or hoped to find a job there." Weiss, *Kinder schildern ihren Alltag*, p. 44.

⁴⁰ Weiss, *Kinder schildern ihren Alltag*, p. 45; Weiss, "Abwanderung in die Städte," p. 165.

a neighboring Iatmul village, and 423 in the cities, especially in Rabaul (223), Madang (88) and Wewak (44). Stanek was unable to determine the place of residence for 19 persons. Over half the people had thus moved to the city, presumably somewhat more men than women.⁴¹ This rate is extremely high, considering that only about five percent of the total population of Papua New Guinea lived in cities at the time.

What, then, were the real reasons for this massive migration? Weiss attributes the first stage from the 1920s to the 1940s or 50s to the prohibition of headhunting, which seriously compromised the authority of the older men. "From being well-known warriors and head hunters, the Iatmul became the conquered. Stripped of their pride and their identity, the elderly became irritated and unpredictable toward the youth, whom they could no longer serve as role models."⁴² The tensions that ensued between young and old compounded the ongoing, customary friction between elderly and adolescents. Adolescents were therefore the first ones interested in working on the plantations. "Adolescents welcomed the invitation from the white people to go to a plantation far away from their dissatisfied and insecure elders. Many also expected to find a new identity by entrusting their fate to white people, who after all had proven to be the strongest."⁴³

Over time, however, this sense of desperation subsided, as the elders died. All the same, migration continued to increase. Several factors are believed to have been involved. The first was the growth and liberalization of the labor market. Until the 1960s, only those with an employment contract (usually lasting three to five years) were allowed to settle in the cities. With the expanding economy and the establishment of the state facilities, however, which increased the demand for labor, the regulations changed. From then on, everybody was permitted to move to the cities, with or without a permanent employment contract. While the labor migrants had at first consisted mainly of young men, women and children started to arrive as well. Secondly, the autonomous sources of income in the villages were minimal, as regular floods made growing coffee or cacao impossible. Thirdly, the Iatmul had always been a mobile people, with a traditional custom of resolving conflicts

⁴¹ Stanek, *Sozialordnung und Mythik*, p. 24.

⁴² Weiss, "Abwanderung in die Städte," p. 160.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

by temporarily moving to somewhere else: “Even small children who argue with their parents or siblings gather their things and move in with relatives. After the tensions subside they return home, sometimes several weeks later. Women in trouble with their husbands return to their Clan. Men disappear to a nearby village, especially if one suspects that a woman is trying to force him to marry her. [...] Establishing new villages was the most extreme solution of the Iatmul society to arising tensions.”⁴⁴

Settlements in the cities

More recent ethnographic research extends beyond descriptions of the villages where the outward migration originated. In 1988–9 Florence Weiss and Milan Stanek conducted extensive field research at a settlement of labor migrants from the Palimbei village in Rabaul (New Britain), a city about a thousand kilometres from the Sepik area. Weiss describes how the Iatmul from Palimbei had established the Kori settlement in Rabaul since 1960. In 1988, 305 persons lived in Kori: 167 adults and 138 children and young adults, including 149 females and 156 males. Outside Kori (but in Rabaul) lived another 45 persons. Over ninety percent of the adults had come from Palimbei, although most of the children and young adults were born in Rabaul.⁴⁵ The spatial structure of Kori largely replicates that of Palimbei. “The original village clan organization of the village even rules the arrangement of the houses.”⁴⁶ During the research period Kori featured fifteen clans, which just as in Palimbei determined the social structure.

All adult men worked for a living. Most were wage earners, although some were self-employed as woodcarvers. The wage earners rarely stayed with the same boss for long. After all, wage labor meant adhering to a schedule set by others, obeying the supervisor, working among strangers and doing work unrelated to their own needs. These working conditions were diametrically opposed to the ones in the villages. One woodcarver recounted:

⁴⁴ Weiss, “Abwanderung in die Städte,” p. 159.

⁴⁵ Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ Weiss, “Abwanderung in die Städte,” p. 162.

I was a porter at the harbor [...]. We loaded the bags of copra, which were brought to Rabaul from the coconut plantations, onto large ships. The work was very hard. We unloaded the bags from the trucks and carried them onto the ship along a narrow gangplank. Each bag weighed 80 kilos [about 180 lbs]. We toiled under the hot sun, in the rain, in all weather conditions. The white supervisor was a stuck-up prig. He yelled all the time and played tricks on us. He did not let us rest for a moment. One day I got fed up and told him to his face that he could not treat us that way. I was fired. I have been a woodcarver ever since. Now I determine how much and when I work.⁴⁷

In addition to regularly resisting the pressure to adapt, after a few weeks or months, when the situation had become unbearable, the men would get into “a huge argument with their employer, speak ill of him, even come to blows with him and run off. After a while they would find a new job.”⁴⁸ In the 1960s and 70s, the men tried to soothe their frustrations brought on by the alienated labor by getting drunk after payday. During these drinking bouts, they would talk about life in their village. “The men would sit in the same order as in the ceremonial house in their village. They would address each other by the names of their age groups, as they reminisced about their mythical ancestors and recited their names. Communal drinking sprees compensated for the missing community in the world of labor and the lack of self-confidence.”⁴⁹

Redistributive pressure was strong: if somebody had made an exceptional amount of money through some kind of activity, he was expected to share with the others.⁵⁰ This was the main reason why some people chose not to live in Kori. One successful Iatmul noted: “[Living] in a group like Kori means sharing everything you have; you can never set anything aside; the peer pressure is overwhelming.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*, p. 66.

⁴⁸ Weiss, “Frauen in der urbanethnologischen Forschung,” p. 269.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington make the same observation about the Chambri in Wewak: “As one Chambri told us: ‘It is custom here in town that whenever anyone is up, everyone comes around and asks him for credit; that is how everyone is made equal.’” *Twisted Histories*, p. 105.

⁵¹ Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*, pp. 100–1.

Among the first generation of migrant families in Kori, who arrived in the 1960s, the gendered division of labor differed markedly from the way it had been in Palimbei. “The roles switched: the men in the village, artisans and dependent on their women for food, became the providers; the women in the town lost their autonomous position to the men. The men became dependent upon their employers, the women upon their men.”⁵² Weiss offers several related explanations for this role reversal.

Firstly, the men had a historic lead over the women in proletarianization. After all, the men had worked on the plantations since the 1920s, where they mastered the *lingua franca* (Pidgin) and in many cases had learned a trade as well, such as carpentry or police work. The women had been unable to leave their villages until the 1960s, spoke nothing but Iatmul, and were unprepared for life in the cities. Secondly, the women had trouble arranging childcare in the cities. “Where could they leave their small children when they were at work? They never encountered this problem in the village. When they went fishing or to the market, they never took their small children with them. In the village the older children watched the younger ones while the women were away. In the cities, though, the older children attended school.”⁵³ Thirdly, the informal sector was virtually non-existent in Papua New Guinea before the independence, due to the regulations imposed by the Australian authorities. “Establishing a sales outlet that complied with all the rules required substantial start-up capital, and selling food and beverages was tightly regulated. Only white people and Chinese were able to meet [all the regulations]. Particularly in this sector of the economy, however, Iatmul women might have been able to keep their small children with them.”⁵⁴

As a result of their “housewifization,” some women became agoraphobic, a problem they had never experienced in the village.⁵⁵ Paradoxically, the men

⁵² Stanek and Weiss, “‘Big Man’ and ‘Big Woman,’” p. 321.

⁵³ Weiss, “Frauen in der urbanethnologischen Forschung,” p. 265. School attendance appears to have been an ongoing problem. “Most Iatmul children offer resistance and refuse regular school attendance. The demands of school stand in direct contrast to the autonomy and individual initiative that is so important to the Iatmul. In traditional Iatmul society children get fully reprimanded but are hardly ever forced to do something. One waits until they begin something out of their own initiative.” Stanek and Weiss, “‘Big Man’ and ‘Big Woman,’” p. 322.

⁵⁴ Weiss, “Frauen in der urbanethnologischen Forschung,” p. 266.

⁵⁵ Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*, p. 364. I borrow the term “housewifization” from Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*. See also the previous chapter.

often had far greater problems adapting. “[Men] had to meet all new requirements at the workplace, including obedience, submission, time budgeting, adaptation. They have trouble accepting that a job is a permanent arrangement and are inclined to change jobs continuously out of sheer frustration. The women experienced the new relations more indirectly, through their husband’s working hours and their children’s school hours.”⁵⁶

These new gender relations changed again in some respects with the second and subsequent generations. Many young women had attended school and obtained paid employment. “By the 1980s the first generation of women raised in Rabaul was about twenty years old. [...] All these young women have become wage earners. The ones who attended occupational training after leaving school work as nurses, secretaries, saleswomen, and seamstresses. Motherhood is no longer an obstacle to paid employment. The women have established a network of relatives within the community that enables them to entrust their children to other women while they are at work. In the early 1960s, this would have been virtually impossible, because there were too few women migrants. All young women without occupational training are unskilled workers or sell homemade net bags and jewellery to tourists.”⁵⁷

Although the migrants in Rabaul and elsewhere often felt they had accomplished more than the Iatmul who stayed behind in the Sepik area,⁵⁸ they retained strong ties with their villages of origin. Florence Weiss relates a clear example from the 1960s, when “the men from the Payambit men’s house community decided to build a new men’s house, even though this part of the village had been the most deeply affected by out-migration: 236 of the 340 persons had left, including 65 adult males. They each contributed a flat rate

⁵⁶ Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*, pp. 321–2. The missionaries figure in the adaptation process; they teach the men, for example, to assume their responsibility as male breadwinners and to manage money in the cities. “Money must be retained and spent appropriately, so that it is not squandered right away.” (Ibid., p. 296) Parenting practices changed as a result. In the village, children were never beaten. “The Iatmul believe that children should not be beaten, as such treatment will make them passive and submissive.” (Ibid., p. 305) In the cities, however, the children were beaten.

⁵⁷ Weiss, “Frauen in der urbanethnologischen Forschung,” p. 267.

⁵⁸ Milan Stanek: “Every Iatmul knows that living in the city is a step up. The ones who stay behind in the village are poor. They may have food and a large house but have not joined the new trend. The Iatmul who have migrated to the cities have, even if they live here in Kori, achieved upward social mobility. Nobody seriously wants to return to the village. The ones who do so anyway have failed here.” Quoted in Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*, p. 117.

of about A\$ 10 toward constructing the new men's house, thereby preserving their rights of use in case they returned to the village."⁵⁹ People in the villages of origin remained in close contact with the cities where out-migrants settled, in part through visits. "Visits from one city to the other reinforce cohesion among all those who came from the same village. The network appears to extend throughout the country. There is a village, and in several cities there is an Iatmul settlement, and all communities stay in touch with each other."⁶⁰ Most marriages are between members of the same ethnic group. "Only 15 marriages involved partners from different ethnic groups."⁶¹

Ties between urban settlements and villages were not only emotional: economic and financial considerations came into play as well. "As long as only civil servants receive a retirement pension, most elderly people will have no choice but to return to the village. [...] Long-term employment and social benefits are virtually non-existent. Concern on the part of relatives from the village, reciprocal visits, gifts and money channelled from the city to the village – all transactions are pre-payments in case people are forced to return to the village: especially care for elderly parents and siblings. Somebody who has never given any thought to his relatives in the village will be treated accordingly."⁶² News travels very quickly between Iatmul settlements. When somebody fell ill in Palimbei, the people in Kori knew about it within a day, even though the distance was "five days by boat." One inhabitant travelled "by canoe from the village to Pagwi, where a driver was waiting to take him to Wewak. He went to the bank where his nephew worked and telephoned somebody at work in Rabaul."⁶³

Conclusion

This story intends to show that the ethnographic studies can offer a detailed impression of the gradual capitalist incorporation, in this case of the Iatmul people, and the concurrent spread of wage labor in the period 1908–88. Two

⁵⁹ Weiss, *Kinder schildern ihren Alltag*, pp. 45–6.

⁶⁰ Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*, p. 86, also p. 234.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶² Weiss, "Abwanderung in die Städte," p. 163.

⁶³ Weiss, *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch*, p. 139.

caveats are should be mentioned however. The Iatmul were studied much more extensively by ethnographers than some other groups in Papua New Guinea. After all, as I mentioned before, they were relatively easy to reach and of artistic interest. And also, research on proletarianization in Papua New Guinea or elsewhere should obviously not be *limited* to reviewing ethnographic material. Fortunately, however, we have at least four other sources of information. Firstly, we have documents from civil servants (reports and memoirs from patrol officers), such as the memoirs of 'Kassa' Townsend, who did much to subjugate and develop the Sepik region during the 1920s and 30s.⁶⁴ These sources tend to be rather instrumental and superficial, although they may reflect concrete experiences and policy practices. Secondly, there are the reports from missionaries, which appear in the archives and publications of various missionary societies, such as the aforementioned Societas Verbi Divini (Steyley Mission) of Father Franz Kirschbaum, who arrived in the Sepik region in 1913.⁶⁵ Later, during the "second missionary wave" after 1945,⁶⁶ and in the settlements in Rabaul and other towns, additional, smaller denominations were established, such as the Evangelical, Apostolic, and Pentecostal churches. Obviously, accounts from these sources emphasize other aspects than the ones on which labor historians would focus. Thirdly, we could interview Sepik residents,⁶⁷ patrol officers, missionaries and... ethnographers. Fourthly, contemporary studies are available about labor migration and circulation.⁶⁸ Comparing ethnographic material with other sources wherever possible is therefore desirable, as we always aim to do with any one kind of source.

The ethnographic material merits discussion as well. I have presented only a few small excerpts from the vast body of ethnographic research material on

⁶⁴ Townsend, *District Officer*.

⁶⁵ On the early mission, see Steffen, *Missionsbeginn in Neuguinea*, pp. 173–265. Also: *Divine Word Missionaries in Papua New Guinea*. Franz Kirschbaum (1882–1939) left a wealth of ethnographic material, most of which was lost during World War II (Steffen, *Missionsbeginn*, pp. 292–3). His diaries are at the Steyley Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, St. Augustin, Germany.

⁶⁶ I derive this term from Jebens, "Catholics."

⁶⁷ Curtain, "Labour Migration from the Sepik."

⁶⁸ See e.g. Curtain, "Dual Dependence"; Curry and Koczberski, "Risks and Uncertainties of Migration."

the Iatmul.⁶⁹ A far more elaborate review of this same research is certainly feasible. Nor is the ethnographic material available limited to published texts. It may certainly be complemented by field notes sometimes stored in archives and a wealth of visual materials (e.g. photographs, motion pictures).⁷⁰

In the course of the twentieth century, a clear trend emerged within ethnography. Early studies in this discipline aimed to comprehend the “original” culture existing prior to the colonial invasion. This approach meant that as much as possible of what disrupted this culture was abstracted from. Thus, the older publications refer little to Western influences, which are implicitly treated as “pollutions” of a pure past. This shortcoming is less prevalent in more recent ethnographic studies, especially ones from the late 1960s and afterwards; these works tend to reflect greater consideration for economic and political changes in general, and for the sweeping influence of colonization and decolonization in particular;⁷¹ they are more compatible with our own research questions and approaches.

At any rate, ethnographers have much to offer labor historians, including over 21,000 brief and extended studies on Papua New Guinea alone.⁷² Global Labor History can access much more relevant information than one might think.

⁶⁹ Florence Weiss published the ethno-psychoanalytic study *Gespräche am sterbenden Fluss* together with Fritz and Marco Morgenthaler; also issued in French as *Conversations au bord du fleuve mourant*. I do not consider myself competent to discuss this book. For a critique, see: Gesch, “There Can Be Neither Black nor White.” There are other ethnographers whose works I have not discussed here, as they are not sufficiently related to my argument. One is Margaret Mead’s collaborator Rhoda Métraux, who spent twenty-one months in the Iatmul village of Tambunam between 1967 and 1973, and another is Eric Kline Silverman, who visited this village in 1988–90 and in 1994. See the special issue of the *Anthropological Quarterly*, 51, 1 (1978), edited by Métraux, and Silverman’s *Masculinity, Motherhood, and Mockery*.

⁷⁰ The field notes of Margaret Mead are at sites such as the Library of Congress, as are about 10,000 still photographs and 11,300 feet of motion picture film recorded by Gregory Bateson in 1938.

⁷¹ “[We] study the colonial situation and its heritage, urbanization, the international political and economic links, and arrive inevitably at the world system as an object of study in its own right.” Stanek and Weiss, “‘Big Man’ and ‘Big Woman,’” p. 313. Also see Donald Denoon’s inspiring “Agenda,” pp. 51–64, for an attempt to interpret Papua New Guinea’s general development.

⁷² See <www.papuaweb.org/bib>.

Chapter Sixteen

Outlook

There is no way at all of bringing back to life the clusters of possibilities from which a choice had to be made, every time it was a question of deciding what was the correct way to proceed. Looking backwards, what we produce as perceptible and intelligible is inevitably a simplification that gives a false appearance of more or less straightforward progress. And it is this false appearance that incites to the belief in an encompassing single necessity determining a process from start to end and so producing it as a development.

Pierre Watter

The “rebuilding of the ship of labor history” (adapting Otto Neurath’s metaphor which I mentioned in the introduction) is in progress. In the previous chapters, I made three contributions of my own to this venture. I provided a proposal for the location of the “navigation room”, from which the ship’s route can be directed, by developing a broader concept of the working class; I collected and ordered some “driftwood” about forms of collective action; and I have obtained useful advice from the “crews of other ships” in the vicinity. Whether in doing so I have inadvertently overlooked important aspects, is something to be settled by future discussions. In any case, it is clear that by far the largest part of the work

has yet to be done. We still lack a lot of timber, and as yet we have only a somewhat vague picture of what the new ship should look like in total. Even so, an attempt has been made to make the outlines visible, in a way which I hope will be useful as orientation.

Capitalism

If we want to write the history of labor on a world scale, two approaches are conceivable. One approach aspires to a “universal history of work,” documenting the labor relations in different parts of the world as comprehensively as possible. Another approach aims for “a history of globalized work,” looking at labor relations and labor movements from the topical perspective of the “globalized” economy.¹ Both approaches need not be mutually exclusive, however. Willem van Schendel proposes that the first approach could become “a dynamic and crucial field of inquiry”, in which “the histories and identities of working people are compared and analyzed from different theoretical vantage points that attempt to see beyond the looking-glass of the North.” The second approach (“histories of labor seen as studies of capitalism through its labour aspect”) could be interpreted as “a special interest within this larger field and it, too, could be approached from various theoretical angles.”² I would endorse such a view, except that I favor prioritizing the second (more narrowly focused) approach in the meantime. My reasons are practical and political.

The practical reason is that both Old and New labor historians have always centrally focused on labor in capitalist societies; it is obvious that Global Labor History dovetails with that interest. The political reason is that the second approach directly contributes to understanding the world in which we live now – to better insight into the tendencies which have brought us to where we are today.³ The first-mentioned approach obviously does not lose any of

¹ van der Linden, “‘Globalization’ of Labor and Working-Class History,” pp. 141–4.

² van Schendel, “Stretching Labour Historiography,” pp. 260–1.

³ Bruce Mazlish correctly argues that “all history is contemporary history in the sense that the perspective brought to bear on past events is necessarily rooted in the present. In this light, global history may simply be more conscious of its perspective and interested in focusing it more directly on contemporary happenings, as well as

its importance because of this priority. If Global Labor History would in time extend its horizons beyond capitalist civilization, it would deepen our understanding of the specificity (or non-specificity) of capitalist developments.

If I assign central place to capitalist labor, the first question that arises is what we ought to understand by “capitalism”. The proper use of the term remains controversial, and again and again becomes a topic of terminological debates. I nevertheless continue to use the term because, as Fernand Braudel rightly concluded, there is nothing to be gained “by throwing out along with the word the controversies it arouses, which have some pertinence to the present-day world.”⁴ But in line with the argument of previous chapters, I do propose a description which deviates somewhat from commonly accepted definitions.

With Marx, I think that the core, the “elementary form” of capitalism, inheres in the commodity, the contradictory unity of use-value and exchange-value, which simultaneously represents a definite commercial value for the owner and “satisfies human needs of whatever kind” for someone else.⁵ And with Polányi, I think that we can distinguish between two kinds of commodities: *real* commodities, i.e. objects and services consciously produced by human labor for sale; and *fictitious* commodities (or “pseudo-commodities”) which are not produced specifically for sale, but nevertheless are offered for sale. Among fictitious commodities I include especially labor, which is “only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself” and the natural world insofar as it is “not produced by man” at all.⁶

Commodification, the transformation of labour products, labor or natural resources into a commodity, is a process which began a very long time ago. Labor commodification in particular is a very ancient practice. As I indicated, wage-labor occurred for thousands of years prior to capitalist civilization; the same applies to chattel slavery. In Ancient Mesopotamia, “The slave was the property of his master like any other chattel. He could be branded and flogged and was severely punished if he attempted to escape. [...] The sale price of a

on the past. Serious problems of selectivity or documentation then remain, as they do with any history.” Mazlish, “Introduction to Global History,” p. 3.

⁴ Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, II, p. 231.

⁵ Marx, *Capital*, I, pp. 125–8.

⁶ Polányi, *Great Transformation*, p. 72. Polányi distinguishes a third category of fictitious commodities (i.e. money), but this variant is less relevant for my own argument.

slave varied with the market and the individual involved; an average price for a grown man was twenty shekels, which was at times less than the price for an ass.⁷ Seemingly “modern” phenomena such as a complex division of labor in the production of commodities likewise have an ancient origin, as shown for example by the Chinese experience.⁸ And the integration of slaves and wage laborers in systems of long-distance trade are not of recent vintage either.

The different types of commodification, and the reciprocations across great distances which may accompany it, for a long time remained “discontinuous, partial, and especially marginal.”⁹ In the course of time, the process accelerated and extended, interrupted or braked time after time by forms of de-commodification, without any sharply-defined turning-point being visible. The rise of the Arab trade empire from the ninth century, the *Pax Mongolica* in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, the European expansion into the Western Hemisphere from 1492 – these were all but steps in a lengthy, protracted process which, from the nineteenth century, received a new, gigantic stimulus by increased agricultural productivity and industrialization.¹⁰

At a certain point, circuits of commodity trade emerged in which both *inputs* in labor processes (labor, raw materials, natural resources) and *outputs* (goods and services) acquired the commodity-form. A trading circuit thus emerged, in which tendentially “production of commodities by means of commodities” took place (borrowing Piero Sraffa’s famous expression). *This progressing circulation of commodity production and distribution, such that not just labor products but also means of production and labor itself acquire the status of commodities, is what I would call capitalism.*

This definition is consistent with that of Marx, who similarly describes the capitalist mode of production as “generalized commodity production”. But it differs crucially from definitions which regard capitalism simply as “production for the market”, in abstraction from the specific labor relations involved in production, i.e. it differs from the description we already encounter in the

⁷ Kramer, *Sumerians*, p. 78.

⁸ Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*.

⁹ Chesneaux, *Du passé faisons table rase?*, p. 101.

¹⁰ Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*; Banaji, “Islam”; Komlosy, “Weltzeit – Ortszeit”; Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation*; Norel, *Crises et tiers monde*; Osterhammel, “In Search of a Nineteenth Century”.

writings of Michael Rostovtzeff, and which resurfaces in Immanuel Wallerstein's analyses (among others).¹¹

Nevertheless my definition also deviates from Marx's, because I interpret labor commodification more broadly than the author of *Capital*. After all, Marx implied that "free" wage labor is a privileged form of labor commodification in capitalism, i.e. the dominant or essential form which capitalist development will inexorably reproduce on a larger and larger scale. But if the analysis presented in this book is correct, then *many other types of commodified labor relations which are just as important as "free" wage labor co-exist with it at any time, and have an equal importance. We therefore need to broaden our concept of capitalism accordingly.*¹²

Capitalism is a self-reinforcing process which has transformed the whole world, and will, in all likelihood, continue to change it during the next decades; the circuit of commodity trade is essentially *expansive*. After all, commodities are not isolated phenomena, but are always embedded in a juridical and economic infrastructure characterized by property rights and competition, which in the long term subordinates more and more regions of the globe and a larger part of the totality of life to its commercial requirements. The "need of a constantly expanding market" heralded in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* is an *essential* feature of capitalist development. Again and again, "new industries" emerge which "no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe." Parallel to this development, production techniques are constantly revolutionized, with the consequence of "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation."¹³ A permanent fluidity of labor relations in all continents results from it.

¹¹ "[The large agricultural units in ancient Greece] were run mostly on capitalistic lines; their products, that is to say, were chiefly sold in the market, not consumed by the producers." Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History*, I, pp. 100–1.

¹² By an "equal importance", I mean that the different forms of labor commodification all contribute to the accumulation of capital. Of course some variants (especially chattel slavery) imply that the subaltern workers don't have much buying power, and thus brake the circulation of commodities at a higher level (See Chapters 2–4). Inversely, some forms of commodification are more suitable to early commodification than others. See, in this regard, de Souza Martins, "Reappearance of Slavery" on contemporary Amazonia.

¹³ Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," pp. 70–1.

In characterizing capitalism in this way, I should nevertheless mention three important qualifications. Firstly, it ought to be said that commodification is a process without end, and that the trading circuit has never *totally* consisted of reproducible commodities. Capitalist expansion should not just be defined geographically, as Marx did when he wrote to Engels in 1858 that: “The proper task of bourgeois society is the creation of the *world market*, at least in outlines, and of the production based on that market. Since the world is round, the colonization of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan would seem to have completed this process.”¹⁴ István Mészáros correctly notes that Marx did not distinguish between two different processes here. Admittedly, with the annexation of Australia, California, etc. world capitalism became an *extensive* global totality, but that did not mean that an *intensive* global totality had emerged. The difference is analogous to Marx’s contrast between absolute and relative surplus value: just as absolute surplus value reaches a limit because a day only has twenty-four hours, the possibilities for expansion of the “extensive totality” are exhausted when the whole globe is encompassed. But further accumulation continues through the extraction of relative surplus value, i.e. through the “conquest” of spheres of life previously not yet subordinated to the logic of commodity trade.¹⁵ In this regard, an indication crucial for our concerns is that the production and regeneration of labor power still requires, even in the most advanced capitalist regions, an important input of private subsistence labor.

Secondly, although capitalist expansion has its own self-reproducing logic, it never operates in isolation from conditions external to it, or regardless of circumstances. Commodification generally, and commodification of labor power in particular, is always embedded in a historically-formed culture and a natural environment to which it responds. That is why patterns of commodification differ according to location and period.¹⁶ Many elements are responsible for this reality. It is for example becoming increasingly clear, that climate change can strongly influence economic developments.¹⁷ Just as important perhaps is the fact that commodification progresses in a combined

¹⁴ Marx, letter to Engels, 8 October 1858.

¹⁵ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, p. 35.

¹⁶ On commodities which are the bearers of variegated meanings in different environments, see Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*.

¹⁷ See the brilliant analysis in Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*.

and uneven way, i.e. occurring simultaneously and interdependently in the most variegated historical and cultural environments, which co-determine the pattern of development.

If we want to understand the incorporation of people in capitalist relations, “we need to know not only what new order is installed but how the installation of that new order dislocates and rearranges the preexisting relationships governing the deployment of social labor.”¹⁸ The exact scope of pre-existing influences can only be established by empirical research. Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly questions in this regard the idea that “workers all over the world, irrespective of their specific cultural pasts, *experience* capitalist production in the same way.”¹⁹ But with equal justification, Janaki Nair has objected that while objective labor conditions “cannot be assumed to be exactly the same in all societies or cultures,” they “nevertheless form the starting point of a history of the working class.”²⁰ These viewpoints are not incompatible. The commodity economy has its own intrinsic dynamic, but it does not unfold this dynamic under self-selected circumstances – it must adapt to a complex of circumstances inherited from the past.

Thirdly – this is possibly only a variation on the two qualifications mentioned previously – the “modes of life” of people are not identical with the “modes of production” they perpetuate.²¹ The rich diversity of life among subaltern workers is not fully enclosed by commerce or described by commodification. There are always many aspects which cannot be fully subordinated by the logic of commodities. At issue are the “blockages in real life” resisting the valorization of capital, as described by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge.²² Many authors have pointed out aspects of subversion and the transformation of meanings in everyday life. For example, Alf Lüdtke emphasizes *Eigensinn* (the idiosyncratic pursuit of one’s own interests) as joyful expenditure of time “without any calculation of effects or outcomes.”²³ Georges Bataille refers

¹⁸ Wolf, “Incorporation and Identity,” p. 354.

¹⁹ Chakrabarty, “Class Consciousness and the Indian Working Class,” p. 29.

²⁰ Nair, “Production Regimes, Cultural Processes,” p. 262.

²¹ This terminology is due to Marx and Engels, who wrote (*German Ideology*, p. 31) that the “mode of production [...] is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are.”

²² Negt and Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*, p. 107.

²³ Lüdtke, *Eigensinn*, p. 140.

to *dépenses*, modes of behavior often not integrated in the logic of accumulation, such as “laughter, heroism, ecstasy, sacrifice, poetry, eroticism, and others.”²⁴

With Roswitha Scholz, we could indeed say that commodification itself *pre-supposes and encroaches on* areas which are not yet subject to market trade to any great extent. One can only turn something new into a commodity, if it was not already a commodity in the first place. Individual private consumption is one such pivotal condition: it extends beyond the realm of the commodity economy, and does not necessarily obey its laws, yet it is nevertheless indispensable for it. Production and distribution of commodities would lose their rationality without the possibility of freely chosen consumption. Consumption – not just private consumption but also collective consumption – is the necessary counterpart (an essential “Other”) to the commodity offered for sale. Non-commodified “spheres” (which include all sorts of communicative cooperation, human care, consideration, and eroticism) are often perceived as “feminine,” whereas the calculating, “rational” world of commodities is viewed as “masculine.”²⁵

Classes

Against this theoretical background, we can specify the concerns of Global Labor History more closely. The proposed enlargement of the concept “working class” necessarily implies an extension of the research terrain of labor historians. By making not just “free” wage earners, but also chattel slaves, indentured laborers, sharecroppers and other workers a valid subject of inquiry, a wholly new discipline emerges, much broader in scope than the old labor history. But if we implement such an enlargement, what then is the unifying theme of an otherwise pluralist discipline?

Global Labor History in the sense of a “globalized history of work” researches not the history of all forms of human labor through the centuries,

²⁴ Bataille, “L’expérience intérieure,” p. 11.

²⁵ Scholz, “Der Wert ist der Mann.” I have discussed the context of Scholz’s thesis in *Transnational Labour History*, pp. 205–15.

but *the history of labor insofar that labor is part of the global process of commodification*. This labor takes two forms: labor which assumes the commodity form, being sold or hired to employers (wage labor, etc.), and labor which *creates* such commodified labor or regenerates it (parental and household labor).²⁶

Labor commodification therefore not only presupposes the existence of subaltern workers, but also of employers, that is to say the persons, corporations, or institutions commanding the means (financial assets, natural resources, means of production, intellectual property) with which they can appropriate – by economic or extra-economic means – the living labor-time of others. Between this class and the class of carriers of labor power there is a somewhat vague boundary²⁷ which although permeable (subaltern workers can sometimes become employers or self-employed and vice versa) at the same time implies a structural contradiction continually reproduced by capitalism in the course of its expansion. The basic source of class conflict is weakened or strengthened by other contradictions, arising from differences related to gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, age, etc. Among the persons, corporations, or institutions acting as employers, an incessant competitive battle moreover rages, creating winners and losers.

In the process, the subaltern workers are constantly uprooted, regrouped, and reorganized; their number, sectoral and geographic distribution or composition continually changes. Not only the different gradations of autonomy can vary, but people are also continually being absorbed into or expelled from this class. The parameters and modalities of class conflicts within global capitalism *change continually* for this reason. Sometimes the conflict between capital and labor is clearly visible, at other moments it remains hidden behind other, more palpably visible contrasts and conflicts. But whatever form it takes, openly or obscured, a constant battle continues between carriers of labor power and their buyers or hirers.

²⁶ Let us note that commodified labor does not only occur in the market sector (capitalist commodity circulation as such), but also among soldiers, policemen and domestic servants. In addition, subaltern workers whose labor is not commodified temporarily or permanently due to invalidity, age, sickness or unemployment obviously deserve attention in Global Labor History. See, for example, Bayat, "Workless Revolutionaries," or Emsley, "Policeman as Worker."

²⁷ The vagueness of this boundary "does not refer to problems of neatly pigeonholing people within an abstract typology; rather it refers to objective contradictions among the real processes of class relations." (Wright, "Class Boundaries," p. 27) Contradictory class locations exist e.g. among managers, supervisors, and small employers.

This battle has two logical stages. The first stage concerns the question of how an employment relationship is established, and under what conditions. If the employer or his supplier applies *physical force*, subaltern workers may try to escape from this coercion, like the African slaves who committed suicide or revolted aboard the ships carrying them to the Americas.²⁸ And if *economic compulsion* is involved, many forms of evasion or bargaining are possible.

In the second stage, the employer seeks to transform the labor power of subaltern workers into living, productive labor effort. Here conflicts of interest occur continuously with regard to the relevant working hours, working conditions, intensity of work, etc. regardless of the precise nature of the employment relationship.²⁹ Even in the case of the 'free' wage laborers who can negotiate individually or collectively about their working conditions, these kinds of frictions regularly occur. Harvey Leibenstein rightly notes that it is "exceedingly rare for all elements of performance in a labor contract to be spelled out. A good deal is left to custom, authority, and whatever motivational techniques are available to management as well as to individual discretion and judgment."³⁰

Actually, total control and domination of labor is in practice never possible, because human labor necessarily requires at least a minimal independent volition on the part of the workers. In all cases, employers require a degree of voluntary cooperation and care from their workers, without which the work will not be done as it should be.³¹ The fact that "work to rule" can be a very effective form of employee action illustrates the point: if workers simply carry out work routines to the letter, without applying their personal judgment at all, it is soon revealed that those instructions are always insufficient and partly inconsistent, and that the labor process breaks down, or at least proceeds very inefficiently as a result.³² If such phenomena happen to occur rather infre-

²⁸ About this, see the impressive book by Rediker, *Slave Ship*.

²⁹ Pioneering studies which describe these frictions are Goodrich, *Frontier of Control* (for wage labor), and Bauer and Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance" (with regard to slavery).

³⁰ Leibenstein, "Allocation Efficiency and 'X-Efficiency,'" p. 407.

³¹ Baldamus, *Efficiency and Effort*; Brockhaus, *Lohnarbeit*. Even in Nazi concentration camps the SS "needed some minimal cooperation from the prisoners in order to carry out the day's routine of getting them to the dormitories, feeding them, and making them work." Moore, Jr., *Injustice*, p. 65.

³² Bourdet, "Les contradictions de l'hétérogestion," pp. 158–9; Beck and Brater, "Grenzen abstrakter Arbeit," p. 182.

quently, this also indicates that there are simultaneously almost always tendencies at work toward acquiescence, acceptance or subordination.³³

In view of these insights, two questions would appear to be of central importance in Global Labor History: the logic of the process of labor commodification as such in all its forms, and the worldwide development of class conflicts between employers and subaltern workers which it gives rise to.³⁴ At the risk of simplification, four elements can be marked out as far as the second question is concerned: (i) the changing structural composition of the subaltern world working class during the last five hundred years or so; (ii) the possibilities for collective action arising (or failing to arise) from it in different circumstances; (iii) the ways in which subaltern workers have utilized those possibilities, or failed to utilize them in their struggle for a decent life; and (iv) the social-cultural aspects and forms of consciousness accompanying their struggles.³⁵ It is self-evident that we can analyze these elements properly only if we do not consider subaltern workers in isolation, but within the total societal context; and if in addition we abandon teleological perspectives (whether optimistic or pessimistic) and study the development of the labor-society relationship as an "open dialectic" without fully predetermined outcomes.

In the preceding chapters, I made a few cursory comments about the first element, I said somewhat more about the second and third, and only a few things about the fourth. One could therefore object that my analyses of the

³³ "Within the working-class as a whole, there is a constant and uneasy tension between acquiescence and dissent. At different times and within different levels of experience, one may predominate over another, but both are continually present not as a predetermined, static relationship, but as a constantly changing and shifting dynamic. [...] Thus, the immediate choice for labour in the labour process is *not* between autonomy or subordination, resistance or incorporation, but the balance (which varies between and within historical periods) between these two that allow for the 'form of bargain that labour makes with capital'." Price, "Rethinking Labour History," pp. 198–9.

³⁴ Obviously there are also many related questions which did not receive attention in this book, for example the survival repertoires of subaltern workers' households (see Kok, *Rebellious Families*), or the history of commodified labor processes as such, a subject which labor historians have often treated as an ancillary concern, but which also has its dangers if approached only descriptively. See in this regard the contribution by Womack, "Doing Labor History," and a response to it: French and Daniels, "Travails of Doing Labor History."

³⁵ A useful elaboration of this approach is Kocka, "Problems of Working-Class Formation." Kocka's analysis concerns Central Europe, but can be adapted easily for the purpose of global labor history. See van der Linden, "Transnationale Arbeitergeschichte."

representation of interests and resistance contain at least two deficiencies. Firstly, subaltern workers with very little autonomy received too little attention. Secondly, I deal only with the *options* available to groups of subaltern workers in certain situations, without analyzing their *intrinsic* decisions. An additional comment is therefore perhaps appropriate.

The choices that groups make are determined by all kinds of influences – “setting limits, exerting pressures.”³⁶ The range of influences comprises two subsets. On the one hand, there are the contextual influences, which are social factors that create or in fact eliminate opportunities, such as economic, political, legal relationships, cultural and religious traditions etc. They determine which types of activities and organizations are *possible* and *conceivable* for subaltern workers in a given situation, and delimit the alternatives to some feasible set. On the other hand, this set of feasible alternatives is delimited by the past of collective action itself. From the outset, social groups devise a certain cultural and organizational “style” that acquires a weight of its own. Arthur Stinchcombe calls it “imprinting”; it leads to “structural slowness”.³⁷

Moreover, the choices a group makes give rise to habits and routines which later co-determine new decisions, by rendering some options *undesirable* or *inconceivable* and others *self-evident*. This “constraining and enabling process” is sometimes also called “path dependence”.³⁸ A group of workers must always choose from a more or less circumscribed set of feasible alternatives. The final choice may be the outcome of open discussion and democratic decision-making, but manipulation or misinformation may also exert influence. If a certain choice proves highly controversial, then part of the group may decide against it; these dissidents will then presumably organize another form of collective action, join another group, or concentrate on other causes.

At any rate, the historical study of collective action by subaltern workers always involves two steps. The first involves exploring the set of feasible *alternatives* available at a certain moment, with regard to the decisive influences of context, imprint, and path dependence; the second consists of examining the

³⁶ Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” p. 32. See also Williams’ discussion about “determine” in his *Keywords*, pp. 87–91.

³⁷ Stinchcombe, “Social Structure and Organizations,” p. 154. See also the notion of the “initial solution” as developed in Scoville, “Some Determinants of the Structure of Labor Movements,” p. 74.

³⁸ David, “Why Are Institutions the ‘Carriers of History?’”; Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology.”

motives that have led to the selection of one or more of these alternatives.³⁹ In this book, I dealt almost exclusively with the first step, largely disregarding the specific motives behind the decisions. Clearly, such an approach limits our understanding of subaltern workers' activities. Further research could illuminate the intrinsic decision-making processes and possibly provide useful generalizations about them.

The subjectivities of the subaltern working classes are an enormous, scarcely explored terrain. What we need in the first instance are comparative *global* studies of socialization processes in families, in schools, in labor processes, and of the emotions and intuitions they shape up. "Which perceptions do the actors on the stage of history have of the reality that surrounds them, of themselves and each other? To what extent does the image which people have of their own actions correspond with the actions themselves?"⁴⁰ If we know much more about that in a comparative sense, we can hopefully also obtain more understanding of collective learning processes and obstructions to learning. But there is as yet a long road to travel to reach this goal.⁴¹ Even if such knowledge would shed more light on the sequence of decisions, however, a "streamlined" theory reflecting a consistent reconstruction of part (or all) of the past is unlikely to emerge. Some subjective phenomena will probably always defy scientific comprehension.

³⁹ Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories*, pp. 196–7. See also Wright, Levine, and Sober, "Causal Asymmetries," p. 147.

⁴⁰ Noordegraaf, *Overmoed uit onbehagen*, pp. 40–1.

⁴¹ Admittedly there is a considerable amount of literature on socialization processes in the milieu of wage laborers within advanced capitalist societies, but it is seldomly intercultural. Historical socialization research about unfree workers is as yet in its initial stages, although the thesis of W.E.B. Du Bois about the double consciousness of ex-slaves could probably provide a starting point. See Dubois, "Souls of Black Folk," and Dickson, Jr., "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness." Du Bois' approach could be applied to other areas as well, such as women's history. See, for example, Herrmann, *Les voleuses de langue*. We can also draw inspiration from Frantz Fanon's analysis of the "colonial gaze." See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, and commentaries on his work in Siebert, *Frantz Fanon*; McCulloch, *Black Soul, White Artefact*; Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*; and Wolter, *Das obscure Objekt der Begierde*. An isolated pioneering study of proletarian learning processes is Vester's *Die Entstehung des Proletariats als Lernprozeß*, an attempt to reinterpret the process of class formation described by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* as a combination of successive cycles of learning and struggles. Elaborating on this approach, there is a study by Millbourn, "Swedish Social Democrats' Experiences and Consciousness." A very different angle is taken by Mergner, *Social Limits to Learning*.

The histories I reflect upon in this volume exhibit many more empirical variations all over the world – often far more than a historian presumes – yet they reflect clear general patterns as well. Subaltern workers need to protect their interests under all kinds of different circumstances, but they nevertheless face very similar strategic choices: if we set up a mutual aid society, how do we avert abuse, and ensure that everyone pays his or her dues on time? If we organize a strike, how do we arrange the decision-making process? And how do we compensate our lost wages? Such questions inevitably arise, whatever the specific context may be. And despite the enormous diversity of working-class experiences, I think the answers subaltern workers have found to these questions can be grouped in a few distinctive basic types. Almost every basic type will lead, either immediately or over the long term, to both intended and unintended consequences which in turn present new choices. In some cases, the result is an extended series of intertwined decisions that form a historic “trail” of collective action, by virtue of their mutual cohesion. In other words, the forms of collective action which subaltern workers all over the world have devised reflect a definite logic of its own, which we can discover and verify.

This insight should not, however, tempt us to *reduce* their actions simplistically to a process of “rational choice” only. The choices made are often far from optimal or fully rational, due to poor information, lack of experience, emotional tensions, or unforeseen setbacks. On all continents, the history of subaltern workers’ action features both decisions that culminated in major successes, as well as fatal errors and strategic blunders.

Teleconnections

While we can reconstruct in this way the great diversity and logics of workers’ experiences and actions, the *global interconnections* between those experiences and actions also demand our attention. Such interconnections were already recognized in the past quite often, but they have been neglected equally often by labor historians to this very day.

Rosa Luxemburg gave attention to them when, in the years immediately preceding World War I, she worked on an (unfinished) manuscript published posthumously under the title *Introduction to Political Economy*. Early on in this study, she engages in a polemic against Karl Bücher, a prominent representative of the Historical School who denied the reality of an interconnected world

economy.⁴² In order to prove the contrary, Luxemburg pointed to the reality of global social, political and economic entanglements. In just a few pages, she illuminates how the mechanization of the British textile industry at the end of the eighteenth century for the most part destroyed manual weaving in Britain, while at the same time it increased the demand for cotton produced by North American slaves. When the trans-Atlantic trade stagnated during the American Civil War of 1861–65, the resulting Lancashire “cotton famine” meant not only the pauperization of British workers, but also led to the emigration of workers to Australia, and increased cotton production in e.g. Egypt and India. There, the farmers were robbed of their means of subsistence by commercialization, causing among other things more famines.⁴³

Luxemburg elaborated her example with even more detail, but of interest here is just the fact that she presented a narrative showing the real impact of connections between developments in different continents. She demonstrated how the destinies of North American slaves, British textile workers, small farmers in Egypt and India, and Australian immigrants were bound up with each other. Her story is based on changes within just one commodity chain (cotton), but she is attentive to the wider social causes and implications of those changes. In so doing, she provides a wonderful example of what a global history of the subaltern working class *could* look like. Of course, other angles are also conceivable, but the focus in Global Labor History should be, I think, on comparing commodified labor relations and on reconstructing their global interconnections and their consequences.

We could also call such connections *teleconnections*, after the example of geologists and climatologists who, since the beginning of the twentieth century, have demonstrated many linkages between regions located at a remote distance from each other.⁴⁴ In reality, the immediate interests of workers in

⁴² Bücher, *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft*, p. 142.

⁴³ Luxemburg, “Einführung in die Nationalökonomie,” pp. 557–60. Quite possibly Luxemburg’s example was inspired by Marx’s descriptions of the cotton industry in *Capital*.

⁴⁴ The concept “teleconnections” seems to have been introduced by the Swedish geologist Gerard De Geer as counterpole to what he calls “close-connection.” See his retrospective in “Geology and Geochronology.” An early systematic treatment of the concept in a climatological context is offered by Ångström, “Teleconnections of Climatic Changes,” who distinguished three main causes of teleconnections, namely i) the local extension of a given phenomenon, for example an expanding area of rains; ii) the propagation of phenomena along the earth’s surface, for example a moving

one part of the world can have direct repercussions for the immediate interests of workers in another part. Such teleconnections emerge in all kinds of ways. A valid general theory about them requires much more research, but a few examples will suffice here to illustrate what is at issue:

- *Labor processes in different locations can be linked via global commodity chains.* Luis Valenzuela for example shows how from the 1830s through to the 1860s a very close nexus existed between Chilean copper miners and British copper smelters in Swansea (South Wales): “Large quantities of Chilean copper and regulus arrived in the Swansea docks to be smelted and refined in the South Wales furnaces. On the other hand, Welsh coal and firebricks as well as other British produce were shipped from South Wales to Chilean ports close to the mines to pay for that copper and, incidentally, stimulating mining and smelting production.”⁴⁵
- *Labor processes are themselves sometimes intrinsically international.* Transport workers like seamen and longshoremen are “natural” liaisons between regions separated by long distances. Already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and perhaps even earlier, they made logistical connections between subaltern workers in different continents. Seamen “influenced both the form and the content of plebeian protest by their militant presence in seaport crowds” and “used their mobility [...] to create links with other working people.”⁴⁶ Transport workers have figured prominently in the transcontinental dissemination of forms of collective action, as shown by the diffusion of the model of the Industrial Workers of the World from the United States to places like Chile, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Moreover, in 1911 they were the first to organize transcontinental collective action, through simultaneous strikes in Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium and on the East Coast of the United States.⁴⁷

cyclone; or iii) changes in environmental factors (for example solar radiation) which in different locations can have a different impact. Ångström argued, that the different types of causes are interdependent (p. 243). Such considerations could possibly have a heuristic value for social historians as well.

⁴⁵ Valenzuela, “Copper,” p. 177.

⁴⁶ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p. 294; Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*.

⁴⁷ On the IWW model see Burgman, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*; Olssen, *The Red Feds*; Philips, “South African Wobblies”; Simon, “Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism in South America”; van der Walt, “The Industrial Union is the Embryo

- *Migrants can impart their experiences to other workers in the country of settlement* – as Indian workers did in the Caribbean and South-East Asia, British workers did in Australia, Italian workers did in the Americas, and Chinese workers did in the Asian Diaspora. Their presence in the new country may cause segmentation of its labor markets, which might in turn lead to forms of ethnically segregated action. And returning migrants may import a repertoire of forms of collective action from their respective countries of origin.⁴⁸
- *The employers' capital likewise realizes transcontinental entanglements.* The staffs of multinational firms are mutually connected via corporate structures – a phenomenon which does not date from the last hundred and fifty years, but is already at least four hundred years old.⁴⁹
- *Consumption by subaltern workers of products produced by subaltern workers elsewhere* is another relationship. The increased use of sugar by workers in Europe in the eighteenth century influenced the activities of slaves in the sugar plantations of the New World. The inverse also seems to apply; Sidney Mintz suggests for example that sugar made the diet of workers in England more varied and richer, and therefore promoted the industrial revolution.⁵⁰
- *The fate of subaltern workers can be mediated by government agencies.* The introduction of immigration restrictions by nation-states from the last decades of the 19th century is probably also bound up with the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of the serfs in Russia and other developments which promoted the mobility of subaltern workers.
- Last – but not least – there are *transnational waves of collective action*. In addition to instigating the first Russian Revolution in 1905, the Japanese victory over Russia, for instance, promoted nationalist and anti-colonial forces

of the Socialist Commonwealth'." On the 1911 strike see van der Linden, "Transport Workers' Strike."

⁴⁸ See, for example, Hira, *Van Priary tot en met de Kom*; Jayawardena, "Culture and Ethnicity"; Mohapatra, "Hosay Massacre of 1884"; Lipset, "Radicalism or Reformism," p. 3; Gabaccia, "'Yellow Peril' and the 'Chinese of Europe'"; Atabaki, "Disgruntled Guests."

⁴⁹ Lucassen, "Multinational and its Labor Force"; Arrighi, Barr, and Hisaeda, "Transformation of Business Enterprise"; Chandler and Mazlish, *Leviathans*.

⁵⁰ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p. 183.

throughout Asia, and encouraged workers' collective action in many places.⁵¹ The second Russian Revolution from March 1917, and the Bolshevik seizure of power inspired an explosive increase of workers' collective action on all continents.⁵² The Hungarian uprising of 1956 was a "powerful stimulus" for labor unrest in Shanghai in the following year.⁵³

All such "teleconnections" cannot be viewed in separation from the ongoing class conflicts between employers and subaltern workers. Policies "from above" followed collective actions "from below", and vice versa. Beverly Silver shows in her elegant analysis that capital can respond to workers' unrest with a number of "fixes," i.e. the reorganization of labor processes, shifting activities to other geographic locations, new product lines, and banking or speculation.⁵⁴ Our broader concept of the working class enables us to add another variant, which we could call the "labor modes fix": employers can, if they see their position threatened in one way or another, substitute one form of labor commodification for another, for example replacing "free" wage labour by debt bondage, subcontracting (outsourcing) or self-employment.

The connections and contradictions between different forms of labor commodification are of essential importance for Global Labor History. Marx already wrote in *Capital*, that "Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin."⁵⁵ Robert von Pöhlmann summarizes the logic of this thought succinctly: "How could the free working class, even if its members were well-organized, hope to influence wage-levels durably across the board, if a large part of the workers present were impervious to their influence because of their unfreedom, when the success of even the staunchest

⁵¹ See e.g. Kreiser, "Der japanische Sieg über Russland"; Sohrabi, "Historicizing Revolutions."

⁵² See e.g. McInnes, "Labour Movement." The influence might be propagated either indirectly via the mass media and the like, or directly. The Iranian migrant workers who regularly came to work in Southern Russia are a case in point. In the early 1920s trade unions expanded faster in the North and Northwest of Iran than in other parts of the country thanks to the "close proximity to Russia." Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, p. 8.

⁵³ Perry, "Shanghai's Strike Wave of 1957," p. 11.

⁵⁴ Silver, *Forces of Labor*. Also see Chapter 13.

⁵⁵ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 414.

solidarity essentially depended on whether and to what extent the shortages caused by a strike could be compensated for with unfree workers?"⁵⁶

And obviously acute conflicts can also emerge within individual segments of the subaltern workers. Often there are conflicts between better-paid and less well-paid groups of wage earners which are consolidated along ethnic, racial or gender dimensions.⁵⁷ Yet other allocative mechanisms assert themselves, even within one segment of the labor market in which workers have the same ethnic and religious background.⁵⁸

A final comment

Because the international literature about workers' collective action is presented in a plethora of publications as well as in numerous languages (most of which I regrettably do not read), I base my observations on only a very modest fraction of the total stock of original sources and secondary literature available. Within those limits, my selection also reflects the inevitably uneven development of international historiography. Some countries, especially in the North Atlantic region, have already been researched comprehensively, while other countries and regions received much less attention. Far more has been written about some sectors, such as mining and manufacturing, than about others, such as agriculture and the service sector. And labor historians have shown much greater interest in some types of organizations and activities (trade unions, strikes) than in others. By emphasizing these deficiencies, I intend to invite future researchers to help overcome them, and promote a body of knowledge more representative in composition. Although I have tried to draw upon experiences from diverse areas and sectors around the

⁵⁶ Pöhlmann, *Geschichte der sozialen Frage*, p. 177. A striking example of such a connection is provided by Casanovas, who points out that until the 1880s, "free labourers in Cuba faced the constant threat of being replaced by forced labourers" and that therefore "free labour co-operated increasingly with unfree labour in eliminating the combination of slavery and colonialism." ("Slavery, the Labour Movement and Spanish Colonialism," pp. 368–9.)

⁵⁷ Bonacich, "Past, Present, and Future of Split Labor Market Theory." Bonacich's theory gains in explanatory power if it includes the role of states. See Peled and Shafir, "Split Labor Market and the State."

⁵⁸ In the 1880s, for example, indentured muslim laborers from British India in Trinidad were divided over the question of whether, during prayer, they should face towards the East or to the West. Mohapatra, "Following Custom?"

globe, this book inevitably reflects only some “snapshots” about the current state of research in the field of labor history.

I think I have reached my goal, if I have made a credible case for the view that another historiography of the world’s laboring poor is possible and desirable. I hope to have demonstrated that it makes sense to regard all subaltern workers as one broad social class. There are many important common characteristics of chattel slaves, self-employed laborers and “free” wage earners (“wage slaves”) which until now have often been overlooked. At the same time, the studies I refer to also prove that the class of subaltern workers is internally very varied, and often divided within itself. Complex organizational forms like consumer and producer cooperatives, or trade unions with multiple branches, can only be built by subaltern workers with a rather large degree of autonomy. Conversely, all sorts of tactics which are rather obvious for groups of workers who have little autonomy, are not attractive for more autonomous groups, who regard them as counterproductive or too risky.

Most of all, with this book I intend to mark out a *direction*, not final or conclusive answers. My demarcations of the world working class, my reconstructions of the logic of collective labor action, and my appropriations from adjacent disciplines aim primarily to stimulate further debate, inspired by Francis Bacon’s motto: “Truth will sooner come out from error than from confusion.” The progress of Global Labor History will not only enable us to view transcontinental developments in their mutual connection, as they should be. It will also enable us to understand regional histories better. The challenge is to transcend Old and New Labor History with a new approach, which places the insights previously acquired by historians in a new and broader context. By this means, I think our ability to understand the world and explain it can only improve, enabling better relativizations and more useful generalizations. As Edward P. Thompson recognized: “Each historical event is unique. But many events, widely separated in time and place, reveal, when brought into relation with each other, regularities of process.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, p. 84.

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