



WORK & CULTURE

Representing Global Labor

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You may recall this song, perhaps in a different translation.

“Arise, you prisoners of starvation!
Arise, you wretched of the earth!
For justice thunders condemnation.
A better world’s in birth.
No more tradition’s chains shall bind us.
Arise you slaves, no more in thrall!
The earth shall rise on new foundations.
We have been naught, we shall be all.

‘Tis the final conflict;
Let each stand in his place
The international working class
Shall be the human race.”¹

These are the common US lyrics to the “Internationale,” which was written in 1871 by the Commune poet, Eugène Pottier, after the fall of the Paris Commune. Pottier, born in 1816, was one of the revolutionary Parisian artisans of 1848, an admirer of Proudhon, a friend of Courbet, a leader in the Paris Commune who subsequently went into exile in the United States. His poem was set to music in 1888 by a member of a Lille worker’s chorus, Pierre Degeyter. By 1910, it had been adopted as the anthem of the international worker’s movement. It later served as an anthem of the Soviet Union, but it has been translated into many languages and sung around the world. It was banned in many parts of the world in the early years of the century; it was sung by Wobblies in the Lawrence textile strike, by the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, and it was the source of Frantz Fanon’s most famous title.

I begin with the Internationale because it stands as one of the first great popular “representations” of global labor. Somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century -- one might mark it from the famous *Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848, written by Pottier’s German contemporary Karl Marx, with its final lines: “Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!” (“Proletarians of all countries, unite!”) or perhaps from the moment of the organization of the International Working Men’s Association in 1864, the Internationale that Pottier refers in the chorus of the song -- people began to see the workers of the world as constituting an interconnected global labor force sharing a common situation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, this notion of an international working class was a powerful imaginative construct, even if it was in many ways a fiction. What had actually emerged for the first time were powerful *national* labor movements, uniting socialist and labor parties, trade and industrial unions, and a variety of working-class mutual aid societies and voluntary associations. But the songs of the movement -- not only Pottier and Degeyter’s “L’Internationale,” but the oft-translated Italian song, “Bandiera Rossa,” and “Solidarity Forever,” written by the US Wobbly Ralph Chaplin in

1915 -- marked the beginning of an era that arcs from the first imaginings of a world working class to the triumph of that representation of labor in the social democratic, laborist, and communist visions of the twentieth century to the crisis of representing labor in the late twentieth century, a crisis which is imaginative as well as organizational, cultural as well as political. Indeed “L’Internationale” and “Solidarity Forever” seem throwbacks to an era that is long past. Not only had, in the words of a celebrated essay by the pioneering historian of labor, Eric Hobsbawm, the forward march of labor halted, but “labor” seemed a curious anachronism.

My essay is about that project of representing global labor -- imaginatively, culturally, politically -- and it is part of a larger book I am writing on “workers of the world,” on what might be called the “workers’ century.” This essay has three parts: in the first part I suggest that the representation of global labor required two crucial breakthroughs: a new abstraction of labor, of work, and the invention of “workers” as a category; and a new sense of the globe, of the “international.” In the second part I look at two relatively contemporary representations of global labor, the photographs of Sebastião Salgado and the graphs and pie charts of the World Bank report. In the final part, I address the sense of imaginative crisis that has led many contemporary thinkers to reject the very categories of “labor” and “laborer” as inadequate.

ABSTRACTING WORK, IMAGINING THE GLOBE

The first breakthrough was in representing work. This was a breakthrough of the new discourse of political economy, and the story is perhaps best told by that avid student of political economy, Karl Marx, in the first draft of his introduction to the book that would become *Capital*. “Labour,” he writes in 1857, “seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form—as labour as such—is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, ‘labour’ is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction...It was an immense step forward for Adam Smith to throw out every limiting specification of wealth-creating activity -- not only manufacturing, or commercial or agricultural labour, but one as well as the others, labour in general...Now, it might seem that all that had been achieved thereby was to discover the abstract expression for the simplest and most ancient relation in which human beings -- in whatever form of society -- play the role of producers. This is correct in one respect. Not in another. Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant...Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference.”²

I begin from Marx’s great insight that the apparently simple category of “work” -- just work, not weaving, tailoring, welding, teaching, cooking, driving, typing -- is the product of a society that itself is able to see these indifferently, as versions of the same kind of activity, reducible to a multiplier -- so many dollars and cents per hour. For not only does labor become a new kind of abstraction, the product of the new economic relations of

capitalism, but so does the category of the worker or laborer to name the masses of wage-earners in these new relations.

And these new workers began to represent themselves as such -- not only as weavers, welders, teachers and cooks but as workers -- and they represented themselves and were represented by others, socially (through unions, mutual aid and friendly societies as well as through informal social network), politically (through labor parties from the Workingman's Party in Philadelphia in 1832 to the Workers Party in Brazil a century and a half later) and culturally (in novels, songs, films, government statistics, sociological studies, autobiographies, newspapers, etc).

The second great breakthrough was the imagination of an interdependent globe, a world economy that was truly connected. It is not clear exactly when such a popular globalism emerges; most of the work on the nineteenth century is the story of nationalizing populations, turning peoples whose allegiance was to village or town into national citizens through schools and armies. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had seen the emergence of the "motley crew" that Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Redikker write of in *The Many-Headed Hydra*, a shipboard proletariat of sailors, slaves and pirates who circulated radical ideologies from port to port. But the worldwide system of migratory labor that develops in the nineteenth century with the steamship -- the proletarian mass migrations from Europe and the Asian contract labor migrations -- combined with the series of imperialist wars made transoceanic connections a part of daily life in the new industrial cities, company towns, and industrial plantations.

However, in this case, the great theoretical breakthrough was made not by Marx or anyone of his generation but by Rosa Luxemburg, a half-century younger. For Marx's generation, the international of workers was experienced as the migration of artisans across Europe and to the settler colonies, looking for work and for political refuge. Marx himself, though not an artisan, lived in the world of migrant German artisans in Paris, Brussels, and eventually London (he also thought seriously of joining the German artisan diaspora in New York). As a result, the international of workers meant two things, and one can see this in the actual day-to-day work of the First International in the 1860s: first, cross-border strike support; and second, rhetorical support for the struggles of oppressed nationalities -- particularly the Irish, the Poles, and (in a slightly different way) the antislavery Union forces in the US civil war -- combined with material support for the community of transnational political refugees and exiles.

But if this is the activist meaning of the international, Marx also begins to imagine the international theoretically after his arrival in London, the capital of the British Empire, where begins a crash self-education in imperialism. Though the major focus of *Capital* is national -- England is its "chief illustration" -- Marx begins to sense a global working class through the vehicle of a global industry: the textile industry where a complex global division of labor unites the growing and processing of fabrics, where cotton links Manchester with Charleston, Cairo and Calcutta, the Irish immigrant factory women of Manchester with the African-American slaves of the plantation South and the dispossessed handloom weavers of colonial India.

But a fuller sense of a global capitalism does not emerge until the early twentieth century when the extraordinary young post-colonial intellectual Rosa Luxemburg -- a Polish Jewish woman who leaves Warsaw as teenage activist, facing arrest, to study for a doctorate in Zurich and then become a leader of the German socialist party in Berlin -- rewrites Marx's *Capital* in an extraordinary way. For the third and greatest part of her masterwork *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) is the first account of capitalism as global proletarianization: as the dispossession of handcraft workers and subsistence agriculturalists around the world. I won't summarize the full theoretical argument, but let me cite the concrete examples in her narrative to show how Marx's earlier account of the enclosures of the commons in England has been radically globalized by Luxemburg.

Luxemburg sees three aspects of this global proletarianization: first, the struggle of capital against what she calls the "natural economy" in which her examples are the British in India, the French in Algeria, and the "opening" of China during the opium wars. The second moment is the struggle against the commodity economy -- by which she means the struggle against an independent peasant and handicraft economy. Here she has a chapter on the US plains and the post-Civil War revolution in American agriculture, where the struggle against the natural economy of the "Red Indians" is followed by a struggle against the commodity economy of the plains farmers (which led to populist revolt); her other example is South Africa where again the dispossession of the native peoples is followed by British capitalist war against the Boer settlers. The third moment is the competitive struggle of capital on the international stage for the remaining conditions of accumulation: the moment of "imperialism," the stage of "lending abroad, railroad constructions, revolutions, and wars" where she uses the example of British capital in Latin America and Egypt and of German capital in Turkey to analyze the effects of foreign debt and foreign capital investment.³

Though Luxemburg's argument became the focus of a long and now-exhausted debate, her powerful and original mapping of the global division of labor was not developed in subsequent work. For most of the twentieth century, labor was imagined through the lens of the nation. The very enfranchisement of organized workers as citizens of parliamentary nation-states and racially-structured colonial empires led to the nationalizing of "labor." If the socialist and labor parties invented the "working class" as a political actor, as Donald Sassoon has argued, they invented it as a national working class. Analytically, a "methodological nationalism" has informed most analysis of workers; from Engel's own *The Condition of the English Working Class in 1844* to E. P. Thompson's great study of 1963, *The Making of the English Working Class*, the nation framed the understanding of the working class.

By the end of the twentieth century, the emergence of something called "globalization" made the notion of a global labor force more palpable: the *Harvard Business Review* published a study of "Global Work Force 2000: The New World Labor Market" in 1991. It seemed that the era of globalization created for the first time a world labor force, a global working class. The massive migration of the peasantry to global barrios and favelas and ghettos -- not least in the United States -- and the extraordinarily rapid

industrialization of the world's South has led to an vast remaking of the working classes; one economist has said that the global South's industrialization took place "in half the time, at twice the growth rates, and with five times the North's population in the nineteenth century."⁴ Moreover, the eroding or end of the state policies that constituted particular national working classes with their citizen workers -- the welfare states and iron rice bowls of the social democracies and the people's democracies of mid-century -- has thrown the nationally-constituted parties and unions of the labor movement in crisis.

But how can we figure a world labor force, a global working class? What are the mental maps, the imagined narratives that would allow us to comprehend such an abstraction? In the second part of this essay, I would like briefly to look at two.

"GLOBAL WORK FORCE 2000"

Perhaps the first major attempt to represent the world's workers as whole was the remarkable photography project of Sebastião Salgado, the exhibition and subsequent book entitled *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*. If you have not seen the work, you can view a number of the images at Salgado's website (<http://www.terra.com.br/sebastiaosalgado/>); go to his "The Majority World: Three Photo Essays" and choose "Workers." Most of the photographs I discuss below are on the website.

Photographing workers and forms of labor around the world between 1986 and 1992, Salgado's powerful representation of a global working class is a contradictory synthesis of retrospection and prophesy. Not only does Salgado revive the formal conventions of mid-century black and white documentary photography, but he casts the work in a retrospective mode; it is, he says, "a farewell to a world of manual labor that is slowly disappearing," "the story of an era" -- the industrial era -- that is coming to an end.⁵

The work's division into six sections reflects the divisions of the industrial economy: 1) the plantation production of agricultural commodities (for example, on the first two pages of the web photo-essay, there are images of tea plantation workers in Rwanda in 1991 and of sugar cutting brigades in Cuba in 1988); 2) the slaughtering of animals for mass-produced food (on the third page of the web photo-essay, there are images of shellfish fishermen in Spain in 1988 and of slaughterhouse workers in South Dakota US in 1988; 3) the factory production of industrial metals (iron, steel, lead, magnesium) and means of transport (bicycles, scooters, automobiles, trains and ships) (on pages 4 to 6 of the web photo-essay, there are images of auto workers in India in 1989-90 and of shipbuilding in France in 1990; 4 & 5) the extraction of coal, gold, and oil (pages 7 to 9 of the web photo-essay includes images of coal miners in Bihar, India in 1989 and of oil workers in Kuwait in 1991); and 6) the grand public works (tunnels, dams, canals) (pages 10-11 of the web photo-essay includes images of women canal workers and dam workers in India in 1989 and tunnel workers in Europe in 1990).

Salgado's workers are not "service sector" workers: there are no waitresses or dishwashers, no janitors or department store clerks. Recalling his childhood encounter with the "great steel complexes of Minas Gerais," he writes that "to this day, steel making is for me an almost religious experience. And the high priest of this institution called production is the steelworker. For me, the mills are like huge, powerful gods who rule the frightening production of metal that dominates our system."⁶ Like the rest of us, Salgado is captured by a childhood sense of what workers look like.

Moreover, the grand oppositions of the age of three worlds seem to have structured the initial project: Salgado after all was trained as a development economist in São Paulo and Paris in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the power and prestige of radical Latin American dependency theory was at its height. As a result, one is not surprised by the focus on aspects of what is often called the "old international division of labor": the plantations and mines that produce the Third World's "primary commodities" for the world market -- sugar, tobacco, tea, oil, sulfur; nor is one surprised by the juxtapositions of labor in capitalist and communist societies -- the opening sequence on sugarcane in Brazil and Cuba, part three's juxtaposition of textile mills in Bangladesh and Kazakstan as well as shipyards in France and Poland. The project was conceived before the collapse of the European Communist states, and rhetoric of three worlds persists in its introduction: "the planet remains divided, the first world in a crisis of excess, the third world in a crisis of need, and at the end of the century, the second world -- that built on socialism -- in ruins."⁷

Perhaps the images that most dramatically draw us to the past are the famous images of the masses of mud-soaked men digging for gold in Serra Pelada, Brazil (see the first image in the web photo-essay). "You can't locate it in history," the critic Arthur Danto wrote of them, "you're astonished that anything like that could happen in the contemporary world." The gold images are perhaps the ones most circulated; and they were the first ones taken (in 1986); but they are, I would suggest, unrepresentative of the entire project.

For Salgado's portrait of the world's workers is not completely retrospective, nor is it exhausted by the images and ideologies that he inherited from the age of three worlds. For despite his framing narratives, the photographs assert the immediacy and contemporaneity of the work being done. Most of his images do not draw on the classicizing gaze, turning the gestures of labor into composed still lives of muscle and metal, as in the Dunkirk furnace image on page 4 of the web photo-essay. Rather most of his images of work capture everyday moments: moments of repetitive routines, of exertion, of rest (note the image of the metallurgical workers in the Ukrainian sauna on the page 4 of the web photo-essay).

If these are not photographs of the age of heroic industrialism like Charles Sheeler's cathedral-like River Rouge, neither are these the images of "de-industrialization" that dominated US film and photography of the "rust belt": emptied factory buildings with broken windows and padlocked fences waiting for restoration as condominiums and festival marketplaces (like Jim West's classic image of a closed Cadillac plant in Detroit

(see http://jimwestphoto.com/set_economic.html). Rather, these images of workers surrounded by the products of their labor -- piles of jute bags in Bangladesh, of hot dogs in South Dakota, or of bicycle frames in China -- restore the material basis of our apparently virtual world.

Moreover, the photographs create a powerful sense of a world labor force. Salgado does not divide his photographs into First, Second and Third World, nor even into North and South. Nor does he link countries and products in ways that would accent a divide between the technologies of an automated, computerized North and a South built on manual labor. The only US workers photographed as part of the project were South Dakota meatpackers; and the book ends by juxtaposing massive public works projects: the Channel tunnel in Europe and the Narmada dam in India. It is not that Salgado misses the dramatic inequalities across the globe; nor does he sentimentally construct an encompassing "Family of Man." The rhythm that develops across the four hundred photographs is built on the faces and heads of the laborers: faces and head sometimes open and clear in portraits, sometimes obscured or cut off by the machines and materials of the labor process, and often covered by a variety of rhyming goggles, masks, turbans, and hard hats.

A remarkable contrast to Salgado's photos can be seen in a second document from the mid-1990s that also marked the "discovery" of a global working class: the World Bank report of 1995, *Workers in a Integrating World*. On its cover was a 1982 painting of construction workers (*Eight Builders*) by one of the century's great proletarian artists, Jacob Lawrence; inside was a remarkable portrait -- in graphs, tables, pie charts and anecdotes -- of the world's workers.

The World Bank report reminds us that the representation of labor has long been an activity of what one might call the labor apparatuses of the national and colonial state, a central part of those biopolitical regimes that regulate bodies and populations. The creation of ministries and departments of labor in the nineteenth and early twentieth century involved not only the political struggles over the legal regulation of labor relations -- the legal status of unions, strikes, boycotts as well as the state regulation of wages and hours -- but the amassing of statistics about the labor market and of testimonies in front of legislative committees. The earliest of these "representations" of "labor" were the famed blue books of the British factory inspectors -- there over 300 books produced by 140 inspectors in the two decades after the Factory Act of 1833; it was these representations of workers that enabled Marx to write *Capital*.⁸ Within a half century not only had other governments followed this path, but the International Labor Organization -- which was founded in 1919 as part of the League of Nations and continued in Geneva, later becoming part of the UN -- began to collect world-wide statistics, imagining a global labor force.

The representational work of these labor apparatuses cannot be underestimated; their censuses and standard of living surveys created the categories through which we still think about work. For example, the ILO helped codify the divide between the agricultural, industrial and service sectors, a categorization in which the service sector

was never really theorized but was a residual category. And yet the debates and polemics about the apparent transformation marked by the shift from “industrial” to “service” work depend on this crude measure. Similarly, Harry Braverman called attraction to the reification of “skill” levels with the long-lasting divide between skilled, unskilled and “semi-skilled,” a category that was created, in the United States, by the census bureau to account for the new machine operators and assemblers in the mass production plants. Much of the debate about de-skilling depended on these categories; recent work in labor studies has not only shown that the definition of skill is a cultural product but that workers have continually fought over the classifications of particular jobs.

In another way, the testimonies of workers before legislative committee hearings -- orchestrated by union leaders and populist politicians to be sure -- nevertheless mark a crucial moment when working people represented themselves to the state.

Thus the World Bank report is a vital stake in the way a global labor force is being represented. Though its general perspective and its policy recommendations -- neoliberalism with a human face -- were predictable, its representation of the global labor force set the parameters of debate and discussion for much of the last decade.

What is the picture of the world’s workers that the World Bank gives us? First, it offers a history, a narrative built on the existence and failure of two alternatives to the present: the centrally-planned economies of the communist world and the post-colonial import substitution economies. It is an account of the shift from what I have called the age of three worlds to the single “integrating world.” However, and this is the second point, they see the world still divided into three, but no longer ideologically but economically: higher, middle, lower income. In 1995, they wrote, the world’s labor force was made up of 2.5 billion men and women, almost twice as many as in 1965.⁹ About sixty percent of the world’s workers were in low income countries; another quarter was in middle income countries; the high income countries made up 15% of the total. When they divide this by sector -- agriculture, industry, service, unemployed, not in labor market -- they find that a third of the world’s workers are not in the labor force. This is further elaborated in an extended discussion of what they see as “household labor decisions”: who works, how much (labor hours and the controversy over the trajectory of labor hours), and where (the issue of migration).

Their general conclusion is that world inequality is increasing, that we are seeing divergence not convergence, and they have several dramatic representations of the distribution of earnings across the world to show this. So for example, the pay ratio of engineers to women textile workers is eight to one in Nairobi and three to one in Frankfurt; this dramatic difference in internal wage rates is then amplified internationally, the pay ratio of German to Kenyan engineers is seven to one, that of German to Kenyan women textile workers is eighteen to one.¹⁰

To put names to these numbers, the report opened with four miniature narratives of the world’s workers, which metaphorically account for three-quarters of the world’s workers: Duong, a Vietnamese rice farmer (“Workers like Duong, laboring on family farms in

low- and middle-income countries, account for about 40 percent of the world's labor force"); Hoa, a garment factory worker in Ho Chi Minh City ("Wage employees like Hoa, working in the formal sector in low- and middle-income countries, make up about 20 percent of the global labor force."); Françoise, a Vietnamese immigrant in France working as a waitress ("Françoise and other service sector workers in high-income countries account for about 9 percent of the global labor force"); and Jean-Paul, a now-unemployed French garment worker ("Workers in industry in high-income countries...make up just 4 percent of the world's labor force.")¹¹

This World Bank story epitomizes the narrative of the world's working class that has come to dominate the last decade. Unlike Salgado's linking of workers by their place in the industrial division of labor – plantations, mines, and manufacturing -- the World Bank links them through a geography of jobs, a labor chain that implicitly links Duong with Jean-Paul through the processes of internal labor migration from rural agriculture to urban manufacturing (Hoa is Duong's symbolic "daughter") and international labor migration from former colony to former colonizer (as Françoise is Hoa's symbolic "sister"), as well as the implied export of garment industry jobs from Toulouse to Ho Chi Minh City, from Jean-Paul to Hoa.

So far, the key imaginative form by which this new reality of a world labor force has been captured is the story of people moving across borders to find work: though transnational migrant workers make up only about two percent of the world labor force, they have become the figures by which we can imagine the transformations. One thinks of Gregory Nava's great film of 1984 *El Norte* which follows the Guatemalan brother and sister as they pass through the underworld of a rat-infested sewage tunnel to cross the border between Mexico and California; or of Xavier Koller's *Journey of Hope* (1990), which tells the tale of a Kurdish family from Turkey crossing the Alps in winter; or of Adrian Caetano's *Bolivia* (2001) with its narrative of the migrant Peruvian restaurant worker in Buenos Aires. Indeed Salgado's own work testifies to this imaginative shift; in the late 1990s, he followed his *Workers* project with the photographic work, *Migrations*.

Thus, the World Bank report would not lead us to conclude that workers are disappearing; deindustrialization is actually industrial relocation, as working class are being remade and recomposed. Moreover, recent studies would suggest -- here the World Bank report is less helpful -- that worker self-organization and militancy has not, as is often thought, declined or disappeared. As the important work of the World Labor Research Group at the Braudel center in Binghamton has shown, labor unrest rose around the world in the 1980s and 1990s, following the shift in manufacturing, and the industrial revolution in the South. Indeed by the end of the century we see what one labor historian has called an "unprecedented world-wide action" -- a coordinated global work stoppage by dockworkers in 1997.¹²

Nevertheless, though the twentieth century may have been the "workers' century," hardly anyone thinks the twenty-first century will be a century of the "worker." What constitutes this crisis of labor? What is wrong with the notion of "work" or "labor," with the figure of the "worker" or the "laborer"? Why does it seem that we now need a new

representation: the multitude, the subaltern? Even the scholarly representation of labor -- "labor history" -- is in crisis, challenged by new forms of subaltern studies.

THE CRISIS OF THE FIGURE OF LABOR

This crisis of labor has a number of aspects. First and foremost, it has appeared as a political crisis, a crisis of the social movement that constituted itself on the basis of the figure of the worker, the labor parties and trade unions that emerged in the epoch of Pottier and Degeyter's "L'Internationale." Union membership has fluctuated wildly over the course of the last century, with moments of accelerating growth alternating with periods of collapse. Socialist and labor parties grew more steadily and held their ground - - Goran Therborn and Donald Sassoon both suggest that they reach the height of their power in the late 1970s -- but rarely achieved stable majorities of the voting population; they were caught in the dilemma that Adam Przeworski identified: in order to gain electoral majorities, they had a tendency to move away from the workerist ideologies of their core constituency to broader populist and nationalist appeals; but that move away from workerist ideologies weakened the allegiance of their core constituents.

But more important, the articulation between the movement institutions and specific groups of workers -- free, "independent" producers, workingmen earning a "family wage," enfranchised (which is to say male, white, native-born) citizen workers, skilled craftworkers, or, by the mid-twentieth century, formal sector mass-production workers in the commanding Fordist industries -- meant that the unions and parties of "labor" not only adopted the racial, gender and national ideologies of those workers but were unable to see the toil of unproductive (in the terms of political economy), unwaged, unfree, unskilled, unwhite, undocumented and unmale toilers as "labor," or to see them as "workers."

Thus from the beginning of the labor movement, there were challenges to its capacity to represent the "prisoners of starvation," the "wretched of the earth" by its sibling social movements: the women's movement, the anti-colonial and anti-imperial national movements, the anti-slavery movement and the subsequent movement of post-slave communities. These social movements for civil, social, and cultural citizenship often avoided or refused the figure of "labor." Though Fanon adopted the phrase, "les damnés de la terre," from the "Internationale," he did it to highlight the failure of the promise that the international working class would be the human race: "in general," he writes in the final pages of *Les damnés de la terre*, "the workers of Europe have not replied to these calls; for the workers believe, too, that they are part of the prodigious adventure of the European spirit." A century after the Internationale, "labor" was often seen as an interest group, not a figure for the whole of toiling humanity.

This political crisis of the labor movement is not my central concern in this essay. It has been recognized by labor movement activists for more than two decades, and its resolution depends on the success or failure of those activists to recreate a movement that wins the allegiance of working people around the globe.

Rather, I would like to address the imaginative crisis, the sense that the innocuous second half of that last sentence -- “working people around the globe” -- is not so innocent, but is an inadequate, superceded figure, a misleading abstraction that comes bundled with a host of suspect connotations about work and workers. What is wrong with these terms? There are two different indictments which complement each other. First, “worker” is said to be too specific a figure, too full of metaphoric connotations. To say “worker” is to conjure up a specific body: the white, male, manual laborer of the classic Wobbly poster working in the large factories of the metal-working industries, living in a heterosexual household in the working-class tenements of the smoke-filled industrial cities, and drinking at the neighborhood tavern, bar, pub, or cafe. The result of a century of the cultural enfranchisement of labor has been to create such a powerful iconography that it now seems not only exclusive but traditional and conservative. The iconography of the blue collar workingman -- from Andy Capp to Archie Bunker to Homer Simpson -- is that of a lovable authoritarian, patriarchal but “hen-pecked,” always singing that “those were the days.”

It is true that this is not the only image that “worker” brings to mind. The iconography of labor has, one might say, an entire holy family, whose second most common figure is the sweatshop daughter, the swarthy, sultry, and seduced mill girl, eternally victimized from the Irish seamstresses of the 1840s in Manchester and New York to the Jewish and Italian shirtwaist makers of the early twentieth century to the Mexican and Malaysian maquiladora workers of the late twentieth-century. The World Bank’s narrative of Jean Paul, Hoa and Francoise is another version of this iconography.

Here we are caught in the full contradictions of figuration itself. On the one hand, powerful ideologies -- those narratives we tell ourselves in order to make sense of an incomprehensible social totality, those cognitive maps by which we figure where we are -- depend on richly elaborated metaphors, giant characters: as John Lennon once sang, “a working-class hero is something to be.” The creation of “working-class heroes” has been an extraordinary cultural revolution, a revaluing of ordinary lives, so that tragedy is no longer the monopoly of royal houses but is the stuff of plebian families. Similarly, the invention of “labor” as a political actor in state politics -- municipal and then national -- is one of the central accomplishments of the labor movement.

On the other hand, the very materialization of “labor” in specific working-class heroes reduces and reifies the original promise of the metaphor to embody not a single worker but the entire dispersed wretched of the earth. So it is that the most powerful terms that have been created to replace the overly-rich figure of “labor” are not the figures of equal metaphoric richness -- the “people,” “women,” “citizen,” “consumer,” “gay” or the various nationalities -- but are those terms which attempt to repel any positive content: the “subaltern,” which in the words of Ranajit Guha’s 1981 preface to *Subaltern Studies* is “a name for the general attribute of subordination...whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender office or any other way” or the “multitude,” which is, in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “a set of singularities...a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different.”¹³

One or another of these terms may well prove to be empty enough to encompass “*les damnés de la terre*”; it is worth recalling however, that this emptiness was the precise usefulness of the term “proletarian” when it was adopted by the French and German communists of the 1830s and 1840s. Long before the advancing male proletariat of the IWW posters, proletariat was derived from a Roman census term that meant “one who contributes nothing to the state except offspring”; in the early nineteenth century it referred to the “lowest stratum of poor and propertyless freemen; the term often meant living in pauperism.”¹⁴ Labor itself was an abject category whose negative connotations - - “working girl” long carried the connotations of prostitution -- were later transfigured: think of the curious rhetoric of knights of labor and ladies of labor in 1880s and 1890s.

The other objection to work and labor as categories is that they are too abstract, that they reduce the tremendous variety and meanings of human activity to a notion of “abstract labor.” Perhaps the most powerful version of this argument has been made by Dipesh Chakrabarty, a “labor” historian -- the author of the classic study of jute mill workers of Bengal, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* -- who develops a critique of the very concept of “labor.” “‘Work’ and ‘labor,’” he writes, “are words deeply implicated in the production of universal sociologies. Labor is one of the key categories in the imagination of capitalism itself. In the same way that we think of capitalism as coming into being in all sorts of contexts, we also imagine the modern category ‘work’ or ‘labor’ as emerging in all kinds of histories...Yet the fact is that the modern word ‘labor,’ as every historian of labor in India would know, translates into a general category a whole host of words and practices with divergent and different associations.”¹⁵ This universal sociology -- which he shared -- failed to make sense of the *hathiyar puja*, the worship of tools, a common festival in north Indian factories: “like many of my colleagues in labor history, I interpreted worshipping machinery -- an everyday fact of life in India, from taxis to scooter-rickshaws, minibuses, and lathe machines -- as ‘insurance policy’ against accidents and contingencies. That in the so-called religious imagination (as in language), redundancy -- the huge and, from a strictly functionalist point of view, unnecessarily elaborate panoply of iconography and rituals -- proved the poverty of a purely functionalist approach never deterred my secular narrative.”¹⁶

Chakrabarty extends this critique of universal sociologies of work to Marx’s concept of “abstract labor” itself, arguing -- in a parallel manner to Lisa Lowe in her *Immigrant Acts* -- that the “abstract labor” of Marx is, like the abstract citizen, “a particular instance of the idea of the abstract human -- the bearers of rights, for example -- popularized by Enlightenment philosophers.” I won’t try to summarize Chakrabarty’s brilliant and persuasive interpretation of Marx’s theory of abstract labor. But the difficulty he points to -- and it is similar to the zero-work argument of autonomist marxism -- is that to speak the words “work” and “labor” is already to be speaking the vernacular of capitalism, the language of commodities, the idiom of political economy. To invoke “workers” as the figure for an emancipated humanity is already to accept the logic of capitalism. For Chakrabarty, an analytical history speaks through the “abstracting categories of capital” and would speak of workers and work -- this would be a “labor” history; but he also holds out a second history, a subaltern history, which “beckons us to more *affective* narratives of human belonging where life forms, although porous to one another, do not

seem exchangeable through a third term of equivalence such as abstract labor.” “The subaltern,” he writes, “is that which constantly, from within the narrative of capital, reminds us of other ways of being human than as bearers of the capacity to labor.”¹⁷

In many respects, Chakrabarty is right, and even Marx recognized this. It is worth recalling that the central meaning of communism for Marx was never the state ownership of the means of production or even workers’ control of production but the dramatic reduction of working day. And the labor movement itself recognized it: only rarely was worker or laborer used as a salutation. The early labor movement adopted citizen from the French revolution -- the minutes of the First International are full of Citizen Marx; the communist movement adopted comrade; and the trade union movement adopted brother and sister.

Nonetheless, as many critics have argued, the labor movement often did find itself committed to the political economy of capitalism, to a variety of productionisms that made an absolute virtue of work: trade unions that found themselves disciplining work forces and enforcing no-strike pledges; militants who saw women’s entry into wage labor as a necessary step in the emancipation of women; anarchosyndicalists whose notions of worker’s control made notions of labor central to manliness; Stakhanovite communists for whom “voluntary” work brigades were necessary to the building of socialism. The contrary traditions that, in Chakrabarty’s words, remind “us of other ways of being human than as bearers of the capacity to labor” -- movements for sexual, spiritual or cultural transformation -- have always seemed somewhat suspect to the reality-principle of the labor movements.

In the face of these critiques, should we abandon the figure of labor? Or can one imagine a subaltern account of workers of the world? That is the question and project of the book I am working on. Let me conclude with a few preliminary suggestions. First, the ongoing search for a term empty of connotations that could capture the experience of the dispossessed is always in tension with the fullness of figuration. So there is an unavoidable dialectic between the imagination of new empty names to stand for the incomprehensible and unimaginable totality that is toiling humanity, the subaltern, the multitude and the necessity of powerful and reductive figures to map our relation to other people joined to us by this global division of labor. We know well the dangers of taking the part for the whole, but it is difficult to imagine the whole without those metonymic devices (like the transnational migrants who are a tiny percentage of the world’s workers). And there have been moments where certain specific groups of workers did play disproportionate roles in helping to define, shape and trigger oppositional movements.

Second, this crisis of the figure of labor does not signal an end to work or to workers. Rather it marks a reconfiguration of the shape of work and workers. Despite the heroic attempt to create stable and long-lasting organizations and narratives to represent working people, there is no stable “working class” under capitalism. “The term ‘working class’, properly understood,” Harry Braverman wrote in his classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, “never precisely delineated a specified body of people, but was rather an

expression for an ongoing social process....the working class as it exists [is] the shape given to the working population by the capital accumulation process.”¹⁸ Thus a capitalist economy continually reshapes workplaces and the working population; it destroys “old” industries and “old” work forces while drawing “new” workers from around the globe and moving workplaces to “new” regions. Thus, as Gareth Stedman Jones once noted, the phrase, “the making of the English -- or any other -- working class,” is misleading; a working class is no sooner “made” then it is unmade and remade. Or, to put it in the language of the Italian autonomist thinkers, the process of class composition is always a process of decomposition and recomposition.

Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the representations of “labor” often seem more solid and enduring than the labor process. We remain caught in the class maps we inherited from family, school and movies. No matter what our position in the class-structuring of the population, our class images are usually a generation behind the realities of class formation, behind the forces of capitalism that are reshaping the working population. It is perhaps not surprising that this is true of the political representatives of labor as well, the labor parties, unions, and associations.

However, insofar as states, corporations and international financial institutions continue to represent -- and exploit -- a global labor force, it is necessary to engage in the contest over representing workers. And if the notion of a global labor movement seems utopian, with only a handful of actions by dockers to point to, it is worth remembering that a century ago any national labor movement seemed just unlikely.

If the working class is the shape capital gives to the working population, then another name for “workers of the world” is the “international division of labor,” a concept that emerged out of anti-imperialist dependency theory. Without rehearsing the scholarly controversies over the “old” (sectors) and “new” (processes in production chain) international divisions of labor, let me simply conclude by suggesting that the international division of labor is a key figure for the unity and division of the global labor force, pointing to the structured hierarchy of forms of waged and unwaged work, and to the various ways we divide labor, ideologically, scientifically, and in popular thought. Seeing the world working class as the international division of labor (and vice versa) avoids the false concreteness of “proletariat” -- it does not equal industrial workers or formal sector wage-earners, nor the false abstractness of homogenized labor.

This allows us to resist a sense that there is a single trajectory toward a homogenization of workers, toward a global unity or necessary solidarity. Because of the party and union politics of workers alliance, there is a constant temptation to read a necessary logic of alliance into capitalism, that one could move easily from the social construction of abstract labor in a capitalist economy to the actual reduction of differences among workers in the formation of specific historical working classes.

But the central dynamic of working class life under capitalism is neither a secular trend toward homogenization, not an infinite proliferation of differences, but the dialectic between, to use Marx’s words, competition and association. The same forces that create

the conditions for competition among workers also create the conditions for association. But the reverse is also true.

Furthermore, any reconceived use of the figure of labor must recognize that the fetish of the wage form conceals the hidden abode of domestic labor and recognize that the fundamental split between workplace and household -- though it has real effects -- is a reification of the totality of subaltern life, that the forms of life and struggle of the unwaged, the unemployed, the informal, are as central to this dialectic of competition and association, power and misery, as are the lives and struggles of those capital deems “workers.”

To the command of neo-liberal globalization -- “workers of the world, compete” -- we must answer with that old slogan of the global justice movement: “workers of the world, unite.” But in doing so we need to put it in new words, new songs, new figures of that yet unimagined collectivity.

¹ US version of Eugene Pottier and Pierre Degeyter, “L’Internationale,” from Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Carry It On! A History in Song and Picture of the Working Men and Women of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 97.

² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, translated by Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 103-104.

³ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press), p. 419.

⁴ A. Singh quoted in Ronaldo Munck, *Globalisation and Labour: The New “Great Transformation”* (London: Zed Books, 2002), p. 107.

⁵ Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age* (New York: Aperture, 1993), p. 6.

⁶ Salgado, 13-14.

⁷ Salgado, 7.

⁸ David MacGregor, *Hegel, Marx, and the English State* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 218.

⁹ World Bank, *Workers in an Integrating World* (World Development Report 1995), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 9.

¹⁰ World Bank, 11.

¹¹ World Bank, 1.

¹² For the work of the World Labor Research Group, see Beverly J. Silver, Giovanni Arrighi, and Melvyn Dubofsky, eds., “Special Issue on Labor Unrest in the World-Economy, 1870-1990,” *Review* Vol 18, no 1 (Winter 1995); and Beverly J. Silver, *Forces Of Labor: Workers’ Movements and Globalization since 1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). On the dockworkers’ action, see Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World* (London: Verso,), p. 249.

¹³ Ranajit Guha, “Preface” reprinted in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 35; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, p. 99.

¹⁴ Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution: Volume Two*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), p. 131.

¹⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 76

¹⁶ Chakrabarty, 78.

¹⁷ Chakrabarty, 52,71,94.

¹⁸ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press,), p. 24, 27.