

# INTRODUCTION

## Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor

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[T]hese newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence . . . And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.

—Karl Marx

Recent protests—from the Arab Spring, to the European revolts, to Occupy, to the mass demonstrations in Turkey and Brazil—galvanized worldwide attention, as people in many different places demanded rights to livelihood, a livable wage, education, state services, and democratic freedoms. After years of steady pronouncements in the mainstream media that free trade was the source of universal prosperity and liberty, the widespread evidence of social precariousness and political exclusion on display exposed the underbelly of neoliberal globalization usually hidden from view. As a result, the protests pushed the problem of social inequality and the idea of class from the margins to the center of debate around the world. The general tenor of this discussion raises for us two key questions: How did we get to a situation in which labor was everywhere diminished? And, why had it been decades since labor demands were tied so explicitly to ideas about the greater common good?

After more than forty years of neoliberal hegemony, with its strong emphases on individualism and capital-labor cooperation, the connection we draw between labor demands and social betterment may strike readers as anachronistic. Even in the aftermath of the 2007/2008 global financial collapse, and its origins in corporate malfeasance, the

notion that “what’s good for capital is good for all” remains a broadly accepted truism, even among some labor unionists. Yet the recent political protestors across the world explicitly claimed rights and freedoms on behalf of a common humanity. In doing so they resurrected what Buck-Morss (2009) called “universalism from below,” a set of demands for emancipation, human rights, and social equality made by common people throughout the *longue durée* of capitalist and colonial expansion. The rights and freedoms that are everywhere under attack in the early twenty-first century were initially won by the combined challenges of laborers—across space and social categories—to the reigning forms of economic exploitation and political oppression they faced. Those gains were not, however, secured for all time, but were subject to continuing efforts to restrict democratic freedoms to the privileged few. We invoke this dialectic of force and counterforce to remind readers of the suppressed histories of universalism that are now being reclaimed by popular movements of the dispossessed and disenfranchised around the world, and to foreshadow a theme that weaves its way throughout this volume.

The question of how we got here immediately calls attention to the global multiplication and political stultification of labor that has fed neoliberal capitalism and governance for the last four decades. In our view, though, adequate answers to this important inquiry requires a comparative focus on the making and unmaking of particular working classes over a longer time frame. The processes of dispossession and displacement at the root of this tripling of the global proletariat were experienced and lived differently in specific localities, countries, and regions, largely due to the historically specific ways these places were originally incorporated into the world capitalist order. At the same time, the global experience of what David Harvey (2003) calls “accumulation by dispossession” exposes heretofore hidden histories of connection among places and people. This understanding provides the rationale for the expansive geographical and historical scope of this volume.

Each of the contributors addresses the above issues through historical ethnographies that range from Colombia, India, Poland, to Spain and the United States. The six studies show how dispossession was lived by different local working classes at the end of the twentieth century. In each case, the authors document how the social movements, vibrant public spheres, and attempts to build organizations through which laborers tried to secure some greater measure of political and economic democracy for themselves and their societies were

met by repression and violence. The chapters are longer than would be found in a typical edited collection. Our purpose in structuring the volume in this way is to represent the complexity of the struggles, histories, and social relations in each setting and to enable a comparison among cases to further our understanding of global precariousness. Notwithstanding the particularities of each case, commonalities among them quickly become apparent.

We elaborate below several overlapping themes that span the contributions to this volume, yet one important commonality needs to be stated upfront. A strong emphasis on the shifting spatial/temporal matrices of working-class life, culture, and organization animates each study. This is evident at the ethnographic level in changes in class experience, memory, and spatial perspective over time. The focus here is not, however, on the kind of local/global opposition that has captured the anthropological imagination in the last twenty years. Rather, transformations in the “common sense” (Gramsci 1971) within particular working-class places are seen in relationship to wider national, regional, and global sources of power and influence, which mediate, shape, and react to these local conditions, the type of confluence that Don Kalb (2009) calls “critical junctions.” Taken together, the case studies not only attest to the mutability of class belonging, identity, and politics over time and space, but also constitute a strong argument for the continuing salience of class as both social formation and analytical tool for critical scholarship. In fact, as we discuss below, a sense of the mutability of class is central to an adequate understanding of its continuing relevance.

Our guiding questions fly in the face of the reigning academic wisdom that class as a social formation has simply disappeared over the last thirty-odd years. It is certainly true that no small amount of theoretical cunning was marshaled against the very idea of class or its historical-geographical existence (see Palmer 1994). Yet the elision of class is as much a consequence of contemporary scholars’ mistaking the transformation and decline of the Fordist working class, a specific historical/geographical formation, for the end of class itself. This seems to be a recurrent misstep in social and historical scholarship, not least, as Michael Denning (2004) suggests, because cultural images and understandings of class last longer than actual class formations within capitalism. Denning argues that:

While a capitalist economy continually reshapes workplaces and working populations, destroying old industries and working forces while drawing

new workers from around the globe and moving industry to new regions, we remain caught in the class maps we inherited from family, school, and movies. (2004: 229–230)

A central feature of the class maps or memories we have inherited is the opposition between “the stable working class” and “the poor,” which, in turn, evokes a whole chain of signifiers—the affluent worker, aristocracy of labor, labor elite, on the one side; dangerous classes, the great unwashed, lumpen-proletariat, surplus populations, on the other. Moreover, this opposition is frequently traced on to all-encompassing distinctions between skilled industrial workers in the global North and racially marked and super-exploited laborers of the South. These typologies, whatever the particularities of their enunciation, greatly reduce our ability to apprehend the fluidity of class relations and experience.

It should be easy to see why our inherited class maps have become obsolete in our era when all “fast frozen” relationships and oppositions are, if not exactly “melting into air,” at least being upended and remade. At the same time, new, transnational class formations, to replace the national classes of the Keynesian/state capitalist era, are not yet wholly apparent. We are confronted instead by a world of labor, in various stages of the making, unmaking, and remaking of class. The current moment of capitalist restructuring is producing a range of new social relations. Informal, criminalized, military, child, and bonded labors are once again as common as industrial and service sector work in both the global North and South, just as structural adjustment programs, penalization, and military and paramilitary violence serve to differentiate and regulate labor across the world. It is precisely these new or remade relations that compel us to move beyond old antinomies in search of explanatory frameworks capable of making sense of the changing experiences of labor and all they mean for social and daily life.

We take our cue here from “the shouts in the streets” (Berman 1982). The 99 percent versus the 1 percent equation that emanated roundly from the Occupy encampments or the poignant demands for economic and social justice wafting across national borders during the 2012 European Day of Solidarity and Protest demonstrated the widespread impulse and urgency among protestors to redraw class maps in the face of the growing aristocratic privilege of globe-trotting elites who have withdrawn from all social compacts. This

reemergence of grassroots universalism echoes the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century popular movements and sentiments that facilitated the early coalescence of class formations within and beyond national and cultural boundaries.

E. P. Thompson's strictures on essentialism thus seem especially trenchant and timely some fifty years after they were first lodged. As Thompson famously remarked in the opening paragraph of *The Making of the English Working Class*: "The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making" (1963: 9). Thompson traces the experiences and historical relationships of working people as they begin to consider their shared conditions and develop (or not) a shared identity. His emphasis on the making rather than always already accomplished structure of class (whether "in-itself" or "for-itself") is once again worth heeding in this moment of transition, and it serves as a guiding thread of our analysis. As such, we do not attempt to elucidate the already accomplished formation of a global working class, or any other such designation, nor do we suggest that outcomes can be known in advance. Rather, we draw attention to a politics of labor in the past and present as pointers to a processual and relational approach to the global anthropology of labor.

## **Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor**

Our point of entry is what Karl Marx called the "multiplication of the proletariat," the continual expansion of those who were forced onto the market to sell their labor power, which he saw as the mirror process of capital accumulation. This notion of labor accumulation signals, for us, a sustained focus on the continual making, unmaking, and remaking of labor forces and working classes—politically, culturally, and structurally—through the dual lens of dispossession and disorganization. Expanding on Rosa Luxemburg's indispensable insight that primitive accumulation is not a one-time event but a constant feature of capital expansion, David Harvey's "accumulation by dispossession" brings the idea fully into the twenty-first century (2003). In a departure from the "expanded reproduction" of post-World War II Keynesianism in the North, when mass consumption, a burgeoning welfare state, and increased government expenditures for infrastructure did much to absorb surplus value, capital's strategies of privatization, creative destruction of assets, speculation,

geographic mobility, etc. characterize the neoliberal epoch (see also Perelman 2000). Harvey's consideration of the inside/outside dialectic and the way that capitalism always creates its own "other" directs attention to the contingencies of labor and its forms of social reproduction. We would add to this the importance of placing the politics of labor at the heart of analysis. This is an initial step for a global anthropology of labor that centers on the dialectic of dispossession and incorporation in people's daily lives, as well as the ways working people make new divisions and alliances in the context of global accumulation. And it calls upon us to closely study working classes in their making, remaking, and unmaking, as this played out in kin relations, belief, social organizations, work relationships, and the many other arenas of life that are anthropology's long-standing concerns.

To realize this project, however, a critique of the analytical frames that Harvey uses to elaborate the concept of accumulation by dispossession is in order. First, he features capital as the driving force of this global process and relegates labor struggles to the proverbial back seat. This is not to say that the "class struggle from above" that Harvey so well documents is not hugely important, only that it remains incomplete without a reciprocal focus on "class struggle from below." Second, Harvey dichotomizes labor struggles in the global South and North, which he designates as progressive and retrograde, respectively; this is a problematic move. As Harvey shows, dispossession takes various forms around the globe: In the North workers lost pensions, welfare, national health care, and jobs. In the South, peasant and indigenous communities lost communal lands; environmental and genetic materials were patented by private corporations; and water, communications, and other public utilities were privatized. These wide-ranging processes can be traced to the shift in dominance from productive to finance capital that accompanied the rise of neoliberalism. Although these multiple forms of dispossession may have their origins in the overriding interests of finance capital, Harvey attaches distinct logics to the struggles they engender; hence he reinscribes a typology of global labor—North/South, forward-looking struggles/rearguard action—that his theory should, by rights, dismantle. Unfortunately, this frame inhibits the remapping of past and present geographies of labor accumulation and struggle that we urgently need (see critiques by Collins 2012, Kasmir and Carbonella 2008). The reason for this misstep may be that Harvey sometimes slips into a narrow association of accumulation by dispossession with the loss of property rights, whereas he tends to neglect other forms (see Collins

2012, Wood 2007.) We develop a more *holistic* notion of dispossession that expressly refers to the varied acts of disorganization, defeat, and enclosure that are at once economic, martial, social, and cultural and that create the conditions for a new set of social relations.

As we are using it, labor—rather than “livelihood” as a collection of strategies for social reproduction, or “work” as a social activity, both of which are close companion concepts—is a pointedly *political entity*, whose social protests and quietude, organizations, and cultures reflect its multiple engagements with capital and state, as well as relationships with other workers locally, regionally, and globally. To be explicit, the designation labor is meant to convey several related ideas: First, it encompasses myriad ways of working—the manifold labors of slaves, petty commodity producers, coerced laborers, plantation workers, and domestic labor, within temporal and spatial processes of capital accumulation, as Eric Wolf described things for the early colonial period in *Europe and the People Without History* (1982). Second, it refers to the power-laden processes of categorizing, differentiating, or unifying those laborers. As such, it does not presume that the end point is full-on proletarianization, nor, with E. P. Thompson in mind, class-in-itself or class-for-itself at a global scale. Finally, a focus on labor in this political sense allows us to explore how states and other powerful institutions (such as, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) intervene in capitalist processes to facilitate or hinder connections among working people, and it leads us to closely examine the creation of organizational forms such as unions and political parties.

Our development of this definition is heavily indebted to W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1969 [1920]). Du Bois argued that “the shadow of hunger” (a phrase that poetically captures the lived experience of dispossession) and the production of difference and inequality are conjoined, simultaneous processes, and he framed the struggles of differently classified laborers within this broader context. Du Bois’s mapping of recurrent processes of class composition and decomposition not only brings labor’s political agency to the fore, but it also suggests that the outcomes of working classes’ attempts to make themselves are multiple and uneven, resulting in attempts at solidarity, but also in racial, ethnic, and gender hierarchy, exclusion, and violence.

To expand upon Du Bois’s political view of labor, we return to Wolf’s grand synthesis in *Europe and the People without History* (1982). Wolf’s perspective provided a still too little realized opportunity to



reconceptualize anthropological subjects engaged in manifold labors, within temporal and spatial processes of capital accumulation, a move that encouraged a general, radical reshaping of the discipline (Roseberry 1989; see also Mintz 1985). Wolf's radical impulse was prefigured by others in anthropology. Monica Hunter Wilson and Godfrey Wilson, Max Gluckman, and Georges Balandier, and Wolf's fellow researchers in Julian Steward's People of Puerto Rico Project, especially Sidney Mintz, to note just a few examples, all paid considerable attention to questions of labor and power in colonial situations and developed innovative conceptual and methodological approaches for understanding the connections among the many, various forms of labor they encountered in the field (see Nugent 2002). Although Wolf's proposal for a critically engaged, global anthropology was eclipsed by the postmodernist celebration of all things cultural, in our view it remains extremely timely for the twenty-first century.

To this point, we have sketched a beginning for an overarching framework for a global anthropology of labor. In what follows, we review studies from anthropology, history, political economy, and sociology that are lodestones for our examination of labor in explicitly political terms. We use these works to enrich our ability to theorize the lived experience of various laborers across time and space and to consider the multiplication of the proletariat from an ethnological perspective, and we draw on them to elaborate several overlapping themes that we consider to be anchors for our project: *dispossession and difference; the politics of dispossession; place, space, and power; and the myth of "disposable people."*

## Dispossession and Difference

The concept of dispossession has a long history in political economic theory. Marx's justly famous sketch of primitive accumulation remains the paradigmatic formulation. The story Marx tells has to do with the primacy of force and enclosure in creating both the preconditions for capitalism and the reduction of human beings to commoditized laborers. This process of "conquest, enslavement, robbery, [and] murder," in Marx's succinct summary "is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire" (1977 [1867]: 874, 875). Fiery prose aside, in some of his writings, Marx appears to assume that the plunder and terror that marked the earliest phases of capitalist development would subside with the steady advancement of capitalist



relations. The continuing exploitation of labor would thereafter, he suggested, be secured through the silent compulsion of economic relations and the inculcation of tradition and habit. Yet as Rosa Luxemburg (2003 [1913]) and Karl Polanyi (1944) pointed out long ago, primitive accumulation (Marx's "original sin" of capitalism) could not be so easily relegated to the past. The title of this volume, *Blood and Fire*, refers to Marx's evocative phrase, and we revisit it to bring "primitive" accumulation squarely into the present, and to underscore the centrality of the process of dispossession and its manifold effects for the anthropology of labor.

If the current Great Recession has shown us anything, it is that waves of dispossession do not wash evenly over whole communities (Perelman 2000). Rather they are important moments in the political process of creating difference and inequality. The many examples of racism, exclusion, and anti-immigrant and right-wing populism that are one form of reaction to the enclosure and privatization of the contemporary global era underscore this important fact (Mullings 2005).

To better understand the connection between dispossession and differentiation, we need to decenter the wage relationship in our understanding of labor. In his provocative essay "The Spectre of a Wageless Life" Michael Denning (2008) recalls that the founding moment of capitalism is not the wage contract, but the imperative to "earn a living." This entails the wholesale divestment of the property and rights by which people had previously secured their sustenance. How a person or group enters the wage relation, if at all, is the stuff of multiple identities and cleavages, but the moment of wagelessness is one of commonality. This point serves to remind us that solidarity, as much as difference, is always a possibility. It also reminds us that the many ways of being without a wage—for a short term, for a lifetime, for generations, for whole communities or regions—is one manner in which people experience capital accumulation. We take this moment of wagelessness, with all its possibilities for solidarity *and* for division, and in all of its varied historical manifestations, as a starting point for analysis.

Jane Collins's (2003) study of the intersecting and mutually determined lives of garment workers in the United States and Mexico is highly suggestive in this regard. Collins describes the experiences of southern US women who lost their jobs when their employer declared bankruptcy. Their counterparts in Aguascalientes, Mexico, where the employer relocated, gained employment but nonetheless faced the persistent threat of plant closure. We see here the simultaneous

making of wage labor and wagelessness and the precariousness of workers throughout the world, as well as the fledgling cross-border organizing efforts that resulted (see also Lee 2007).

The recognition that we need to decenter the wage contract also serves as a rejoinder to the increasingly common assertions that present forms of neoliberal accumulation are creating “surplus populations” that now constitute a permanent “outside” of capitalism, a problem we will address shortly. At the same time, it should not be taken to suggest a simple linear progression from wagelessness to wages, the trajectory usually associated with the idea of primitive accumulation. Historically, these two distinct existential relationships to capitalism have been produced simultaneously.

Indeed, the history of dispossession can be told as the simultaneous production of both wage labor and wagelessness. Silvia Federici (2004) documents the emergence of the sexual division of labor and the patriarchy of the wage during the long transition to capitalism in Western Europe. With other feminist scholars who advanced the theory of social reproduction, she knows that women’s unpaid work is fundamental to the production of surplus value (e.g. Collins and Gimenez 1990; Federici 2012; Vogel 1983; Young 1981). The historical separation of men’s and women’s labors may be the least told aspect of capitalism’s originating moment. Yet Federici’s starting point is not this production of gender difference and hierarchy but an earlier experience of commonality dating to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when there was an emergent popular consciousness, political sympathies and actions crossed linguistic and cultural lines, and there was widespread popular resistance. Elites and authorities were terrified of these developments (see also Robinson 2001).

By the mid-sixteenth century, capital, church, and state coordinated a counter response. They disciplined labor via mass incarceration of the poor in work and correction houses and “transportation” to the colonies, and they enclosed social reproduction through attacks on collective sociality and sexuality. The witch-hunt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was central to the counter response, for it consolidated a range of assaults on women’s bodies that were compounded during the witch trials, as men turned violently on women, and the young on the old. Rendered in situ within Europe, these cleavages mirrored the violent hierarchies of race that were mapped onto the global relationship of unwaged, enslaved labor in the New World and debased waged labor in the Old. As Federici tells us, these

divisions set the terms for the later accumulation of difference and became a cornerstone of power for emergent capitalist classes:

Primitive accumulation . . . was not simply an accumulation of exploitable workers and capital. It was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as “race” and age, became constituent of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat. (63)

If we recall that so-called primitive accumulation is a recurrent process, then we understand that the making and remaking of such divisions is the lifeblood of labor accumulation. Each wave of dispossession makes or remakes particular working classes again; old divisions are deployed and new ones institutionalized.

This dynamic also characterized London’s docks at the turn of the nineteenth century. Dockworkers at that time were only nominally compensated for their labor with wages. Instead of regular monetary wages, dockworkers received their chief remuneration in “chips,” the scraps and waste left over from shipbuilding. More specifically, chips referred to the prescriptive right of workers to appropriate a certain amount of the wood as payment. Chips together with “takings” from other workplaces along the Thames River constituted the primary medium of exchange among a network of marine-store dealers, grocers, peddlers, sex workers, alehouse keepers, and pawnbrokers. Efforts in the 1790s to regularize the money wage followed a dual strategy of criminalizing the customary takings and eliminating the nonmonetary community. At the same time, the construction of hydraulic dams and a massive system of docks and canals physically destroyed the nonmonetary community. As the existing material and cultural forms of everyday life were dismantled, new forms of social reproduction centering on the money wage were forcefully regulated. The newly formed River Thames Police were charged primarily with determining who would receive wages and who would not. The literal policing of the division between waged laborers and the wageless poor effectively separated the struggles of workers within the wage labor process from those outside it, and social hierarchy developed among the river proletariat as a result. This reclassification simultaneously intensified existing gender, ethnic, and racial inequalities. This late-eighteenth-century policing of the boundary between wage and wageless laborers was not a novel historical development. It paralleled and was preceded by numerous attempts to

separate the labors of men and women, slaves and proletarians, and black and white workers (Linebaugh 2003).

A more recent twentieth-century example of wage struggle as the making of difference and hierarchy, especially with regard to racial inequality and the construction of “whiteness” can be found in Du Bois’s “On Work and Wealth” in *Darkwater* (1969). The essay deals with the 1917 race riots in East St. Louis, Illinois. Du Bois begins his mournful sketch of the city with the growth of industrial capital in the first years of the twentieth century, when large numbers of eastern and southern European immigrants came to find work. Upon arrival, they encountered established tradesmen of mostly northern European descent who held fast to both their American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions and to their relative privilege. Consequently, the new immigrants faced insecure employment, intermittent and less than livable wages, and social exclusion. Nevertheless, the government’s new restrictions on immigration and its conscription of white citizen-workers during World War I allowed these new immigrants a greater measure of bargaining power and a rising standard of living. Industrialists confronted labor’s newfound strength by looking south to “the greatest industrial miracles of modern days—slaves transforming themselves to freemen” (89).

Rather than depress wages, though, the influx of African Americans to the city sparked fledgling attempts at solidarity. In the months before the riots, black, recent European immigrant, and even white workers joined together to confront their employers. Influenced by radical labor movements throughout North America and Europe, and counter to the overt racism of the AFL, black workers began to join the laborers’ unions. This emergent solidarity was in Du Bois’s frame as he imagined the possible materialization of a socialism that aspired to equality for all. But the constant remaking of global divisions cast a very dark shadow over that possibility. Du Bois foresaw that the demand to increase wages would benefit only white men, whereas people of color, immigrants, and white women would continue to suffer caste-like exclusion. Thus, he rightly predicted the continuation of white male privilege in the workplace and in labor in unions in the United States (see Roediger 1991). At the same time, he understood the classification of whiteness itself to be a highly fraught political process, one that fatefully depended on the use of terror and force.

As Du Bois well knew, capital never acts alone, and the wartime US government soon initiated a nationwide reign of terror aimed at

forestalling emergent forms of working-class solidarity. Du Bois left out the larger political context of this government suppression in his portrait of the riot, but despite neglecting the details of this campaign, he pointed to its terror as a spark that ignited the violence. The not-quite-white eastern and southern European laborers were faced with the prospect of increasing insecurity or of joining with white workers in their attempt to banish African American laborers to a state of wagelessness. Many ultimately took sides with white workers and engaged in racial violence. The immediate aftermath was brutal, both for those African Americans who remained in the city and those forcefully exiled to an uncertain future in the South.

Building upon these conceptual advances, Bernard Magubane examines the relationship of race and class in South Africa (1979, 1983). Magubane recounts the making of the black working class in its dialectical relationship to the white working class and in a colonial context. He notes an initial possibility of class solidarity among landless black and white peasants who flocked to the slums of Natal during the first decade of the twentieth century. But ruling class and government fears of interracial solidarity pushed the government to enact policies of territorial segregation. Blacks were allowed entry to the city only as migrant laborers, but were precluded from permanent residence. As a consequence, white laborers became fully proletarianized, whereas blacks did not. White workers then defended their privilege as they fought for and won the right to organize white labor unions and secured laws that reserved skilled jobs for themselves. Thereby, they developed an allegiance to the state, and they participated in suppressing the emergence of an African working class (1983: 29). As a result, blacks continued to rely on household production in rural areas to subsidize their wages and ensure social reproduction, and labor brokers exploited their liminal position by recruiting them directly from rural areas and setting wages that were far inferior to those offered to whites. Magubane demonstrates how the simultaneous making of wage, wage insecure, and wageless labor depended crucially upon the production and maintenance of racial inequality and spatial segregation.

These studies clearly indicate that the process of defining waged and unwaged labor is inherently political, with long-term implications for working class formation and politics. The systemic power of capitalism may well lie in its ability to continually bring myriad forms of waged and unwaged labor into relation with one another across spatial scales. But attempts by laborers to similarly join together in

solidarity across nations and empires have been only intermittently successful (Featherstone 2012; Kelley 2002; Silver and Arrighi 2001; Waterman and Willis 2001). This is a reflection of the persistent difficulty in crossing the color, gender, and status lines that demarcate different forms of labor around the world. It also spotlights the exclusionary practices of labor organization themselves. “White laborism,” for example, found wide support among Anglo-Saxon workers across the British Empire, from England, to South Africa and Australia during the pre-World War I era. Labor unions in many different nations have used race, gender, ethnicity, and skill to draw boundaries around who was “cut in” and who “cut out” of the protections and benefits they won for their members (Brodkin 1998a; 1998b; 2000; Bush 2009; Du Bois 1969; Hyslop 1999; Mullings 2005; Silver 2003).

Contributors to this volume develop an understanding of relationship between dispossession and difference in a number of ways. August Carbonella’s chapter on unionized workers in the twin cities of Jay/Livermore Falls, Maine, in the northeast United States shows how waves of dispossession depended upon the making of ethnic and social difference and inequality among workers in the paper and forest industry. Two protracted labor strikes against International Paper, in 1921 and 1987, frame his analysis. During the first, the company installed stark lines of demarcation to divide skilled and unskilled workers and to reinscribe an ethnic division of labor in the factory and town, a social cleavage that workers had successfully struggled to overcome in the 1910s. This legacy of difference hindered efforts to recreate solidarity across the industry and greatly contributed to the union’s defeat in the latter 1987 strike. Sharryn Kasmir highlights the long dispossession of US autoworkers from the 1980s to the present, focusing on the ways in which GM’s Saturn project produced difference and ruptured solidarity within the United Automobile Workers, precisely at a time when national and international alliances were critically important for labor. By locating the plant in the anti-union, right-to-work southern United States, GM sought to leverage Saturn’s model of labor-management cooperation to encourage competition and division among union locals and to engender an individualist, entrepreneurial ethos among workers. Neither Carbonella or Kasmir take the existence of difference for granted. Instead we closely chart how, on the one hand, difference is made and sustained over a long period of time, and how, on the other, it is turned into inequality and disempowerment. More than providing clear expositions of the re-



lationship between dispossession and the production of difference, then, we point to a larger politics of dispossession.

## The Politics of Dispossession

By the politics of dispossession, we refer to the multiple ways in which capital and the state episodically undermine the power of working classes. Jerry Lembcke's (1991–1992) framing of "disorganization" is particularly useful for developing this point. US capital's flight beginning in the 1960s can be seen, Lembcke argues, as an effort to disorganize and defeat a domestic working class that had won position and leverage. Indeed, the move to neoliberalism in the 1970s–1980s restored power to the capitalist class after two decades of working-class empowerment through labor and urban social movements. We see this in the 1973 coup in Chile or the New York City fiscal crisis of the 1970s, when, in a very short time, working-class New Yorkers and their institutions were side-lined from their prominent role in shaping the city's social, economic, and political future (Freeman 2000; Harvey 2005). This exercise of the combined power of capital and the state over organized working classes takes place as well on a global scale, as cycles of disinvestment follow the accumulated victories of regional or national working classes (Silver 2003).

The concept of disorganization is also key for Steve Striffler's (2002) account of banana workers in southern Ecuador, who were unorganized, underemployed, and super-exploited despite the area's rich tradition of worker and peasant activism. State and military repression and violence played a central role in bringing about this wholesale defeat. "Regulation by fear" was equally used to discipline labor and to dismantle leftist culture and institutions in post-civil war Spain (Narotzky and Smith 2006). The Franco Regime used repression, murder, and exile to wipe out the traces of left politics, beliefs, and rituals from the public sphere. The regime thereby instituted new oppressive forms of daily life, which counted upon poverty, hunger, and food rationing to control its citizens. In rural Alicante, these conditions meant that when the post-Franco, democratic Spanish state promoted flexible labor contracts in the 1980s–1990s, there was little resistance. Workers had learned not to see themselves as political, and a public culture that might have sustained a political response had been destroyed.



We come, then, to a holistic understanding of dispossession as simultaneously economic, martial, social, and cultural. Lesley Gill develops this perspective in her chapter on the Colombian oil city of Barrancabermeja. Popular solidarity was systematically destroyed in the 1980s–1990s via a broad-based attack on working class, peasant, and guerrilla movements undertaken by a coalition of US military advisors, the Colombian state and military, and Colombian paramilitary organizations. Assassinations, mass murders, disappearances, arrests, and daily repression spread fear and insecurity, and social networks were steadily fragmented and dissolved. The profound salience of violence that Gill so eloquently describes contrasts sharply with the antiseptic portrayal of contemporary capital accumulation. Indeed, Gill’s informants use the phrase “blood and fire” to describe their experience of displacement and to underscore the prevalence of terror in their lives, and to refer to Marx’s depiction of the brutality and violence of capital accumulation.

In her chapter on Janata Colony, a slum in Mumbai, India, Judy Whitehead likewise details how neoliberal policies worked to fracture the Fordist work relationship and encourage real estate speculation. This “double dispossession” marginalized workers both from stable employment and from the city center, and Janata’s working-class institutions consequently lost their power to influence and improve daily life. Tellingly, new forms of community organization and welfare come largely from the right wing, Hindu fundamentalist Shiv Sena, which uses gang violence in the service of labor discipline. Don Kalb, also charts the connection between political defeat and the rise of right-wing ultranationalism in his chapter on the declining fortunes of factory workers in Wroclaw, Poland, during the post-socialist period. The 1981 victory of Solidarity propelled a movement for worker control and self-government at the factory level. A year later, Solidarity was banned and the worker’s control movement was pushed underground. Economic reforms, enacted after 1989 as “shock therapy” (Klein 2008) for Poland’s membership in the EU and entrance into the wider capitalist world, paved the way for the sale of state-owned factories. A new class of technocrats, who had once been part of a broad coalition with workers to create Solidarity, planned these policies. The reforms are seen from the outside as having produced a “successful democratic transition,” but Kalb argues that the “hidden history” of working-class dispossession—the loss of their political aspirations and control of their factories, their betrayal by

technocrats, and their widespread unemployment—is at the core of his informants’ right-wing populism and anti-liberalism.

In her chapter, Susana Narotzky writes about workers in the shipbuilding town of Ferrol in Galicia, northwestern Spain. Ferrol’s workers organized the underground communist union CCOO and participated in a broad, popular movement that helped bring down the Franco Regime and force a democratic transition in the 1970s. The workers’ annual labor contract, secure work, stable wages, and experience of solidarity, once enabled a class-based “structure of feeling,” but Spain’s preparation for entry into the EU in 1986 and the requisite, state-imposed neoliberal reforms forced the downsizing of the shipyards and the steel sector, such that there is no longer stable or well-paying work in Ferrol. Galicia’s shipbuilding sector now relies wholly on a network of subcontractors and casual labor. Many young people have left in search of opportunities elsewhere. Those who remain are unable to afford housing, therefore, they live with their parents and delay marriage and childbearing. Narotzky describes the individual strategizing and networking that residents engage in to find a job and achieve social mobility, much in contrast with the collective action of earlier decades that had been the main avenue of security and advancement. Narotzky’s informants no longer look to the union or left political parties for meaning, and they feel largely hopeless in the absence of a politics of solidarity.

The concept of dispossession developed in this collection speaks to the ways in which the alienation of political position, organizational capacities, culture, and consciousness are intimately connected with economic setback. As we have seen, emergent forms of solidarity often give way to class fragmentation and exclusion, and the multiple ways that people are displaced from their social ties—the bonds of kin and community, however configured—leave many isolated, passive, or in despair. This is brought about in some cases with violent repression, leaving fear and distrust in its wake (Gill.) In others, it is effected by the seemingly mundane mechanisms of worker insecurity produced in unremitting defeats and concessions of labor unions (Carbonella, Kasmir); by displacement from neighborhoods by real estate speculation and gentrification (Whitehead); by the loss of spaces of commonality where worker victories were reproduced through transgenerational memories (Narotzky); or by recriminations resulting from the appropriation of worker self-management (Kalb) (Linda Green, personal communication). It is important to note, however, that disorganization is not a one-way process but reflects, instead, the dialectic of

organization and disorganization that plays a critical role in defining the politics of labor.

### **Place, Space, and Power**

A focus on disorganization therefore implies a necessary, reciprocal attention to the problem of organization. The struggle for organization, in our estimation, is paramount for class politics. However, the above examples point to organizations not as permanently structured institutions. We instead see an active process of shaping, maintaining, destabilizing, and unmaking that depends upon the creation and rupturing of connections, alliances, and identities within places and across space (Wolf 1990). The importance of organization is at the heart of Eric Hobsbawm's (1984) critique of E. P. Thompson's history of the making of the English working class. For Hobsbawm, the making of the working class required more than the mobilization of culture and tradition, the realms of social life that Thompson stressed. In his view, class is a more decidedly political formation that requires institutions, most especially labor unions and political parties that cross national and international space. Although Hobsbawm emphasizes the progressive nature of working class institutions, it is important to keep in mind that a broadly encompassing solidarity is only one of many possible outcomes of organizing.

June Nash's ethnography (1979) of tin miners in Oturo, Bolivia, nicely foregrounds the relationship of organization and place/space connections and the ways that solidarity is created across social divides. Nash conducted fieldwork in 1969–1970, during a brief democratic opening before the brutal coup that destroyed mining communities. She witnessed militant activism and the reorganization of a powerful labor movement. The miners were largely indigenous, and they maintained an adherence to Marxist-Leninism along with their traditional beliefs. In the mining camps, they felt a double exploitation, since company-owned stores and housing were as much a source of expropriation of their surplus value as was their work in the mines. For this reason, and despite a gender division of labor, women and men joined together in the struggle against the company, making family life another source of class solidarity. They had strong local commitments—what Nash termed “*communitas*” and Raymond Williams would consider “structures of feeling”—while at the same time they saw themselves as part of a global proletariat. The

union similarly sustained a tension between local-level activism and a broader understanding of the world market, neocolonialism, and imperialism informed by the international Marxism of the day.

An international labor geography likewise emerges from Karen Brodtkin's (2007) monograph on young activists in Los Angeles. Most of Brodtkin's informants were immigrants or children of immigrants whose parents brought histories of union and social activism with them to the United States. Their own or their parents' experiences of border crossing and confronting racism in the United States were in the forefront of their political consciousness, and their paths to political involvement included associations with labor unions and left groups in California. But their political biographies equally manifest a close identification with their parents' memories of labor and social activism in their home countries.

Nash and Brodtkin each draw connections among locally situated identities and activism and general struggles and ideologies. Raymond Williams (1989) repeatedly returns to this relationship between local and universal scales in his analysis of working-class politics, as Narotzky discusses in her chapter. For Williams, working-class power always involves the necessary dialectic between what he calls "militant particularism" and "abstract universalism." These refer, respectively, to the immediate struggles and feelings developed at the local level (a mine, factory, or town) and the territory-spanning associations, networks, and political organizations that author solidaristic forms of identity (i.e., working class), build formal institutions (political parties), and develop projects (socialism) (see Harvey 2001; 2009). Williams directs our attention, thus, to the political work that is necessary to derive the general interest from specific claims, an effort that we might conceptualize as "universalism from below."

We can see the dialectical process of the particular and the universal in the efforts of workers to organize across geographic space and social categories in Suzan Erem and Paul Durrenberger's *On the Global Waterfront: The Fight to Free the Charleston 5* (2008). This struggle began in 2000, when members of the predominantly African American Local 1422 of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) in Charleston, South Carolina, picketed a ship being unloaded by non-union workers. Their protest was ended by a police riot, followed by the arrest of five workers on felony charges. After this repression, the ILA and the AFL-CIO actively marginalized the besieged union local. Local activists, meanwhile, worked diligently with 1422 leaders to build a movement of independent-minded union locals, civil-rights

organizations, leftist groups, black churches, and progressive white churches. In this way, they ensured that that their union was not isolated but linked to an array of community groups, and that wage laborers were thereby politically tied to those who did not earn a wage.

The map we construct from this account of the struggle begins in Charleston, but that city and its workers are not depicted as a circumscribed place or population. Dockworkers across the globe pledged an industrial action to close dozens of ports on the first day of the trial of the five workers. To avert this massive threat to international trade, the judge permitted the accused to plead no contest to misdemeanor charges. International Dockworkers Council (IDC), a progressive international labor federation, was fortified during the struggle, and after the victory, Local 1422 hosted IDC's first general assembly. The events extend from Charleston to New York City, which is home to ILA international headquarters and its union bureaucrats. The story also takes place in San Francisco, where the militant West Coast International Longshore and Warehouse Union contacted European unions and sketched a plan for solidarity on the global waterfront that sidestepped the conservative International Transport Workers Federation and instead bolstered the IDC. Events unfolded also in Denmark at the corporate offices of Nordana shipping, where there is intense competition in the global shipping industry, a sector that for decades used containerization to pioneer a worldwide assault on labor; in Liverpool, where an unsuccessful effort in the 1990s to organize internationally to save port jobs urged the founding of IDC and offered lessons to this new campaign; and in Seoul, where Daewoo Motor Workers lent their support.

The radically different forms of territory-spanning political networks and imaginations we have recounted raise important questions for a global anthropology of labor. In many ways, they reinforce the attempts to conceptualize continuous, interconnected space found in certain strands of anthropological and geographical theory (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Massey 2005). They also point to the problem of how connections across space, social barriers, and categories are produced in the first place. If, as Henri Lefebvre (1976: 21) notably wrote, capitalism reproduces itself by "occupying space . . . producing a space," the same may be said to hold true for working classes. While capital mobilizes states, transnational agencies, and militaries to create empires, ensure commodity and money flows, and establish global markets, a working class relies solely on its organizations, institutions, and affiliations to command and produce

space. Labor's institutional presence is thus not simply a conduit for wage negotiations and the like, as it increasingly was in the global North during the Fordist period, but vitally important for its ability to command space and place. Political thinking and action beyond local, national, and social boundaries requires coordination, whether through the maintenance of alliances and networks or through more formal structures (see Bourdieu 2003).

Recognizing the importance of organization for connecting working-class places raises questions about contemporary scholarly understandings of the "local" within the social sciences and humanities. The local has increasingly come to mean resistance to the global. Indeed, local-global has become a common oppositional pairing that directs us to a culture of opposition strongly identified with and rooted in a particular place (Escobar 2008; Tsing 2005). The pointed interest in the social ties of place, however, frequently derails an investigation of their shifting relationship to institutions and networks that link local struggles to wider movements. Fred Cooper (2000) critiques the predilection for localism in social history along these same lines. He reminds us that defining a working class in the early nineteenth century "was indeed a political process and it took place not just in relation to communities in England and France, but in relation to imperial structure and the interrelated economies of sugar, cotton, and shipping. Capitalism was as local as community and radical politics was as 'global' as capitalism" (64). The point is not to privilege global forms of solidarity, association, or projects over local or particular struggles, but to argue that local working classes necessarily exist in state of continuing collaboration and/or tension with wider class formations, social movements, political networks, and forms of institutional power.

Carbonella and Kasmir argue in their chapters that the local is not a natural political or cultural space in which daily life is lived. Instead it is produced, involving the often-violent breaking of political connections, alliances, and networks that developed over time and that afforded workers some measure of power. In many of the cases in this collection, the localization of struggle is shown to be central feature of dispossession. This is not to say that the local is not also a site of solidarity, shared suffering, and common struggle (as it is framed in Narotzky's study of Ferrol or in Kalb's description of workers councils during the Solidarity movement). But when these structures of feeling are forcibly circumscribed at the local level (as they became at the Saturn plant and in Jay/Livermore Falls) labor's leverage is stultified.



An anthropology of labor must not, then, mistake the existence of the local as a given, but rather pose it as a problem to be explored.

From this perspective, the production of space and place is a critical component of what Eric Wolf (2001) calls structural power. Offered as a rephrasing and expansion of the older idea of social relations of production, Wolf maintains that structural power establishes the global fields of force in which capital is accumulated and labor is allocated. As seen throughout this volume, this often involves setting in motion recurrent processes of dispossession, differentiation, and disorganization to realign existing social relationships. Localities, regions, and nations are thus merged or disaggregated in the process of producing new spaces of capital accumulation. Structural power shapes, informs, and influences local outcomes, and it makes some kinds of action within them possible, while it renders others less likely or even impossible. Most importantly, the potential for creating and aligning local working class publics, national labor movements, and scale-spanning solidarities are highly determined by the changing forms and uneven geographies of structural power relations.

### Disposable People?

The uneven processes of capital and labor accumulation outlined so far should serve to upset any notions we may still harbor about a homogeneous, global proletariat. As feminist and African American scholars have long argued, the singularity that some have too often attributed to “the” proletariat, white, male, industrial workers and their political institutions comes at the expense of a wider, heterogeneous social formation. Thus the continuing project of reconceptualizing labor brings us back to the insistence on the necessity of the multiple labors of slaves, peasants, plantation workers, household work, and others for the production of surplus value in previous phases of capital accumulation. This keystone of Wolf’s (1982) reconfiguration of anthropological subjects situates them within relations of connection and mutual constitution, bridging the cultural and political divides between labor made *visible* by the capital/wage labor relation and the *invisible* labors outside of that relationship (Robinson 2001). To the extent that these labors are separated in space, they are not always apparent at the local level. Nonetheless, this relationship shapes the lives we seek to understand. If we hope to explain class or the production of culture, anthropologists cannot afford to



miss these unseen connections (Narotzky and Smith 2006). Whitehead's chapter goes a long way to making these unseen labors visible, especially in their connections to capital accumulation in the global financial center of Mumbai.

At this new moment of capitalist restructuring we need to explore how the current multiplication of the proletariat is producing a range of new labor relations. This is not a wholly novel phenomenon, but a specific instance of the "general tendency of [capitalism] to create a 'disposable mass' out of diverse populations, and then to throw that mass into the breach to meet the changing needs of capital" (Wolf 1982: 379–380). The global scale and accelerated timeframe of the processes of dispossession, though, may be unprecedented. Certainly, the recent relentless movement and financialization of capital is simultaneously producing new enclosures (of land, property, commons, rights) and rustbelts (Midnight Notes Collective 1990).

There is a growing scholarly consensus around the notion that these new enclosures are creating people and communities who are permanently constituted as the "outside" of capitalism. Notwithstanding important corrections by those who expose the way states actively incorporate unwaged or unfree forms of labor (e.g., Collins and Mayer 2010: 147–159) or who theorize the "precariat" in relationship to capital and the state (e.g., Standing 2011), a range of concepts attempts to capture this purported outside. "The bare life," "disposable people," "surplus populations," "states of exception," and "wasted lives" all refer to what Mbembe calls "the biopolitics of permanent joblessness" (quoted in Denning 2008: 3). These ideas effectively dispense with the study of labor in favor of citizenship and exclusion, which has been a central analytical move over the last decade. This perspective also unfortunately reinscribes dualistic and outdated class maps, rather than confronting the actual, complicated global "multiplication of the proletariat" taking place in the present moment.

Jan Breman (1999) underscores the inadequacy of these oppositional formulations in his comments on the Indian industrial workers of the so-called informal sector. This "precariat," as we might describe it, has been comprised by a steady stream of displaced rural dwellers to Mumbai and other cities over four decades. Their numbers and output far outweigh the workers employed and goods produced in the formal economy. This informal sector is characterized by heightened insecurity of employment, debt bondage, withheld wages, and dispersed production sites—from domestic homework,

to makeshift workshops, to relatively stable workplaces. It does not, however, constitute the “outside” of capitalism, but, increasingly, its center, as Gill’s and Whitehead’s chapters vividly demonstrate. Yet it is precisely this slum-dwelling precariat that Chatterjee (2004) sees as the embodiment of “surplus populations,” and among whom a new politics, outside of class, is developing (see *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 2011). Chatterjee’s analysis of the surplus populations’ struggles for representation on the fringes of civil society thus comes at the expense of any attempt to understand their labor in the unregulated industrial sector.

Accounts of disposable populations thus make the mistake of substituting static social categories for a clear examination of the profound disregard for laboring peoples’ lives that is exhibited by states, transnational regulatory agencies, global capital, and its local middlemen. They also miss the various ways that the surplus value produced by the precariat and nonwaged labor makes its way into the global circuits of capital, and they overlook the relationship between capital’s prosperity and labor’s deepening poverty. These scholars vaporize the contributions of these many laborers into the mist of what Marx called commodity fetishism by concealing “the social character of private labor and the social relations between individual workers” (Marx quoted in Merrifield 2002: 159). This perspective leaves us with a vision of people who are seemingly never “thrown back into the breach,” nor chart an alternative. The end result of this analysis, we fear, is to remove laboring people from history.

Arundhati Roy (2011: 21) points the way to recovering this historical dynamic in her essay on the armed Maoist rebellions in central India. She asks,

When people are being brutalized, what “better” thing is there for them to do than to fight back? It’s not as though anyone’s offering them a choice, unless it’s to commit suicide, like the 180,000 farmers caught in a spiral of debt have done. (Am I the only one who gets the distinct feeling that the Indian establishment and its representatives in the media are far more comfortable with the idea of poor people killing themselves in despair than with the idea of them fighting back?)

Here Roy captures the dialectic between disposability and historical agency. In the one instance, impoverished, indebted peasants and proletarians appear as surplus populations whose way out is to end their lives. In the next, they rise up against their misery and command

the attention and resources of the state and capital that furiously try to put them down. And they make history.

Rather than simply assuming that real people actually constitute capital's outside, we need to pay more attention to what relations of production and class fragmentation now look like. Future research will have to crack open these relations to include the disciplinary arm of the state (police, immigration services, military, penal institutions, labor laws, etc.), debt purveyors (large and small), and government functionaries, among others. The fact that the US-led military-financial empire, with its permanent war philosophy, has redirected the global spaces of capital and labor strongly suggests that we need to capture the relationship between the organization of oppression and the organization of accumulation to grasp labor politics fully (Robinson 2001). This framework will enhance our ability to revise inherited narratives of class and social inequality. The combined political and structural violence that today constitutes the key avenue of dispossession and the production of precariousness has rendered these narratives obsolete and suggests the urgency of ethnographies and ethnology of actually existing forms of labor and class relationships.

## Conclusion

We have shown in this introduction that the defeat and unmaking of particular working classes is both the consequence of and grounding for neoliberal capitalism, and the six case studies in this volume make this abundantly clear. In examining class formation across both time and space, these studies closely consider the themes of dispossession and difference; the politics of dispossession; place, space, and power; and the myth of "disposable people," and they facilitate a comparative perspective on the uneven consequences of and reactions to the worldwide project to remake capital and labor. This comparison is our starting point for a global anthropology of labor.

As we intend it, a key feature of this subfield is an emphasis on the formal and actual connections and interrelations of distinct laboring populations. This strongly suggests that local and global are not separate spheres of human activity, as they are often portrayed, but interrelated spaces created together by the fields of force in which capital and labor are accumulated. The "global" is evident in each of our "local" historical ethnographies, as we refer to the flows of power, commodities, and labor across place and space, and to the

territory-spanning networks and organizations that anchor local struggles. We trace how the coordination of demands and actions enhanced working class power, as well as how the weakening of those connections facilitated labor's defeat in case after case.

Although the fragmentation of working classes has been the hallmark of the last forty years, we do not see this as the end point, but as the interregnum between the unmaking of national working classes and the as-yet-unfinished class formations of the future. As we write, some sense of the shape of that identification, alliance, and politics is emerging. It is partly exemplified by the Occupy chant: "We are the 99 percent" and rephrased in the "people's" demands arising from public squares in many corners of the world. Whether explicitly or implicitly, these claims echo Thomas Paine's equation of the 1 percent against the 99 percent at the turn of the nineteenth century. At that juncture, that political slogan became a common identification for disparate laboring populations as they began gradually to coalesce into working classes. New alliances and networks are just emerging from the ashes of the long, recent defeat, and we do not yet know what forms will develop, but to apprehend them and contribute to this moment of political possibility, we need to recognize the manifold forms of labor and the changing class maps before us. This is the immediate project of the global anthropology of labor that inspires this volume.

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