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Making Difference: Concluding Comments on Work and Livelihoods.

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"Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

"The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1955)

Anthropologists often tend to stress the particularities of the cases they study through intense ethnographic encounter. This provides an extremely nuanced approach to process and practice that has become the trade mark of our discipline. It leads us to use complexity as an argument to eschew describing simple laws of movement for social processes. I find this a growing trend that places us in a politically irrelevant position. Often, the ethnographic detail appears as a free floating crystallization of contingent

assemblages of items, agents, and connections devoid of historical logic. The problem, then, is why and how to explain human projects that seek to change the connections that exist into something different. Designing an image of the future and of the logical process leading to it is, fundamentally, creating the conditions of possibility for its transformation (Bourdieu 2003). The other, often forgotten, leg of anthropological enquiry is comparison which enables similarities to emerge while it renders differences meaningful in the larger picture. Through the pieces in this volume we begin to perceive a thread of commonalities that, paradoxically, serve to underscore the centrality of the differences that are played out as well as produced by the various actors involved in industrial production.

Making Difference, Making History

Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the angel of history looking at the debris of the past piling under its eyes while it is being blown forcefully backwards toward an unimaginable future can be understood as a poetic rendering of Marx's historical materialist approach (Benjamin 2007 [1955]: 257-8). For several decades now, workers in the heavy industry and their families have witnessed the piling of debris of what used to make their livelihood (Hudson and Sadler 1989). This is often remembered as a "stable" period where plans for the future were easier to develop. Often this entailed inherited positions in the local industrial firm(s), a form of training framed by the plant's vocational school and including intra-plant mentorship based on seniority, a certainty about male identity and bread-winner responsibilities, together with clear household divisions of labor and gender-power geometries. These stable albeit unequal structures of mutual obligation, state protection and production organization existed in a fordist past for the "key" or "strategic" industries (steel, energy, cement, automobile,

etc.) but they were often a recent development of nationalizations or import substitution policies that expanded throughout the first half of the 20th century in both capitalist and socialist polities (Dal Forno and Mollona 2015). The “debris” of this industrial past started piling up at an increasing pace in the 1980s unsettling deeply embedded practices and livelihood expectations. It is certain that the form of these debris and the pace of their accumulation varied according to colonial, post-colonial and political histories; uneven regional patterns of capital expansion; the local embedding of “modernization” and “development” economic models; and changing theories of profit maximization.

At the same time these debris resulted from the actual resistance and resilience practices of people in their everyday attempt to make a living and care for proximate others, and from their active engagement in struggles that occurred at different scales, from the very local to the very global. As Beynon, Hudson and Sadler (1994) pointed out twenty years ago, *place* is formed and transformed by the articulated forces of capital, labor and the state (or, rather, various capitalists, workers and representatives of the administration), in the *longue durée*. Place is the domain of actual existing people while space is the domain of abstraction: of capital - as an abstract social relation - although capital can only be realized in places, through places and their differences; of state -as an abstract relation of domination - although its power can only be realized in places through the concrete production and enforcement of difference. Place grows from the meaningful relationships that people build with each other in the long-term and from their engagement and creative production of institutions in particular locations. Place is multidimensional and the primary referent of people’s lives (Beynon et al. 1994: 5-6). And it is also multiscalar, as social, economic and power relationships that produce

place occur at various scales (local, regional, national, global) and simultaneously transform the operational scale of political-economic processes (Peck 2002). *Space*, in contrast, is an abstract assessment of the value of localities in political, symbolic and economic terms. It is used by public administrators to lure investment to a locality and by capitalists to generate profits through the mobilization of investment. In the globalized present, it supports a neoliberal scalar narrative where places compete in a global market of locational assets. “Investment and divestment decisions perpetually relate to a spatial dimension, and this can often pose a deep threat to the integrity of places” (Beynon et al. 1994:6).

In the history of heavy industry sometimes capitalist forces have been dominant in the shaping of place and have been able to co-opt the other players in the field, often through a kind of blackmailing that uses jobs, and therefore the very basic ability to make a living, as the ultimate trade off token. As the chapters in this volume show, this has been the case in many places at different moments, e.g. in most of Europe in the early 20th century and then after 1973. At other times the state has been the dominant force as was the case in strong nationalist economies such as that of socialist countries, but also in capitalist countries in particular historical conjunctures. Sometimes unions have become dominant, albeit for a brief period, as the success of some labor struggles might express (Herod 2001) or their conjunctural position as political brokers in some regimes (such as Argentina). But, generally, the tension between these three forces is what creates the “circumstances” that get “transmitted from the past” and set the ground where people “make their own history”.

The tension between place and space points to *difference* as it emerges from the human attempt to “make history” in two distinct ways. Firstly, difference results from the everyday *spontaneous* entanglement of peoples’ lives as they engage with the spatial expressions of capitalist uneven regional development in place. Secondly, the *intentional* production of difference appears as a strategy of control by capitalists, the state, or workers in space. Therefore, the attempt to “make history” is often an attempt to create “difference” from various positions and at various scales in order to yield power. As Jamie Peck has stated: “hegemonic power (...) is reflected in the control of scale and/ or the assertion of a particular scalar fix in which certain sectional-political interests are privileged.” (2002: 337). Some of the chapters in the volume present this struggle during processes of restructuring (outsourcing, whipsawing, labor flexibility) when difference becomes the argument of a competitive worth that defines a collective in space: a community, a plant, a nation (Kalb, Kasmir, D’Aloisio, Wódz and Gnieciak, Diaz Crovetto this volume). Other chapters express embedded and individualized processes of differentiation in the workplace, in the household (Kalb, Spyridakis, Trappmann, Perelman and Vargas, Pine this volume). Ethnography and geography enable us to address the actual relationship between these two processes (spontaneous or intentional) of making history. Comparison of ethnographic cases enables us to understand the various scales that interlock in the concrete places where livelihoods are materially situated. What Doreen Massey (1993) defined as “a global sense of place” helps us understand the kind of structure that connects different locations and is expressed through these differences in their relational value. I have found critical topography (Katz 2001) and power geometries (Peck 2002, Yeung 2005) helpful concepts to think through the tension of place and space in the complex processes of capitalist realization. As a geographer who has worked with dispossessed communities

in the Sudan and the U.S.A., Katz reflects on how what she observes in these two locations is related and she finds the concept of topography and its associated term of contour lines helpful:

“Topography is associated not just with the description of place but also with measurements of elevation, distance, and other structural attributes that enable the examination of relationships across spaces and between places. (...) the effects of capitalism's globalizing imperative are experienced commonly across very different locales, and understanding these connections is crucial if they are to be challenged effectively. Topographies provide the ground - literally and figuratively - for developing a critique of the social relations sedimented into space and for scrutinizing the material social practices at all geographic scales through which place is produced.” (Katz 2001: 1228-9).

She uses the concept of contour lines as a metaphor of the original concept where lines connect different places of precisely the same altitude.

“I want to imagine a politics that maintains the distinctness of a place while recognizing that it is connected analytically to other places along contour lines that represent not elevation but particular relations to a process (e.g., globalizing capitalist relations of production). Such connections are precise analytic relationships, not homogenizations.” (Katz 2001: 1229)

Katz's relational concepts provide anthropology with tools to discover analytical similarities that make sense in structural terms, but they remain mostly descriptive in

their aim. In his review of relational economic geography Yeung (2005) attempts to go beyond the descriptive aspect of relationality and proposes a theoretical turn that will enable explanation, what he describes as “theorizing explanations of difference” (2005:42). He proposes to address why and how difference produces power that becomes expressed in concrete outcomes, in place. The geometries of power concept, therefore, attempts to unpack the power tensions between places (2005:44). I will use these methodological and theoretical insights to engage with the cases presented in this volume.

Flexibilities of work and life

Restructurings of heavy industry have had similar effects, namely, job losses and the reorganization of production relations around the polysemic concept of “flexibility” (Narotzky 2015). Structural and functional flexibility are imposed by capital in industry allegedly to enhance productivity and become more competitive in a globalized market. The injunction to productivity has become such an entrenched hegemonic discourse that it is rarely argued and is considered as self-evident by all concerned parties. This flexibility results in some common traits, namely the use of subcontract and outsourced labor often composed by workers who have been made redundant from the core staff or by younger generations of workers that cannot get hired into the core staff of the firm. This situation produces difference between types of workers in the plant, even when they work side by side, a difference that is often marked by their distinct overalls. Outsourced, temporary contract workers, are confronted as *another kind* of worker to permanent, core workers in the firm. Stability that had become ingrained in what the “normal” life of a steel, shipyard or auto worker was, suddenly becomes a “privilege” in the face of the growing majority that have precarious jobs, although in turn they

represent the living expression of the fragility and instability of this “privilege”. These new situations push people to diverse kinds of strategies that operate at different scales. Some of them take advantage of forms of “embeddedness” such as kinship or other local connections (e.g. through the unions) in order to facilitate access to the better jobs (Perelman & Vargas, this volume). Others, strive to individually better their competitive position in the local labor market, such as the *sneaks* in Piraeus who accept extremely low wages, or the *rabbits* who become benchmarks for productivity, speeding the work process and consolidating their value for the firm (Spyridakis, this volume). In other cases, the tensions between a union local plant strategy and larger scale, national or even global solidarities, express the ways in which “difference” or its negation through similarity or connection, gets played out on the side of labor (Kasimir, this volume). This common reality of flexibility, however, presents local variations that relate to history as it has produced place at various scales. In the steel industry case from Argentina, for example, the privatization of the firm strengthened the outsourcing process although articulating it with technical and vocational training systems partially controlled by the unions. In addition to formal credentials, young people now need a further career in the satellite (contract) companies of the firm in order to acquire the proper “work ethic” and “attitude” which might eventually provide employment in the main firm. The expectations of “naturally” following the previous generation into the factory have been shattered and strategies of differentiation are key both for the process of segmented recruitment and for obtaining a stable job. Credentialism appears as a normative evaluation of difference that the firm uses to legitimate its hiring practices that rest on hyper selective incorporation of core employees, which systemically reproduces the pressure on stable employment. Simultaneously, recommendation and union brokerage are the usual practice for anyone who aims at achieving a job at the

main firm. These produce another kind of difference by extending responsibility for the worker beyond his or her individual person and expressing the local power they can mobilize through kinship and other personalized links. Unions, here, emerge as crucial actors both in their control of training institutions and in the informal power they are able to yield towards management, probably related to the political power of unions in Argentina's history. This results in particular patron-client networks that young aspiring workers and their families have to cultivate with key union members in order to succeed in the career to stability.

Both these networks and the low salaries and precarious conditions of young people's labor are based on their families' support, and become a form of dispossession of the family of orientation's resources and care work. As in the case of women workers in the Italian Melfi auto plant whose small scale often informal activities supplement a decreasing income, salaries that are not sufficient to reproduce labor get subsidized by unrecognized forms of work and non-market resources (D'Aloisio, this volume). This is analogous to the support function that subsistence gardens of steel worker's families have in Slovakia (Buzalka and Ferencova, this volume). In a challenge to the labor theory of value, the cost of labor reproduction here is systematically undervalued and labor power exchanged below cost. Colonial and feminist scholars have repeatedly underlined that market exchange is supported by forms of depredation that are embedded in historically produced geometries of power, a process akin to what Harvey has defined as "accumulation by dispossession" (Amin 1970, Elson and Çagatay 2000, Harvey 2005, Kasmir and Carbonella 2008), and this process seems to be expanding in present day globalized capitalism. In his chapter, Kalb points at an important aspect of this process when he compares two different forms of locally producing labor

devaluation or “worthlessness” and their connection through the spatial movements of capital in the white goods sector. This reveals an embedded and changing structure of alienation which is nevertheless connected in a topographic manner to the global movement of capital accumulation and its temporalities. Embeddedness is crucial in this development as it thrives on, reproduces and transforms aspects of inequality deeply entangled with livelihoods, intimate responsibilities and identity belongings. Hence, age, gender, nationality or ethnic factors become structurally entangled in how family relations or community networks contribute to structure present day forms of exploitation in place and across space. The scalar dimension of social reproduction dialectically embracing the household or family’s unequal obligations with larger processes of social reproduction of inequalities and surplus extraction becomes transparent in the chapters of this volume (Narotzky 2004, 2015).

A similar situation seems to emerge in the Galician Spanish case where the mini-mill that has expanded into an international venture has addressed flexibilization mostly in functional terms (Sabaté, this volume). Here, the pressure on reproduction work in the household becomes extreme as wives of younger workers have entered the workforce and the inflexible shift work policies of management are not up for negotiation. Differentiation here hinges on an implicit assertion on the part of management that “traditional” male-breadwinner families are the norm, reassessing an unrealistic gender division of labor that justifies not giving in to work-balance needs for the male workforce. For management, male workers are decidedly another kind of worker (as beholds family responsibilities) which results in a form of dispossession of the kinship network’s resources that creates tensions between male and female household members as they try to renegotiate their family responsibilities. Often households extend the care

network outwards in search for help, therefore redistributing dispossession. The centrality of the male-breadwinner ideology in producing a kind of identity that sets limits to the kinds of jobs that are acceptable to men is also stressed in Trappmann's chapter on employability. Beyond the issue of employability, however, and similar to the Polish workers in Kalb, Pine, and Wódz and Gnieciak chapters, we can witness a "making of difference" that rests on developing a *feeling of inadequacy* about the capacity to fulfill crucial obligations of social reproduction (whether referred to gender, generations, or the nation) that had been produced under different political economic conditions and contributed to a sense of adequacy, of social worth. It is this attack on personal "worth" that challenges the contours of past "stable" identities that contributes to the present devaluation of labor value. Conversely, the attempt to prevent this situation drives workers and the union local in the GM Saturn plant to a strong cooperation with the firm (making themselves different from the rest of UAW workers, allegedly producing a "new" kind of worker's worth). However, this does not prevent the final self-deprecation of "scab" even as they try to recuperate workers' collective action (Kasmir, this volume). In Piraeus, "sneaks" appear as both inevitable expressions of the place bound and gender inflected individual strategies to earn a livelihood and of the larger structures of global shipbuilding capital (Spyridakis, this volume). The poignant consciousness and embodiment of this devaluation takes different forms that are historically path dependent along a continuum that spans from more "moral" depictions to more "political" ones.

Geometries of power and the production of moral economies

Emerging in the comparison of these cases is a topography of capitalist relations of production that defines the precise distinctions that make each place unique as it has

engaged historically with diverse social, political and economic forces. But contour lines appear that show how these differences latch into the enactment of a cost cutting, competitive, “supply side” economy. Indeed, in all cases what amounts to the same destruction of workers’ value and workers’ power is realized through various forms of flexibility. On the one hand, flexibility in the firm, both structural and functional, brings uncertainty to workers. On the other hand, flexible livelihoods of different kinds are forced upon all workers and their families in an environment of skyrocketing relative and absolute surplus population, what neoliberal voices are defining as the structural “acceptable” rate of unemployment (Smith 2011). In practice, however, the changes of labor/ capital relations that this restructuring brings forward in each location depend on how each particular place has become an expression of previous capital, labor and state forces and hence sets the ground for working out and working through further transformation.

Moreover, another vision which is not that of contour lines uniting places in a similar relation to industrial capitalist processes emerges configuring a spatial power geometry: that of power differentials between and within places that are played against each other by the different actors. Places in management’s vision appear constructed as locations containing assets that can be valorized by capital. These include physical resources (e.g. iron, coal, a maritime port) and institutional frameworks (e.g. labor and environment regulations, trade unions), but also people with their different skills, their kinship networks, their webs of dependencies (both political and economic), their histories of conflict; in sum, people with an experience of making a living and memories of making history. Places in state’s vision are territories to govern, firms and citizen’s to regulate and tax, but also to provide for and seduce. The state’s territory is materially a relational

aggregate of places although symbolically it presents itself as an abstract projection of the “imagined community” of the nation (Anderson 1983). Places in workers’ vision are where they need to make a living in all the social complexity that this entails, i.e. sustaining life, being a social person, someone with dignity and respect. The attempt to hold back worthlessness is their main purpose and often results in moving from place to place and creating trans-local places (Narotzky & Besnier 2014, Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008, Pine 2014, and this volume). These various actors’ understandings inform practices occurring at multiple scales that take into consideration the values (or value) most dear to each actor and use them to make differences. Some actors will have a great capacity to define, impose and benefit from particular differences between and within places while others will have a limited one. Geometries of power result from the capacity of some actors to define and take advantage of difference both within and between places (and people) in their interest. Making difference between places is also often making difference between the past of these places and an alleged better present or future. Finally, making a difference is always about trying to impose a moral economy (i.e. produce an hegemonic model of the economy that rests on moral imperatives), a set of basic distinctions in terms of what is “bad” and “good” for the larger “common good”, not for any particular or parochial interest. These moralities are often presented as universals and tend to get essentialized; but they are always historical and political, the result of struggle. In this struggle of producing differences and juggling them, the scale at which the actors are able to operate is often an expression of the power they can yield. Peck (2002) speaks of hierarchies of scale and asserts that actors’ power is generally linked to “the ability to shape extralocal rule regimes that constrain and channel the strategic options and tactical behavior of local actors”. Herod (2001) points, however, at the possibility for “local scale models of struggle” to be powerful tools for

workers in particular crucial positions in the production process of Trans National Corporations in a global economy. Therefore local actors can shift the scale hierarchy if they work in a place that “makes a difference” in the production process, enabling them to overturn the power geometry of the firm. Conversely, the GM Saturn plant union local is co-opted into localism through their conviction of becoming part of a new, better, form of labor-capital relations, one based on cooperation rather than confrontation. Their refusal to participate in the national scale UAW mobilizations stands on a misunderstanding of their actual power in the structure of production and points to their co-optation into the firm’s moral economy. As workers in the plant increasingly realize this, they attempt to renew struggle at the wider scale of national union solidarity and reassert an older kind of class-based morality (Kasimir, this volume).

We initiated these concluding comments with the methodological distinction that Beynon et al. (1994) propose between what they call *space* as opposed to the more concrete *place*. Do the chapters in this volume support such a clear cut proposition? In my opinion, the tension between abstract and concrete seems appropriate while the placing of particular processes (e.g. the power of capital) in what appears as a fixed higher scale, is not (Peck 2002). The hierarchies of scale that generally favor actors with the extralocal capacity to define difference and act accordingly generally set capital in a position of power, but not always. Indeed, the “space” scale is also concretely dependent on previous historical processes that have configured it as a particular kind of abstraction in relation to “places”.

The struggles that the various actors wage through making difference within and between places refer to the value(s) that they seek to produce and reproduce. For capital in the global industrial firm, profits are often tied to the value of shares in the stock market, but this in turn is linked to particular actions that are interpreted as pushing the competitive edge of the firm in production, namely restructuring (e.g. cutting costs and increasing productivity) and playing places against each other (including in symbolic and cultural terms). For workers the main value is a life worth living, which is a complex entanglement of material and social values (e.g. food, health, housing, justice and dignity) and which develops in a different timeframe, one of families, households, generations and memories (Pine; Wódz and Gnieciak, this volume). The cases presented in this volume show how this makes them struggle in the everyday sometimes through organized contestation, but often pushing them into personalized networks that give access to all sorts of resources (e.g. income, jobs, influence, care). The articulation and permanent tension between the contrasting objectives of capital and labor is coordinated by political brokers (in the different levels of government administration and other institutions) that “take sides” through regulatory norms and their greater or lesser enforcement. In this process policy makers differentiate between values. They define and fix through regulation what is allegedly most valuable for the common good – a commonality produced through hegemony-- helping constrict and channel practice for the benefit of enhancing that particular value. Any future of politics of the left is, like any past of politics, the attempt to shift power geometries through making the differences that are useful to make history support the worth of people. And this struggle is always expressed in terms of the common good.

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