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Gramsci, Polanyi and the Labor Politics of Social Protection

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Abstract

The works of Polanyi and Gramsci, taken together, help us to disentangle the multiple understandings of and politics around social protection. Despite Gramsci's convincing analysis of hegemony as the organization of class struggle within limits of capitalism, he does not have a theory of counterhegemony. Polanyi, meanwhile, does not focus attention on the power of capitalist hegemony, yet his displacement of experience from production to exchange creates the grounds for a potential counterhegemony. The article analyzes how, despite apparent efforts to de-commodify labor and social protections, precarity has become more deeply engrained among the laboring poor. While precarity is not necessarily new to populations across the South, the way in which commodification has become hegemonic is, and the objective of the article is to better understand the role of social protection in shaping workers' experiences, and consider potential strategic directions to advance universal social protection.

Keywords

counter movement – hegemony – labor politics – precarity – social protection

1 Introduction

Social protection is a highly contested concept that is full of possibilities. It has been championed by a wide range of actors, from the World Bank, the ILO and OECD, to an increasing number of national governments, as well as trade unions and radical social movements. However, despite a significant uptick in the number of social protection programs across the South, a livelihood crisis has only deepened, as have vast disparities in power between the richest and poorest in society. The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) created a public health emergency with immediate and long-term socio-economic consequences, as well as a livelihoods crisis for a large proportion of workers across the global South. It highlighted the structural challenges of the pre-COVID-19 world, with its weakened social contract characterized by precarious employment, inequality, and tax evasion that has eroded trust in governments and democratic institutions, as equal opportunities for adequate living standards have not been fulfilled (ILO, 2021).

To combat these trends, the ILO has forwarded universal social protection as an indispensable safeguard enabling people to live dignified lives, as well as a lever to embrace change with confidence and security (ILO, 2021). The ILO's reference point is the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which asserts social security as an inalienable human right. Despite these ambitions, the misery and anger of the laboring poor have consistently been wished away with ideals of self-employment, self-provisioning and self-representation (Breman et al., 2019). While precarity is not necessarily new to populations across the South, the way in which commodification has come to dominate lives and labor is, and the objective of the article is to better understand states' roles in shaping this experience. The ILO's core constituents through which they operate are governments, employers and unions, however states tend to reproduce rather than ameliorate precarity. The article analyzes how, despite apparent efforts to de-commodify labor and social protections, precarity has become more deeply entrenched among the laboring poor.

Previous patterns of care provision within the family or other social systems, which went some way to redress unequal social distribution in colonial and post-colonial world, have been eroded without sufficient replacement (von Benda-Beckmann, 1988; Breman and van der Linden, 2014). The precarization of work and life has been enabled by the asymmetric balance of power between capital and labor, and the state has played a central role in institutionalizing flexible labor regimes (Hammer and Ness, 2021). These processes highlight how global development has increasingly become defined by the political economy of capital (Nilsen, 2021). Development agencies with the power to

shape political economic agendas have cautioned against universal social policies that could reach the majority population outside the formal labor force, as these were supposedly too costly (Harris and Scully, 2015). In the wake of the food and fuel crisis of 2007, the financial crisis of 2008, and yet again with the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, this perspective has come into question—as it is clear that aggregate GDP growth only increases inequality, many are vulnerable due to market vicissitudes and economic crisis, and the lack of free or affordable healthcare is in many cases reducing life options and life expectancy. At the same time, the scale and frequency of strikes, the decreasing feasibility of agrarian livelihoods combined with lack of labor market opportunities, and the loss of faith in political leaders, has led to increasing social unrest. This points to labor politics characterized by the expectation for livelihood improvements, which workers often demand through state interventions. Such demands counter reductionist notions that workers in the South have always been precarious, as continuity among workers' expectations does not exist. Rather, the state plays a key role in efforts to instill precarity as a norm, in terms of self-sufficiency, insecurity and over reliance on the market for basic social provisions including health care, pensions and schooling. This points to the need to understand social protection through the lens of power relations between capital and labor, and the role of the state in reproducing inequities in power.

It is against this backdrop that the present article analyzes different and contested social protection policies and practices from Gramscian and Polanyian perspectives. The paper begins with a conceptual framework that identifies how precarity has, in Gramscian terms, become common sense, in that market-led logics of self-sufficiency have become internalized as the norm and social guarantees the exception. Countering the hegemony of precarity are efforts to repoliticize terms that common sense has drained of meaningful political content. This entails a refusal of existing political and economic orders and systems of social valuation which fragments the laboring poor and undermines solidarities that strive for a more just social order. The paper recognizes the rapid increase in the number of social protection initiatives from the mid-1990s. This has triggered debate in which social protection has been perceived as, on the one hand, 'inclusive neoliberalism' wherein the poor's problems are seen as not too much market but too little of it. The implication, from this perspective, is workers' are shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural mechanisms of social integration. Countering this perspective are claims that the rise of social protection programs constitute a 'Polanyian counter movement from below' that comprises a welfare first approach to development across much of the South—supplanting growth-first

logics dominant in the neoliberal era. A contrasting perspective utilizing the governmentality lens views social protection as a state legitimizing tool focusing on surplus populations at the margins of or excluded altogether from labor markets. In light of the contemporary reality in which wage labor is less and less capable of serving as a relay between production and consumption, researchers are calling for distributive politics without which the exclusions produced by capitalist development are unsustainable. Finally, the paper shifts to questions of labor and under what conditions social protections are accessible. It demonstrates the lasting and problematic impact of the standard employment relationship as a universal concept and the basis for extending work-derived social protection. These conceptualizations and policies have the effect of limiting precarious workers' potential to access social protection. In the paper's conclusion the main strands are drawn together along with suggested avenues for further research.

2 Precarity, Hegemony and Counter Movements

A defining aspect of the neoliberal era is the renewed asymmetrical balance of power between capital and labor, usefully viewed by Harvey (2005) as a political project to restore the class power of capital. This is often contrasted to the post-war welfare states which had tamed the markets and pushed back the frontiers of capitalist power by ensuring a standard of living regardless of labor market demands, by linking access to goods and services available as a social citizenship derived right (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Nilsen, 2021). Since the 1970s re-commodification has occurred across the globe, with livelihoods and social reproduction subjected to market imperatives, resulting in a renewed intensity of labor commodification (Ness, 2016) which has led to situations in which survival wages have become the norm, there is poor or no regulation of working hours and conditions, access to social protection including health insurance, and pensions are limited and under-employment widespread (Nilsen, 2021). Protests against these conditions have been common, yet workers have usually been in a reactive position, summed up by Wolfgang Streeck (2014: p. 48) as "disorganized capitalism is disorganizing not only itself but its opposition as well".

Along these lines, Aaron Benavav (2019a,b) has made an important contribution to our understanding of how precarity has become institutionalized in the changing global economy. He argues that we are heading towards a 'good job-less future' rather than a jobless one as claimed by automation and Industry 4.0 theorists. Under-employment is

becoming a standard feature of labor markets. He arrives at this conclusion by demonstrating that the cause of “persistent low demand for labor is the progressive slowdown of economic growth since the 1970s, as industrial overcapacity spread around the world, and no alternative engine of growth materialized” (Benavav, 2019b: p. 117). He asserts that these processes are driven by “... inadequate output demand due to the proliferation of industrial capacities across the world, an associated over-accumulation of capital, and a consequent downshift in rates of manufacturing expansion and economic growth overall” (Benavav, 2019b: p. 121). A scenario is outlined in which stagnant or declining wages, employment insecurity and welfare-state retreat become even more extreme. His proposed solution is collective control of society in which work is reorganized and redistributed, scarcity overcome and existential security and freedom opened up. It comprises a call for a socialist future in which the economy is subordinated to society, overseen by a responsive state with vastly reduced coercive power—basic tenets shared by both Polanyi and Gramsci (Burawoy, 2003).

Typically we think of Gramsci and Polanyi and espousing very different politics. For example, a Gramscian counter-hegemonic social organization is guided by a revolutionary political project that seeks to fundamentally transform society and capitalist social relations, whereas a Polanyian countermovement is typically seen as reformist, in terms of not setting out to transform the state and capitalist social relations, it is rather defensive and seeks to reshape existing capitalist social relations (Henderson, 2017). This personifies the ‘soft’ reading of Polanyi as identified by Goodwin (2018) and Dale (2016), as opposed to the ‘hard’ interpretation of his work which portrays him as a lifelong socialist dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism. Goodwin (2018) (cf. Polanyi-Levitt, 2006: p. 358) clarifies this latter point with the example of the double movement, which is “not a self-correcting mechanism to moderate excesses of market fundamentalism but an existential contradiction between the requirements of a capitalist market economy for unlimited expansion and the requirements of people to live in mutually supportive relations in society”.

The two theorists complement one another. Despite Gramsci’s convincing analysis of hegemony as the organization of class struggle within limits of capitalism, he does not have a theory of counterhegemony (Burawoy, 2003). Polanyi, meanwhile, does not focus attention on the power of capitalist hegemony, yet his displacement of experience from production to exchange creates the grounds for a potential counterhegemony. The main distinction lies between Polanyi’s attention to relations between market and society and Gramsci’s work on state–society relations. Social protection has much potential

in the counterhegemonic toolkit if we accept the basic premise that ownership of the means of production can no longer be regarded, if it ever could be, as the foundation of counterhegemony (Burawoy, 2003). The works of Polanyi and Gramsci, taken together, help us to disentangle the multiple and contradictory politics of social protection, which can provide clarity in directing strategies that advance social protection.

3 Inclusive Neoliberalism

Goodwin (2018) conceptualizes decommodification as a gradational process which operates within the domain of fictitious commodification, comprising three analytically distinct categories: (1) intervening; (2) limiting; and (3) preventing or reversing. Goodwin explains that the first two forms of decommodification are conducive to capital accumulation and can be associated with the 'soft' reading of Polanyi. Going a step further, the inclusive neoliberalism concept of social protection describes its function as deepening of labor commodification. As explained in this and subsequent sections, social protection can be utilized to underpin capital accumulation by supporting consumer demand and ensuring the political viability of capitalism over the long run.

Social protection is typically defined by international organizations and governments as a double-dividend policy for development: it is an input for economic growth that, in turn, aims to reduce poverty by targeting vulnerable households (Brunori and O'Reilly, 2010). Application of most social protection policies is characterized by three components: social assistance, social insurance, and labor market interventions. The ILO (2021) designs its approach to reduce and prevent poverty and vulnerability across the life cycle, including nine main areas: child and family benefits, maternity protection, unemployment support, employment injury benefits, sickness benefits, health protection, old-age benefits, disability benefits and survivors' benefits. According to the ILO social protection systems should address these policy areas through a mix of contributory schemes (mainly social insurance) and non-contributory tax-financed schemes (universal/categorical schemes and social assistance).

The World Bank's adoption of social protection into its economic development agendas signals a modification of the Bank's position that growth is a precondition for increases in living standards. It recognizes the recognition that the impact of growth on poverty reduction varies considerably across countries. Growth, as the Bank now admits, is not accompanied by increased

social cohesion, “even though poverty may fall and living standards improve for some, the expectations of others remain unfulfilled” (World Bank, 2013: p. 38). The Bank’s Social Protection and Labor report asserts, “The innovation in the last ten years is the linking of social protection to the economic growth agenda. The role of risk and vulnerability and the effects of shocks on long-term economic growth potential are now accepted as a key driver of pro-poor growth.” (World Bank, 2013: p. 98). They contend that there is a need “... to better substantiate social protection as an investment and not just welfare (World Bank, 2013: p. 98).” More broadly, as detailed in the Bank’s 2013 World Development Report titled *Jobs*, the Bank envisions jobs as bringing together the “three transformations” of living standards, productivity, and social cohesion. The Bank’s vision on how to achieve these goals remains intact: “... as a general rule it is the private sector that creates jobs. The role of government is to ensure that the conditions are in place for strong private-sector-led growth, to understand why there are not enough good jobs for development, and to remove or mitigate the constraints that prevent the creation of more of those jobs (World Bank, 2012: pp. 21–22). Furthermore, they argue, “What is common to all is the need to remedy the institutional failures and market imperfections that prevent the private sector from creating more of those good jobs for development” (World Bank, 2012: p. 35). In sum, the Bank views social protection’s primary function as a “social investment” whose dividends will see a return when people have greater access to and capacity to participate in labor markets, rather than provide protection from its vagaries.

Arjan de Haan (2014) characterizes the Bank’s approach as ‘inclusive neo-liberalism’—a social assistance approach to poverty reduction centered on including increasing proportions of populations into market-driven development dynamics, thereby assisting them in becoming active and productive in the market. It is an epistemic framework separating social assistance and social insurance (Barchiesi, 2011). The way that social assistance has been applied by government officials and development planners is underpinned by a particular conception of poverty. Certain perspectives conceive the causes of poverty as being rooted in the personal characteristics and circumstances of individuals and households (Devereux and McGregor, 2014). The conceptual underpinnings are oriented around long-running ‘social exclusion’ debates, in which to be marginal or excluded is to be beyond the parameters of the capitalist development project (Munck, 2013). The problem of the poor is seen as not too much market but too little of it (Chhachhi, 2014), and in the process being shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural mechanisms of social integration. Economic participation is held up as the morally sound alternative to state and welfare dependency. Governments

“view the poor as a Janus-faced creature, constantly lured into laziness and sloth, but also in possession of a natural economic ambition that the state has the duty to nurture and guide” (Barchiesi, 2011: p. 134). Barchiesi asserts that the state cannot allow the poor to exist as a category challenging institutional truths, chiefly the unyielding compulsion to work, lest it jeopardize the legitimacy of market-led policy. This approach to social protection policy aims “to protect individual autonomy and avoid any deliberative attempts to re-order the basis for existing social relations” (Hickey, 2014: pp. 322–337). Patrick Bond (2014) takes this line of thinking to its conclusion, arguing that measures such as social transfers are tokenistic gestures justifying capitalism as usual, offering up ‘sustainable poverty’ that smooths out the rough edges in order to stave off political challenges to the legitimacy of the neoliberal order (Ferguson, 2015), a point returned to in detail below.

4 Polanyian Counter-Ovements

Harris and Scully (2015) counter ‘inclusive neoliberalism’ interpretations of social protection programs. They argue that the conceptual stretching of neoliberalism to cover nearly all contemporary political and economic change has obscured ‘from plain sight’ the implementation of numerous forms of social protection that constitute a substantial de-commodification of daily life. They contend that the rise of welfare provision programs signals a new approach to development policy that should not be viewed through the neoliberal optic. They assert that social assistance programs are “not merely an ancillary element of neoliberal statecraft or a technology of top-down social control” (Harris and Scully, 2015: p. 417), rather they indicate a Polanyian counter-movement that comprises a welfare first approach to development across much of the South—supplanting growth-first logics.

The empirical basis of their claim is provided by Barrientos et al. (2013), who estimate that as of 2010 between 750 million and 1 billion people lived in households receiving some form of anti-poverty transfer via flagship programs. Harris and Scully argue that new social protection programs were driven by political demands from below that have forced states to provide social welfare to their citizens, signifying a transformation in state–society relations across a huge swath of the global population. Interestingly, they do not see the programs as trickling down through labor force formalization, but rather scaling up “from the poorest households to those on the cusp of poverty, and from pilot projects to national programs” (Harris and Scully, 2015: p. 429).

In Latin America conditions have remained precarious for most, yet a number of left-leaning governments were successful in decreasing inequality through the expansion of social protection during the Pink Tide. The Pink Tide began in 1998 with the election of Hugo Chávez. Subsequent election of leftists in countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Nicaragua contributed to an emerging regional bloc varyingly opposed to neoliberal consensus. Chodor (2015) views Venezuela and Brazil as the two countries that represent the leading projects within the Pink Tide, with its other members falling somewhere in between. His claim, grounded in Gramscian concepts, is that Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution is based on a radical interpretation of endogenous development and seeks to construct a counter-hegemonic alternative to neoliberalism, while Brazil's passive revolution takes a more moderate stance of reforming certain aspects of the neoliberal project in the pursuit of the 'high road to globalisation.' The differences should not be conceived as a choice between 'reform' or 'revolution,' or as a simple difference between 'good' and 'bad' leftism (Chodor, 2015). Rather, Chodor argues that it can be better understood dialectically, in terms of the potential for radical transformations that arise out of their interaction. Furthermore, the differences should not be thought of as insurmountable, rather, issues of social justice and equality, for a time at least, appeared as the basis for a new regional common sense. This common sense is characterized by a renewed emphasis on regional identity and unity, spurring the search for a sovereign 'Latin American' space increasingly autonomous from external forces (Chodor, 2015). These shared perceptions constitute a stark contrast from the common sense of the 1990s that emerged from the failures and limitations of import substitution industrialization, which embraced market forces and transnational capital and accepted US hegemony. Instead, the countries of the Pink Tide aimed to define their region on their own terms and demonstrate a commitment to the principles of autonomy, social justice, democracy and solidarity (Chodor, 2015).

In the years following 2008 there were other alternatives to the macroeconomic policies espoused by the dominant Washington consensus. For example, drawing on ILO reports, Harris and Scully (2015) claim that China's social policy initiative is the world's fastest and largest social inclusion program ever, with substantial impact on boosting Chinese domestic demand and rebalancing growth towards the internal market. Eli Friedman's (2014) research paints a less sanguine picture of counter movements by contributing to Polanyian debates on (de-/re-) commodification. Friedman (2014) recognizes that minimum wages in China are finally outpacing inflation, social spending has rapidly increased for over a decade, and the central government has

enacted a range of new legislation with the nominal intent of helping workers. His assessment, while not fully countering Harris and Scully's claims, points to a different notion of state-society relations that have taken shape in China. Atomized, ephemeral and often quite militant protests at the factory level looks Marxian and workers remain antagonistic with the local state who suppresses workers at the behest of capital. Viewed from the central state scale, Friedman (2014) finds that the situation looks more Polanyian, as the central government has been moving towards class compromise in the economic sphere. His central claim is that an 'alienated politics has emerged in which the central state's efforts at depoliticization of workers' strikes separates cause (worker unrest) from effect (new legislation), resulting in alienation between worker subjectivity and the class-level political objective that workers themselves have produced. They have no ownership over their demands as processed by the central state. Thus, the central state attempts to improve material conditions for workers paternalistically, while "the dirty work of capitalist growth is left to a *despotic* local government" (Friedman, 2014: p. 1011). In Gramscian terms, the Chinese state has been undergoing a hegemonic transformation, changing its role from forcefully steering the country's top-down passive revolution¹ through coercive tactics, to establishing capitalist hegemony in such ways that the working class acquiesces to the ruling class's leadership (Hui, 2017). The Chinese state has faced enormous challenges from labor unrest and other forms of social protest, and alongside repression of certain groups, the state also adopted select social protection policies to dampen social unrest and maintain its political legitimacy. This exposes the expediency of social protection as a state intervention utilized to shore up consent to its rule, without undermining capital accumulation and authoritarianism.

In final assessment, Friedman suggests that worker discontent could extend beyond the factory to include urban migrant workers employed in services and other sectors, who could organize in a more Polanyian direction at the local level to call for improvements in education, healthcare, housing and pensions. However, Lin and Nguyen (2021) find that quite the opposite has occurred, as the financialization and marketization of welfare has emerged to re-commodity labor in China (and Vietnam). This has taken place through the introduction of financial products and services to be consumed by the labor force. Lin and Nguyen argue that the counter-movement is not one-way, but cycles of commodification are occurring, with more marketization intruding

1 I.e., the economic reforms launched by the Party in 1978, as opposed to a bottom-up and bourgeoisie-led revolution akin to those that had emerged in some Western countries (Hui, 2017).

into social protection policy, with the counter-movement hijacked by the Chinese state to push its own agenda.

So, does social protection constitute a counter-movement that comprises a welfare first approach to development across much of the South? Or, does social protection only deepen precarity associated with market dependence? In Polanyian terms social protection programs are prominent tools of a potential counter-movement, but a Gramscian understanding enables a more nuanced picture of social protection being utilized as a tool to reproduce authoritarian rule and protect capital's interests. The next section delves deeper into these issues.

5 State Legitimacy and Peripheral Capitalism

A key divergence between Gramsci and Polanyi is the question of whether production or the market should be regarded as the foundation of counterhegemony or countermovement. Speaking to this, Burawoy (2003) points out that whereas alienated and precarious labor may trigger organizing, protests and limited alternatives, it does not have the universalism of the market, which touches everybody. Therefore, it is the experience of the market rather than production that can appeal to all classes, he writes:

The market appears to workers as the loss of jobs, impoverishment, longer working hours, and sweatshop conditions. To the peasantry the market is responsible for the loss of land and forced entry into wage labor. The market appears to the landed aristocracy as the degradation of space and the importation of cheap food. To capitalists the anarchy of the market threatens their survival with ever stiffer competition, increasingly of a global character. Women face the market in the speedup at work as at home, the double shift. Everyone suffers from the market inasmuch as unrestrained it leads to the destruction of the environment, global warming, toxic wastes, the colonization of free time, and so forth

BURAWOY, 2003: p. 231

This is not to say that production no longer matters. But it highlights the question of how to situate work in an effective counter-movement that addresses social protection, while understanding it as a struggle that will meet with stiff state and capital resistance, as well as efforts to co-opt it. In other words, capital does not give gifts and gains are hard fought.

Expectations that formal labor manufacturing sectors will become the norm across the South are tethered to the stagist paradigm of development. In cases where this is not realized, or only in part, it reduces peripheral capitalism to a case of failure on the part of capital to revolutionize and transform the economy after its own image. Breaking with this, Kalyan Sanyal (2007) conceptualizes capitalism in the periphery as *sui generis* with dynamics of its own. This calls into question teleological narratives of development as an inexorable and unidirectional trajectory of historical (materialist) change. Tania Murray Li (2017) and James Ferguson (2015) (see also Ferguson and Li, 2018) have further developed critiques of such narratives and the creative destruction that will purportedly bring prosperity to all. Li (2017) argues that modernization theory is deeply inscribed in the development industry, in terms of the framings that insist that all the people of the world will experience a natural progression from country to city, from farm to factory, and from low to high productivity work which would bring prosperity to all. Sanyal (2007) draws attention to the assumption, shared by divergent theorizations including Marxism-Leninism and modernization theory, that as the world's rural populace exited subsistence agriculture, they would enter a world in which wage labor would provide for distribution and in turn enable the conditions for an engaged citizenry to demand social protection provisions from the state.

This foregrounds a politics of exclusion to supplant the politics of transition that has dominated thinking on the South. According to Sanyal, primitive accumulation and the development of peripheral capitalism have not created a world in which capital is self-subsistent. Rather, he asserts that it has produced a 'wasteland' roughly associated with portions of the urban informal economy and slum inhabitants who lack the means to become producers, and whose labor power has not, he argues, been commoditized. According to Sanyal (2007: p. 191) an accumulation-centric development vision "... is fast fading away but is yielding place to an entirely new imaginary of development, one that is rooted in governmentality rather than in the project of planned primitive accumulation." He argued that the global hegemony of human rights and democracy compel governmental interventions to prevent those ejected into the wasteland of non-capital from dying abandoned (Prasse-Freeman, 2022). Chatterjee (2011) makes parallel claims and identifies welfarist forms of governmentality associated with the developmental and late developmental state. His assertions resemble what Li (2010: p. 68) calls a 'make live biopolitics', where social protection is provided to surplus populations, less framed around economic contribution or political status than around "the intrinsic value of life". Sanyal argues that such policies are aimed at mitigating the deleterious effects of the development project, without which the exclusions produced

by capitalist development are unsustainable on political- ideological grounds. Chatterjee (2011) builds upon this with a conceptualization of the developmental state which seeks to relate to different sections of the population through welfare provision, yet these welfare entitlements do not flow from the rights of citizen-worker. Rather, he points to a governmentalization of the state, in which legitimacy is secured not by the participation of citizens in matters of the state, but by claiming to provide for the well-being of the population. This amounts to, as Ferguson (2015) advocates, the adoption of neoliberal forms of governmentality as a means to progressive ends. A core difference with the prerogatives of inclusive-neoliberalism policy makers is that they want increased market access and reach, whereas the governmentality approach looks to state-led socio-economic politics of inclusivity for those excluded or chronically marginal from the labor market.

In addressing those excluded from the world of wage labor, Ferguson (2015) proposes programs of direct distribution that engages the infamous lumpenproletariat. He asserts that wage labor is less and less capable of serving as a relay between production and consumption. He recognizes that labor is still a crucial ground for distributive claims, but, drawing primarily on the South African case, he highlights the increasing reach of state transfers associated with pensions and grants. The demand he forwards, similar to post-work scholars including Kathi Weeks (2020), is a 'radically distributive politics' offering a social wage that is remitted to residents, not citizens. It would be based on what Ferguson characterizes as a politics of presence grounded in membership determined by "a concrete and embodied presence and the obligation it implies" (Ferguson, 2015: p. 215). While this may "invoke a politics yet to be invented", as Ferguson notes, it is not to say it is technically unfeasible, since "providing services to residents is often *more* practical than trying to sort out who 'belongs' where" (Ferguson, 2015: p. 216). The current situation is, however, sobering in that 53.1% of the world's total population are wholly unprotected, while 69.4% of the working age population are not protected at all, or only partially protected (ILO, 2021). The regional variations are extreme (ILO, 2021): 83.9% of the population in Europe and Central Asia are covered by at least one social protection benefit, to only 17.4% in Africa. Of the working age population, 42.1% in the Americas are legally covered but only 29% are in Asia and the Pacific. Precarity and under-employment are thus structural features of the global economy.

Ferguson's claims are certainly justified when considering those at the fringes or altogether excluded from the labor market. However, for those precariously employed it risks bolstering claims emanating from the World Bank which, in an ironic leap away from early proletarian protests against

“wage slavery” and the “tyranny of work over life,” the hegemonic discourses of laborism and productivism have made waged employment the basis of development, dignity and socio-economic rights (Barchiesi 2012). This vision is tethered to the notion, popular among many on the left, that work should be re-formalized, rather than de-commodified, to which the following section turns.

6 The Standard Employment Relationship and Social Protections

The China case discussed above is an example of workers’ power in formal, manufacturing sectors. It reflects the position of modernization theorist Arthur Lewis (1954), who argued that a ‘modern’, capitalist sector in developing countries would draw individuals away from rural subsistence labor and into formal employment, with industry leading the way. There is also, of course, another side of the story in China and across the South, the continued prominence of the informal economy and informalizing-formal sector work. Early iterations of the concept of the informal economy, which first emerged in the early 1970s, understood it primarily as self-employment, and as a temporary economic strategy that rural-to-urban migrants drew on while they waited for their full incorporation into formal employment (Arnold and Campbell, 2018). It has been clear, however, ever since Jan Breman’s (1976) critique of labor market dualism, that formal and informal labor markets are interpenetrated and that informality and precarity has come to increasingly characterize waged labor across the board (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Breman and van der Linden, 2014; Hammer and Ness, 2021).

Taking a step back, Mezzadra (2011) writes that states and capital constitute the overarching reference of modern political economic concepts. In general terms, they both require specific relations to subjectivity in order to exist and reproduce—citizenship and labor are the primary subjectivities under the hegemony of state and capital (Mezzadra, 2011). This came to prominence in the Fordist era, while a new configuration of knowledge and power that sustained the political economic institutions of Fordism has re-emerged in mutated form in the South through economic development (Sanyal, 2007). Its promise lay in presenting wage labor and full employment as conditions for the full activation of national citizenship, yet typically without the laborist compromise for the family wage.

In this context, workers’ ability to access social protection continues to be tethered to the standard employment relationship (SER). Feminist political economist Leah Vosko critiques SER-centrism. She first points out that what

has long differentiated employees from self-employed informal workers, where both groups perform work for remuneration, is whether the purchaser of the labor power exercises control, defined typically as subordination of one person to another at a given worksite (Vosko, 2010). This perspective takes the employment relationship as a universal concept and the basis for extending work-derived social protection. Forms of work that do not fit into the employment relationship are generally omitted from regulatory frameworks, and categorized as the informal economy. The result is a regulatory approach lending continued support to policies that extend different protections to workers on the basis of whether or not they are employees. As such, there is an attempt to stretch the employment norm across an increasingly variegated labor market in which a multiplication of control devices corresponds to the multiplication of labor regimes and the subjectivities implied by them (Mezzadra and Nielson, 2013). These conceptualizations and policies have the effect of limiting informalized and precarious workers' potential to access social protection.

The long-running response has been centered on efforts to (re-)formalize labor to adhere to the definition of employer-employee relationship in the formal economy. For example, Breman and van der Linden (2014: p. 934) contend, "We see no other option than a strategy aiming at the formalization of labor rights which also has to be formulated and acted upon at the global level." Researchers have countered this by arguing that it is impossible (even if it were desirable) to return to the model of industrial citizenship in which social rights are attached to specific labor statuses (see Vosko, 2010; Standing, 2011; Weeks, 2011), as the advantages white males enjoyed were enabled by the margins—immigrants and women—both of whom were largely excluded from the benefits of the SER in the North. The necessary response, according to Vosko (2010) is to eliminate the margins of the SER by embracing a plurality of forms of employment, alongside reconfiguring citizenship boundaries and gender relations and, in the process, identify new models for universal labor and social protections. There is no return to the (30 year) golden era of the SER and the Fordist labor accord. This is particularly relevant for migrant workers who experience a mismatch between the long-term goal designed of policy schemes that centralize the SER and the short-term nature of their employment (Lin and Nguyen, 2021). In an era of highly precarized labor and often decreased expectations on the part of workers for social protection, reclaiming dominant common sense notions of self-reliance when it comes to social welfare, and shaping it for workers' interests is of paramount importance.

This is highlighted in research that has examined groups of people participating in both formal labor markets and agriculture, with neither

proving sufficient for decent livelihoods. As demonstrated by several contributions in this special issue (Thiemann, this issue; Prentice and Sumon, this issue; Turaeva, this issue), many migrants have to fall back on various own resources for social protection, such as family, village, rural land, and home country welfare. Writing on Vietnam, Jonathan Rigg et al. (2016: p. 130) argue that in the absence of sufficient social safety nets in formal sectors, livelihood security is “co-produced in the factories and the fields”. They demonstrate that wage labor alone would not deliver security due largely to precarious terms of employment, while farming alone would not secure subsistence due to agrarian vulnerabilities. Wage laborers’ footholds in rural areas continue to take precedence over the apparent economic attractions of leaving the countryside altogether, and the precarity of waged work, the absence of comprehensive social protection, and cultural attachment to homelands all figure prominently. Smallholders thus tend to supplement household incomes via labor migration, yet due to the seeming perpetuity of precarious work options, where earnings are insufficient and the social safety net thinly woven, small landholdings persist as a primary form of social protection available to households. The crux of the argument is that if precarious private sector work outside of rural areas continues to coalesce with thin or nonexistent social safety nets, “then the logic of keeping an ageing foot in the field, however small that field might be, will likely also persist” (Rigg et al., 2018: p.336). This research points to groups of precarious workers, the ‘missing middle’, which can also include informal economy workers, who are considered too well off to receive state support for the poor, yet many are a crisis away from destitution. Along these lines Benavav (2019a,b) and Nilsen (2020) argue that wage labor is neither in decline nor disappearing, rather ‘good-jobs’ are. This draws attention to the continued need to develop alliances among formal and informal workers, street vendors and factory workers, service workers and those excluded from labor markets altogether in realizing a political project centered on radical decommodification that is advanced through a counter hegemonic process characterized by “what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands” (Nilsen 2021: page). It is not a productivist argument, rather an argument for a rightful share to common resources. It calls for an unspeakable poverty politics that requires new forms of solidarity that re-politicizes commodification, a concept that common sense has drained of political content. Doing so would challenge the common sense of precarity as the labor market norm.

7 “Hegemonies Are Not Totalities”

Precarious workers are subjected to the whip of the market and its vicissitudes, yet not in isolation from the state. The nature of their subjugation is largely defined by how they are incorporated into the state, the state here being understood in Gramscian terms as the “entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win over the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Crehan, 2016: p. 16). Common sense instils precarity as a norm rather than exception, both in terms of labor market participation and expectations, or lack thereof, for social guarantees provided by the state. A life course of precarity thus imposes parameters of constraint on what is possible politically and economically at any given moment (Watkins, 2011).

The concepts of speakable politics and unthinkable poverty politics developed by Lawson and Elwood (2018) help to make sense of how precarity has become common sense, and what to do about it. Speakable politics determines that what is thinkable (or ‘possible’) as a part of political contestation. Structural causes of poverty are erased by the constant reinforcement of neoliberal common sense about the need to reform flawed individuals and unleash their ‘natural’ economic ambition (see below). Governmental projects on social protection that are limited to surplus populations (i.e., the ‘deserving poor’, or very poor) can work against solidarities by individualizing and differentiating people in a society. The deserving poor are framed as flawed but reformable: their poverty can be solved by incorporating them into existing structures of economy and culture. The undeserving poor, which includes the working poor, by contrast, are framed as in need of discipline.

The crux of Lawson and Elwood’s (2018) argument is that ‘hegemonies are not totalities’. Rather, unthinkable poverty politics point to the need to think from existing forms of politics to new forms of solidarity that might yet be unthinkable. A central objective is to repoliticize terms that common sense has drained of meaningful political content, and thus reinforce the importance of challenging the unconscious categories that maintain hegemonic forms of subjectivity (Lawson and Elwood, 2018). This entails a refusal of existing political and economic orders and systems of social valuation which depend upon the devaluation of precarious workers, upon whom the neoliberal regime of accumulation is enabled. Unthinkable poverty politics argues for political alliances that encompass class, race, gender and other social categories such as formal and informal, ‘very poor’ and laboring poor through which inequalities are reproduced. These inequalities, as racial capitalism literature remind us (Pulido, 2017), are necessary because difference is the lifeblood of capital

accumulation. Negotiating difference rather than negating it, as Kathi Weeks (2011) points out, can help revitalize feminist critiques of wage labor by linking it to an ambitious agenda for a “postwork society,” within which a program of state-backed social income available to all would be central. Along these lines the life cycle perspective, a revised version of previous generations’ cradle to grave policies, affords an opportunity to begin to reorganize the balance of class power and reorient counter hegemonic efforts to de-commodify labor and social protections.

8 Conclusion

Neoliberal approaches to social protection reinforce structural causes of inequality. They are centered on ‘including’ increasing proportions of populations into market-driven development dynamics, thereby ‘assisting’ them to become active and productive in the market. The problem of the poor is not seen as too much market, but too little of it. A Polanyian counter-movement approach, in contrast, could argue that the rise in social protection programs globally comprises a welfare first approach to development across much of the South—supplanting growth-first logics. If the inclusive neoliberalism and Polanyian readings are opposed in conceiving social protection as top-down or bottom-up projects, they seem to agree that the project is designed to reduce risks faced by wage earners in a labor market through the provision of income support and services. In both of these formulations, social reproduction is achieved through workers’ access to services or welfare payments.

Analysis of SER-centrism unpacks this relation and demonstrates that an increasing share of formal sector workers are marginalized by outdated norms through which social protection can be accessed. The long-running response has been centered on efforts to (re-) formalize labor to adhere to the definition of the employer–employee relationship in the formal economy. Recent post-colonial theorizations depart from this approach, instead arguing that social protection programs in the South point to a development configuration in which the state seeks to shore up its legitimacy through concessions to surplus populations. This literature on peripheral capitalism and stalled transitions points to a politics of distribution in which social protection programs are rolled out across the South to meet the consumption and social reproduction needs of those at the margins of or fully excluded from the labor market. Wage labor is less and less capable of serving as a relay between production and

consumption, and researchers including Ferguson are seeking out a “radically distributive politics” grounded in a politics of presence.

While not denying the importance of a politics of presence, this paper argues for the continued significance of work and it draws attention to ongoing efforts to make sense of both the commodification of labor and social protections. It is framed as a hegemonic struggle over precarity as a labor market norm that has become common sense among the laboring poor. The commodification of labor and social protection is not path dependent in the South; it is part of an active and ongoing struggle in which the state plays a key role. Going back to Rigg’s example of partial proletarians, hegemony has been effective in suturing dominant groups’ interests in economic growth to subordinate classes, comprising a hegemonic vision that separates workers from social entitlements including health care, child care, unemployment benefits and pensions. This makes it clear that hegemony entails not only discursive elements of socio-economic practice and policies, but it also depends on material concessions. Realization of sufficient concessions in the form of life cycle social protection remains a critical struggle through which the laboring poor can develop solidarities with other subaltern groups.

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