Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
Labouring geography: Negotiating scales, strategies and future directions

Steven Tufts a,b,*, Lydia Savage b

a Department of Geography, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3
b Department of Geography – Anthropology, University of Southern Maine, 300 Bailey Hall, Gorham, ME 04038, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 October 2009

Keywords:
Labour geography
Agency
Scale
Organizing strategy

ABSTRACT

In our editorial introduction to this themed issue on labour geography, we outline some important ongoing debates in the relatively young field of labour geography and suggest future directions for research. First, there is the key question of labour as an active agent in the production of economic landscapes. The agency of labour will likely remain a defining feature of labour geography, but perhaps it is not as important to construct theoretical analytical boundaries as it is to define labour geography as a political project. Second, debates continue surrounding the production of scale and the multiscale of organized labour. Third, labour geographers have yet to engage in any sustained fashion with unpacking the complex identities of workers and the way in which those identities simultaneously are shaped by and shape the economic and cultural landscape. Fourth, there is some debate on the costs and benefits of a ‘normative’ labour geography which emphasizes what workers and their organizations ‘could’ or even ‘should’ do. Lastly, we challenge the assumption that labour geographers have not yet asserted themselves as activists in their own right. We conclude the editorial by introducing the articles included in the issue. While these articles may not address every gap in the literature, they do contribute in significant ways to move the labour geography project forward.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

It has been well over a decade since Herod’s (1997) explicit call for instilling labour theoretically as a more active agent in the production of economic landscapes. Several geographers seriously took up the challenge and labour geography has emerged as a viable sub-discipline (Castree et al., 2004; Herod, 1998; Savage and Wills, 2004). It is only expected, that labour geographers (self-identified, labeled as such by others, or simply guilty by association) have recently engaged in a period of reflection and assessment of existing research gaps and possible future directions for the project. Castree (2007), Lier (2007), and Ward (2007) have all provided some useful reflection on what future labour geographies might entail in order to remain theoretically relevant to contemporary questions of work, employment, and labour organization. Herod (with colleagues) has himself attempted to expand geographical thinking into discussions of work and employment practices beyond the confines of the discipline (Herod et al., 2007).

The fact that labour geography is now in a position where there is enough literature to review and (re)assess should be viewed as an accomplishment in itself. It is also a positive sign that relatively junior researchers continue to engage with questions of work in a similar theoretical manner and that non-geographers have been inspired by such approaches. This themed issue is evidence of the project’s determination to move forward and the contributions address some of the issues raised by those who have recently taken stock of labour geography’s early years. Prior to introducing the articles and how they fit into current discussions we briefly outline some important debates identified by ourselves and others.

First, there is the key question of labour as an active agent in the production of economic landscapes. Lier (2007) succinctly summarizes how the dissatisfaction with structuralist Marxist economic geography led researchers to pay more attention to the agency of multiple actors. Castree (2007) speaks of labour agency as perhaps the necessary ‘analytical boundary’ for defining the discipline. Indeed, Wills (2009) in a recent keynote address differentiated labour geography approaches which illuminate the agency of workers from those that still emphasize the power of neoliberal capital to shape global economic production (defined as the political economy of work). The agency of labour will likely remain a defining feature of labour geography, but perhaps it is not as important to construct theoretical analytical boundaries as it is to define labour geography as a political project. For example, much of the work of Peck (1996, 2001) is very much concerned with mapping the complex terrain of neoliberalism and the manner in which capital and the state relentlessly attack labour and reorganize spatial patterns of production in order to maintain accumulation. If a full exploration of the agency of labour is to be a qualifying factor, Peck (and many others for that matter) would be left...
outside of the labour geography project. Yet, labour geographers require rich understandings of the way capitalist and states seek to control labour at a number of interlocking scales in order to better understand how labour is implicated in and resistant to such processes. Instead, what labour geographers (narrowly defined) and those who study the political economy of work have in common is a strong sense of the lack of sustainability and social justice in the contemporary division of labour. Perhaps, labour geography can be defined as approaches which seek to understand the diverse processes which both limit and build labour's capacities to create more equitable economic systems. Here, we are suggesting nothing more than revisiting Herod's (1997, 2001) initial intervention which was never aimed at completely subverting the theoretical role of capital or the geographically uneven capacities of workers to shape the economic landscape. But more significantly, we are opening up labour geography to engage with discussions of non-capitalist and post-capitalist economic formations which still require a great deal of labour (see Gibson-Graham, 2006). Perhaps of even more immediate importance is the need to apply a labour geography perspective to cases in the Global South, where the exercise of 'agency' takes on significantly different form and meaning.

Second, there are debates surrounding the production of scale and the multiscalar of organized labour. Herod (1998, 2001) was initially influenced by the work of Harvey (1989), Smith (1993), and Swyngedouw (1997) in his theorizations of how workers 'jump scales' at particular moments. Savage (2006) has argued that scale is contested in organizations and tensions (as currently experienced by the SEIU in their efforts to 'scale-up' the Justice for Janitors campaign) inevitably challenge organizational structures. Tufts (2007) conceptualizes union renewal as a spatial circuit dependent on multiscalar action which occurs at a variety of reinforcing scales. Like Savage, he notes that these reinforcing strategies are not easily maintained and a number of 'breaks' between local and international priorities can disrupt the renewal process. Clearly, labour geographers will be tasked with uncovering how labour struggles to overcome the 'geographical dilemmas' which continue to confront workers who reproduce themselves in uneven economic contexts (see Castree et al., 2004). While there may be some consensus on the multiscalar nature of successful labour action, there remains little agreement on the processes which foster such power.

Third, labour geographers have yet to engage in any sustained fashion with unpacking the complex identities of workers and the way in which those identities simultaneously are shaped by and shape the economic and cultural landscape. For example, while many researchers have focused on globalization, only a few have attended to the need to look at the lives of women despite the number of women in the global workforce and their significant role in the economy. Yet in varied and often locally specific ways, capital relies on racialized and gendered ideologies and social relations to recruit and discipline workers and to create a global low-paid labour force. Sassen (2000) has called the reliance on globalization on women's work "the feminization of survival" because it is women's work that generates revenues for governments, wages and remittances for families and profits for corporations. More women are engaged in paid work today than ever before (more than men in some countries), yet women still face higher unemployment rates, receive lower wages than men and represent 60% of the world's 550 million working poor (ILO, 2004). Further, most statistics do not even begin to account for workers employed in commercial sex work, the informal economy, and unpaid labour required for social reproduction. It is here where perhaps there is a need for an unpaid labour geography which links the role of household economies to the ability of workers to shape economic landscapes (Kelly, 2009). Nagar et al. (2002) detail the specific contributions that could be made to this area of research by geographers and argue that this work would greatly enrich our understanding of the global economic landscape.

Despite what we see as a need for more research in this area, there are a number of new and important directions in uncovering the role workers and their organizations play in the continued segregation of labour markets and the reproduction of exclusion around such identities as race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. McDowell et al. (2007) document how changes in the workplace actively reinforce stereotypes through the division of labour in the hotel sector, while Tufts (2006) explores how unions may be active participants in the same processes even as they challenge racism in the workplace. There are exciting avenues for labour geography to pursue the role workers play in shaping cultural landscapes which are implicated in but beyond material questions.

Fourth, there is some debate on the costs and benefits of a 'normative' labour geography which focuses on what 'could' or even 'should' be. Castree (2007) sees such a normative bias as indicative in much labour geography as researchers are biased toward pro-working-class outcomes. As hinted at above, we do not see this as a problem as it would be hard to see any cohesive labour geography project which accommodated research approaches seeking to discipline the agency or workers against capital. Furthermore, the notion of objective research has been called into question by feminists, who have long argued that even the most seemingly objective, scientific research has an implicit 'normative bias' (e.g., Harding, 1987). We do see however, a much larger problem with the inherent bias towards institutions in many studies (of which we are both complicit). In part, this is a theoretical and empirical trap as organized labour does indeed have the power to exercise significant agency and the institutional presence to serve as a convenient research subject/partner. There is a need, however, for researchers to engage more fully with rank-and-file members who may or may not participate in union life. As for the study of non-union workers and sectors, much is being done to explore how workers exercise power without union capacities and how they are building institutional alternatives. This is of crucial importance when studying migrant workers, a vulnerable group whose agency is not as easily made evident and is arguably understudied by (narrowly defined) labour geographers (see Castree, 2007; Lier, 2007). Fortunately, recent work on migrant workers in global cities is addressing these shortcomings (May et al., 2007). There is a wealth of research on migrant labour markets in Canada and a number of researchers are engaged in documenting the exploitive temporary foreign worker programs which have evolved over the post-war period and the emerging resistance to these relations through Workers Action Centres and fights for legislative change. Admittedly, migrant workers are rarely discussed from a specific labour geography perspective (McDowell, 2008).

Lastly, there is an issue over the active role researchers themselves can play in advocating and fighting for change. Castree (2007) argues that the activist component of labour geography can be made stronger. We feel, however, that here he has set up an unnecessary strawperson. First, labour geographers are engaged in a range of activist projects that are simply not documented in journals and book chapters and as a consequence are not easily 'reviewable'. One notable exception is the continuing work of Wills and her colleagues on Living Wage Campaigns in the UK. In some contexts, publicizing certain types of activism may still be detrimental to one's career. Geographers have found their way into the labour movement as consultants, paid staff, rank-and-file activists and community organizers and some disseminate findings in partnership with union staff. While a broader survey would uncover the extent of labour activism among geographers, we do not see any reason to think it still is (or ever was) strictly the domain of Marxist political scientists and sociologists.
Labour geography will undoubtedly continue to evolve and we feel a number of researchers within and outside the formal discipline are positioned to move forward and address some of the gaps which have been recently identified. In this themed issue of Geoforum, we feature five articles which do not address every shortcoming in the still relatively young labour geography project, but do contribute in significant ways.

The ease with which capital moves across space has long been understood to be one of the biggest challenges to labour activism and organizations. Even as many researchers have cautioned that unions need to move with care in scaling up their actions lest they lose local power, most unions have made at least sporadic attempts to engage in some form of labour internationalism. Few unions have moved as aggressively as the US-based Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU). SEIU leadership has declared that the labour movement must “jump scale” to match the global strategies of capitalism. The stated goal of the SEIU is to organize workers across borders under the same union banner and negotiate multi-national labour agreements with global corporations. Aguiar and Ryan (2009) examine the prospects for the SEIU’s efforts to ‘export’ their successful Justice for Janitors (JfJ) campaign. Aguiar and Ryan discuss how the JfJ model is being exported to Canada and Australia to organize cleaners and assess the prospects for “going global.” The authors conclude that JfJ is, in fact, a complex and multiscale campaign which involves local negotiation and is flexible enough to adapt to diverse contexts.

Anderson (2009) proposes that unions can exploit the uneven global economic landscape in much the same way as capital does. In his research on the Driving Up Standards campaign (a public transport sector initiative involving the American SEIU and IBT, and the British T&G), he argues that when unions expand the scale of their activities, they can create multiple networks and nodes for activism which in turn, results in multiplying the number of corporate vulnerabilities that can be targeted. Drawing upon the Deleuzian notion of lines of flight to explore the multiple sites for activism, Anderson contends that just as labour faces uneven support and expectations from states, consumers, workers, and shareholders, so do TNCs. He finds, however, that the ability of unions to create and maintain transnational networks and sustained activism is a difficult prospect as unions have difficulty “unlocking powers” that are more often rooted in national and local contexts. Though he concludes that unions can be successful in challenging capital by “bending scales”, he maintains that they must use multiple strategies that recognize the temporal and spatial aspects of their challenges and any challenge to global capital will “require the capacity to exert pressure from a variety of angles over a sustained period of time.”

While the tendency for unions to rely upon locally spatially rooted practices can pose challenges for sustaining transnational activism, the local state and city are crucial points of engagement in the work of Rhee and Zabin (2009) on home- and community-based caregivers in the US. The authors analyze union efforts to organize workers who provide homecare, childcare, and services to people with developmental disabilities. Demand for services in the care industry in the US is growing rapidly and is characterized primarily by a privatized “flexible” workforce of women, workers of color, and immigrants working in private homes or small facilities for low wages. Rhee and Zabin document how unions have simultaneously pursued two strategies that jump scale to organize and represent caregivers. The first strategy is to raise labour and service standards on a state-by-state basis and to aggregate workers in various organizations to better represent them. The second strategy is to build coalitions between caregivers, consumers and advocates at multiple scales. These two approaches have led to the formation of crucial linkages between workplace organizing, community alliance building, and policy development. More important they have brought workplace politics into the broader field of urban politics, forging place-based solidarities in order to build legitimacy and popular support for local social welfare expenditures and workers’ rights.

While the debate over business unionism versus social movement unionism and organizing models of unionism continue, Tufts (2009) proposes a model of “Schumptarian unionism.” He positions his model on a continuum between idealized business unionism and social movement unionism. While such union practices are not capable of transforming neoliberalism, they do allow for the continued agency of unions in harsh economic and political environments where ceaseless ‘creative destruction’ of local economies continue to disrupt workers’ lives. Here, multiscale union practices are theorized as they exist under contemporary capitalist formations and links are made to union participation in local politics and neoliberal state policy. The theoretical discussion is grounded in the case of UNITE-HERE Local 75 in Toronto and the union’s response to the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 which resulted in a World Health Organization travel advisory for the city and the layoff of thousands of hospitality workers. The article concludes with a call for labour geographers to become more engaged in broader debates of neoliberal restructuring and capital-state theory.

Finally, Mills and Clarke (2009) make a compelling case for unions to rethink and revamp their external and internal practices in order to better organize and represent Aboriginal workers in Canada. They argue that the complex history of the indigenous communities in Canada presents unions with a challenge distinctly different from organizing other historically underrepresented groups since Aboriginal peoples have an inherent right to self-governance. They outline the efforts of two national public sector unions as they approach organizing and representing Aboriginal workers in two broad categories of workplaces: workplaces that are not located on recognized Aboriginal territory or in the north and/or are owned and managed by settlers, and workplaces that are either Aboriginal owned and managed and/or are located on recognized Aboriginal territories or in the north. Union activities in the former have primarily involved drawing connections between a colonial past and present day inequalities to address racism in the workplace and labour market while in the latter, largely non-unionized, organizing has been the priority. Mills and Clarke hold that as unions are guided by principles of social movement unionism and indigeneity, alternative models of organizing evolve that ultimately extend the boundaries of union activism. Moreover, as unions seek to be more inclusive of Aboriginal workers, they must recognize and grapple with their own internal racism and colonial practices and adopt new approaches informed by the voices and activism of Aboriginal workers.

Together, these articles cover significant challenges and opportunities facing Anglo-American labour movements. We do not, however, expect this to be anywhere near an exhaustive treatment and hope that labour geographers will continue to develop new ways of understanding contemporary labour movements which are crucial to the regulation, sustainability, and reproduction of economic landscapes.

References

Aguiar, L.L.M., Ryan, S., 2009. Geographies of the justice for janitors. Geoforum 40 (6), 949–958.

Anderson, J., 2009. Labour’s lines of flight: rethinking the vulnerabilities of transnational capital. Geoforum 40 (6), 959–968.

Castree, N., 2007. Labour geography: a work in progress. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 31 (4), 853–862.

Castree, N., Coe, N., Ward, K., Samers, M., 2004. Spaces of Work: Global Capitalism and the Geographies of Labour. Sage Publications, London.

Gibson-Graham, J.K., 2006. A Postcapitalist Politics. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
Harding, S. (Ed.), 1987. Feminism and Methodology. Open University Press, Milton Keynes.
Harvey, D., 1989. The Condition of Postmodernity. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
Herod, A., 1997. From a geography of labor to a labor geography: labor’s spatial fix and the geography of capitalism. Antipode 29 (1), 1–31.
Herod, A., 1998. The spatiality of labor unionism: a review essay. In: Herod, A. (Ed.), Organizing the Landscape: Geographical Perspectives on Labor Unionism. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 1–36.
Herod, A., 2001. Labor Geographies: Workers and the Landscapes of Capitalism. Guilford Press, New York.
Herod, A., Rannie, A., McGrath-Champ, S., 2007. Working space: why incorporating the geographical is central to theorizing work and employment practices. Work, Employment and Society 21 (2), 247–264.
ILO, 2004. Global Employment Trends for Women. International Labour Organization, Geneva.
Kelly, P., 2009. From global production networks to global reproduction networks: households, migration, and regional development in Cavite, the Philippines. Regional Studies 43 (3), 449–461.
Lier, D., 2007. Places of work, scales of organizing: a review of labour geography. Geography Compass 1 (4), 814–833.
May, J., Wills, J., Datta, K., Evans, Y., Herbert, J., McIlwaine, C., 2007. Keeping London working: global cities, the British state and London’s new migrant division of labour. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 32 (2), 151–167.
McDowell, L., 2008. Thinking through work: complex inequalities, constructions of difference and trans-national migrants. Progress in Human Geography 32 (4), 491–507.
McDowell, L., Batnitsky, A., Dyer, S., 2007. Division, segmentation and interpellation: the embodied labours of migrant workers in a Greater London hotel. Economic Geography 83, 1–25.
Nagar, R., Lawson, V., McDowell, L., Hanson, S., 2002. Locating globalization: feminist (re)readings of the subjects and spaces of globalization. Economic Geography 78 (3), 257–284.
Peck, J., 1996. Work-place: The Social Regulation of Labor Markets. Guilford Press, London.
Peck, J., 2001. Workfare States Guilford, New York.
Sassen, S., 2000. Women’s burden: counter-geographies of globalization and the feminization of survival. Journal of International Affairs 53 (2), 503–512.
Savage, L., 2006. Justice for janitors: scales of organizing and representing workers. Antipode 38, 645–666.
Savage, L., Wills, J., 2004. New geographies of trade unionism. Geoforum 35 (1), 5–8.
Smith, N., 1993. Homeless/global: ‘scaling places’. In: Bird, J., Curtis, B., Putnam, T., Robertson, G., Tucker, L. (Eds.). Mapping the Futures: Local Culture, Global Change. Routledge, London, pp. 87–119.
Swyngedouw, E., 1997. Neither global nor local: ‘globalisation’ and the politics of scale. In: Cox, K. (Ed.), Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local. Guilford Press, New York, pp. 137–166.
Tufts, S., 2006. “We make it work”: the cultural transformation of hotel workers in the city. Antipode 38 (2), 350–373.
Tufts, S., 2007. Emerging labour strategies in Toronto’s hotel sector: toward a spatial circuit of union renewal. Environment and Planning A 39 (10), 2383–2404.
Tufts, S., 2009. Hospitality unionism and labour market adjustment: toward Schumpeterian unionism? Geoforum 40 (6), 980–990.
Ward, K., 2007. Thinking geographically about work employment and society. Work, Employment and Society 21 (2), 265–276.
Wills, J., 2009. Keynote Speech. Developing Theoretical Approaches in Labour Geography. Liverpool, UK, June 11–12.