

Commentaries

Dead labor: the geography of workplace violence in America and beyond

Marx called commodities ‘dead labor’. What if we understood that in less-than-metaphorical terms? How would we write our geographies? Can there be a theory of the geography of commodity production that accounts for labor that is killed, maimed, or assaulted in the course of work. Or is such violence quite literally invisible—in theory and in the landscape? To put that another way, how best should we think about the relationship between violence—whether violence as it is normally thought about (murders, assaults, etc), political violence associated with strikes, strikebreaking and the historical role of company thugs in removing uppity workers, or the ongoing, dull violence of dangerous work conditions—and labor in the making of landscapes and the production of surplus value?

One answer to that question is very simple, at least in the abstract. Surely violence is an integral part of the surplus value equation. Labor activists are not disappeared around the world for nothing. And as everyone from Marx to Pinkerton to Marcos (both Ferdinand and the Subcommandante) to the US Supreme Court to Carey McWilliams to even John Sweeney has recognized, labor has only made significant gains when it has been militant, willing to risk all for what it wants. But just *how* labor violence (again of all types) fits into the surplus value equation is no easy question. And how it gets concretized—how it becomes ‘dead labor’ in Marx’s sense—is likewise complex.

As a starting point take the fact that the rate of workers killed on the job in the United States has dropped dramatically over the last forty years (according to industry sources). The National Safety Council reports that between 1960 and 1995 the rate of workers killed on the job—exclusive of homicides and suicides—had declined from 21 per 100 000 employed to 4 per 100 000. In absolute numbers, in 1960 some 13 800 people were killed on the job. In 1995 ‘only’ 5300 were killed (more than a thousand more were murdered) (NSC, 1996).⁽¹⁾ The largest number of workers killed on the job in the United States (in absolute numbers) is in the construction industry: perhaps Harvey’s (1982) extension of Marx’s argument—that the built environment as a whole is dead labor—is simply an accurate description, rather than a theoretical statement. But given the fact that the construction industry’s ‘points of production’ are by definition within the USA, this fact raises some interesting questions about changing locations of workplace violence and injury: to what extent is that decline linked to the transformation of the US economy and the reliance on overseas producers? Have on-the-job fatalities globalized along with the economy? Is violence against workers—violence of the everyday variety that we call workplace injury—now hidden to our economy by borders across which statistics are not collected and diffused?

The answers to these questions are not as easy as they may seem. It is not clear, for example, whether the rates of disabling injuries have likewise declined over the past four decades—or if in fact they have increased. The National Safety Council and the Bureau of Labor Statistics use statistics for the 1990s that are not comparable with those of previous decades. It appears, however, that some three and a half to four

⁽¹⁾ The numbers for 1995 turn out to be underestimates. The Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the total workplace fatalities (exclusive of homicide) for the year at 6210 (BLS, 1996), but the general point about the decline in workplace fatalities remains.

million workers suffer disabling injuries on the job every year, whereas a decade ago the number was closer to two million. Throughout the private sector some 8 of every 100 employees suffer from a nonfatal occupational injury or illness annually—at least according to employer record keeping as reported to Occupational Health and Safety Administration. The industries with highest rates of nonfatal injuries are not particularly surprising: meatpacking, metals manufacturing and shipbuilding, truck and travel trailer manufacture, leather tanning, and the like. But injuries associated with service industries are economically quite important. Carpal tunnel syndrome and repetitive motion injuries now account for the longest median days away from work for nonfatal injuries (BLS, 1998).

There are a number of issues these data raise having to do with changes in the economy, the success of workplace safety measures developed in the 1960s (and perhaps more vigorously enforced in the 1990s than the 1980s?), and, of course, the changing *geography* of economic production.

Restricting our view, for the moment, to the United States, one approach to the geography of workplace violence is to understand violence against labor has become in some ways more *disorganized* as the economy has been restructured and the labor movement eviscerated. Homicide is now the second leading cause of death in the workplace—accounting for 17% of all workplace deaths—behind only traffic accidents (Toscano and Weber, 1995, page 43). By contrast, assaults and violent acts only account for 1% of the injuries that lead to lost workdays, but many analysts think workplace assault is grossly underreported. The numbers are quite staggering: 20 workers are murdered in the United States every week, and 18 000 are assaulted. Service workers—particularly taxi drivers, convenience store clerks, and health workers—are most at risk (NIOSH, 1998).

Robbery is the primary motivation behind workplace homicides, accounting for nearly three quarters. Murder by coworker, former employer, or known customer or client accounts for only one seventh of all workplace homicides. Attack by a patient is the most common cause of workplace assault. What is important about these numbers is that, as the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 1998, “Foreword”) argues, many employers see homicide and assault as an “accepted cost of doing business”—one that is less, it seems, than providing adequate protection. I can tell a story from my own experience to illustrate this point. For a short time, I drove a taxi in San Diego. Taxi drivers are most at risk of being murdered at work (Toscano and Windau, 1998, page 42). I worked mostly shuttling around old-folks as part of a dial-a-ride program, but I was trained as all drivers were. In our driving-safety and work-safety class [taught by a man with an uncanny resemblance, I thought at the time, to Dr No (when I went to grad school I realized he really looked like Michel Foucault)] we were solemnly told that on the floor of our cabs, near the break pedal, was a button we could press whenever we were in trouble—but could not talk on the radio. That button would send a radio signal back to the taxi shed indicating a problem, and the police would be quickly dispatched to the location from which our signal was sent. This was 1987—before the days of civilian global positioning systems, to be sure—but Dr No extolled the virtues of radio-location systems. Of course there was no such thing as either an automatic emergency radio button or an automated taxi location system. Pressing the button did, however, have the effect of turning on the highbeams, for whatever good that might do. Those of us who objected to this outright lie about our safety were told we could quit. There were plenty of others willing to fill our jobs.

Workplace safety, then, is linked to larger issues about violence in US society, and as even the NIOSH (1998) recognizes, solutions to the problem must be linked to social action around questions of “education, poverty, and environmental justice”. Such social

action, of course, is itself increasingly difficult to organize. The landmark cases concerning the rights of labor to organize in the 1930s recognized the right to unionize to protect workers' collective interests, but connected that right at root to the state's interest in promoting 'industrial peace'. To the degree that labor organizing has been made to serve state interest, then, it has been tailored less as a 'fundamental right' and more as a tool of constraining collective action by workers. During the 1950s a series of cases eventually led to the position that governments in the USA had the right to enjoin even peaceful picketing, and injunctions against labor picketing—in the name of 'industrial peace' and 'commerce'—have become every bit as common as they were in the first quarter of the century. As fundamentally, the 1947 Taft–Hartley Act outlawed secondary boycotts making it exceedingly difficult for unions to work cooperatively on social justice issues. 'Industrial peace', even if it is built on unremitting violence, trumps social action—at least in the legal arena. These facts have taken their toll: the number of strikes involving more than a thousand workers has steadily declined since 1947, from an annual high of more than 400 to now fewer than 50. The unremitting exploitation of working people is ever more difficult to organize around—it is now as much as anything simply taken for granted. In other words, there seems to be little basis, at least at the moment, to believe that the sort of organized threat of political violence that marked the labor movement in the first part of the century will develop again. The daily violence of the workplace will go unchecked by militant social action. Concomitantly, and not coincidentally, fewer and fewer workers are covered by adequate health care and worker's compensation rules are barely enforced.

Without the pressure of such social movements, everyday workplace violence is not a cost of doing business, as it was put above, but perhaps a means of holding down costs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has begun experimenting with means to estimate the total costs of workplace fatalities. The costs to individual workers and their families are fairly obvious and easy to calculate—and it seems clear that it is they who bear the brunt of them. The costs to business, of course, are much more difficult to determine. Even so, at the end of one BLS pilot analysis, the authors declare that "the economic costs of workplace fatalities are enormous. These costs, as well as ethical considerations can be used to justify the expenditure of time and money on preventing them. The optimal level of expenditures needs to be determined by careful cost–benefit analyses that address nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses, as well as fatal ones"(Roché, 1995, page 31). Just what the benefits might be in such an equation are never stated outright. But clearly there must be some: there always is when these costs, as the report fails to point out, are *socialized* and whatever benefits there are, are not.

Absent the social power of an organized labor movement, and given the ability of business to socialize the costs of workplace violence and injury, 'ethical considerations' will do nothing to expose those benefits for what they are: a means of realizing increased profit from dead—or maimed—labor. That is to say that any consideration of the relationship between violence and capitalist production would have to examine the dialectical relationship between the 'benefits' of unremitting low-grade debilitating violence against workers in the workplace and the disruptive violence—or potential violence—by activists and social and labor movements. And they must look beyond the confines of any particular event, any particular struggle, or any particular set of statistics.

These issues need to be addressed, that is, in models of uneven development. Consider the dangers to one's health associated with working in maquiladoras along the Mexico–US border; consider too, the rapid increase in violence in places like Ciudad Juarez associated with the maintenance of sharp distinctions between standards

of living on either side of the border—and the opportunities for exploitation such distinctions give rise to. Or note how the Clinton administration's already lukewarm interest in human rights does not extend to seeing safe working places and living wages as basic aspects of human rights.

Earlier I asked, in a fashion, whether violence against labor has globalized with the economy? But that is not a good question. Rather, what we need to do—and this is why I have been citing statistics on workplace safety—is see that violence of various sorts is a *foundation* of the economy. On the one hand, 'globalization' in all its guises from the slave trade to the US military's well-known willingness to occupy whole countries to protect our vital interest in bananas, has always proceeded through and been built by violence against labor. On the other hand, such violence has never been simply accepted; it has always been contested.

My point here, then, is simply that we need to be more alive (as it were) to dead labor in the economy: what it is, what it means, and how it is contested.

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Learning regions: the politics of knowledge at work

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of younger generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it *or* it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."

Shaull (1996, page 16)

This statement, written in 1970 by Richard Shaull in the foreword to Paolo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, perhaps reflects an overly dualistic understanding of educational processes (see Donald, 1992). Nevertheless, I suggest that it remains an important formulation relevant to both academic geography and government policy. My aim here is to create some space to reflect on the knowledges geographers are currently creating, particularly in relation to policy agendas and with an eye to the tensions between different forms of education and learning. This commentary is also timed to coincide with a resurgence of academic interest in the processes of learning and the wider implications of knowledge (see, for example, Cooke et al, 1998; Jin and Stough, 1998; Malmberg and Maskell, 1999). Within the discipline of geography such debates are surfacing as economic geographers seek to explain the connections between learning, knowledge, and economic success. As Malmberg and Maskell identify "the 1990s have

seen a marked turn towards the study of the role of knowledge in creating and sustaining industrial competitiveness, and the role of location in the process of learning” (1999, page 5). Much of this literature focuses on the existence of spatially clustered firms within ‘learning regions’. I review some of this literature and question the politics implicit within it.

In brief, the logic of the ‘learning regions’ literature runs as follows. Increasingly, economies are built on intangible assets, such as knowledge and trust, at the same time, capital is becoming more mobile. In this situation, often referred to as the ‘knowledge economy’, economic success is achieved by ensuring future competitiveness at the regional scale (Cooke et al, 1998). This is best secured through maintaining innovative milieu via continual *learning*. On the whole this literature focuses attention on explaining processes of knowledge transfer within and between firms, although Jin and Stough (1998) provide a framework to understand learning as spanning “the boundaries of individuals, firms, sectors, markets, regions and nations” (page 1275). Most often, the policy solution suggested by this literature focuses on the promotion of regionally based learning infrastructures that match geographically differentiated employer demands for skills.

Such arguments are most clearly articulated by Maskell et al (1998):

“A major function of the public sector is ... to increase the ability of the economy to change, learn and un-learn, as well as to create and *maintain a combination of policies which can develop generic knowledge useful for industry*” (page 186, emphasis added).

But they then add, somewhat in contradiction, that:

“many political programmes have intentionally *only a symbolic effect* on firm behaviour, wealth generation or income distribution... *at the end of the day it is up to markets*—and not to bureaucrats or policy makers—to decide which firms, industries or regions will be most successful” (pages 187–188, emphasis added).

Their argument clearly prioritises the needs and power of capital. They accept the priorities of a market-led economy that shapes the social landscape merely to provide assistance to corporate competitive success. Learning in this view is simply a tool to support industry and regional policy.

Some authors of the learning regions literature do not jump into bed with capital quite as quickly as Maskell et al (1998) but I find that even more critical voices often neglect the difficulties involved in educational policy and practice. For example, Cooke and Morgan’s (1998) associational model takes the complexity of learning and public policy more seriously by arguing for a society based on collective learning, partnerships, and interaction between managers and workers, and firms and governments. Within this model, they advocate the regional level as the ideal scale for organising vocational training because industrial demand for skills is regionally specific. Such thinking is echoed in the emerging organisation and aims of the University for Industry (Ufi) in the UK. Ufi was created as part of the government’s lifelong learning ‘revolution’ designed to tackle the problems of unemployment and social exclusion while improving economic competitiveness (DfEE, 1999):

“Every business should strive to maximise its potential to compete in today’s increasingly global markets. ... Learning is the key to this—the key to individual employability and business competitiveness. ... This Government puts education at the heart of its ambitions. *We want to build a learning revolution* among children, adults and organisations alike. *The University for Industry will lead this revolution*” (Blunkett, 1998, page 1, emphasis added).

Ufi is still in its development phase but it has adopted a regional structure that is closely linked to the emerging Regional Development Agencies. Ufi regional offices will coordinate a number of ‘inclusive’ geographical and sectoral hubs that will, in

turn, be responsible for overseeing diverse learning environments in various local learning centres. This will be achieved by locating learning centres in football stadiums and shopping centres, as well as more traditional college-based environments.

Although this model, based on regionally specific skills demand and diverse local communities, acknowledges uneven social and economic geographies, it does not, however, propose any new ways to address outstanding disparities in local labour markets. Instead, it relies on the idea that, by encouraging nontraditional learners into education, people who are currently unemployed will become employable. Yet in practice, it is clear that deeply ingrained deprivation in places where large numbers of people are long-term unemployed will not be turned around this easily. Employability is only part of the story; the other part must surely be the availability of sufficiently well-paid employment opportunities. The complex geographical issues raised by such policy initiatives are central to concerns about uneven social and economic development. Unfortunately, however, the current focus in most of the geographical literature on learning firms and regions does not engage with the problematic nature of uneven labour markets in an era when employability is setting the policy agenda. In contrast, educational literature appears to be much more alert to the limitations of current learning policy, including those posed by geographical unevenness (see, for example, Ashton et al, 1990).

Scholars within the field of education research are producing a growing body of literature that questions *whose* needs are being met by the lifelong learning policies currently adopted in much of the developed world (Coffield, 1999). As Murphy (1997) argues, it is clear that European Union states have complied with the demands of multinational capital for an education infrastructure of flexible and adaptable workers. However, such policy initiatives in the promotion of regional learning infrastructures have created a number of very important problems. First, lifelong learning discourses suggest that it is up to individuals to ensure their own employability through continual learning (Ainley, 1999; Coffield, 1999), but even if you are politically persuaded that this is where responsibility should lie, there are serious doubts as to the success of such a policy. Simply matching training to regionally required skills would do little to touch the most marginalised people. It is well known that people in areas of severe socio-economic deprivation are the least likely to participate in learning and they are the least likely to get jobs even if they are retrained (Macrae and Maguire, 1997). Consequently, current policy solutions are doomed to fail as they are based on a model of rationality that takes ‘no account of the real orientations people have to education and training’ (Fevre, cited in Coffield, 1996, page 4). Second, it is clear that the uneven distribution of employment opportunities will affect the outcome of lifelong learning in practice. In areas of high unemployment the lack of jobs, rather than skills, is the key barrier to labour-market entry, providing little motivation for people to start training (Peck, 1998).

In summary, therefore, lifelong learning policy does not do enough to address problems of social exclusion because it does not engage with the geography of labour-market opportunities. Moreover, lifelong learning initiatives do not prevent firms shifting responsibilities for training onto the state. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, lifelong learning shifts the blame for unemployment onto unemployed people. The consequences of this strategy are likely to exacerbate rather than ameliorate social cohesion. And, as Shearman (1997) reminds us, it is not just any culture that can sustain innovation; it is those that are more socially cohesive and which encourage us to look beyond the current situation. Innovative milieu tend to be based in cultures that are open to debate, radical traditions, and intellectual novelty. This brings me back

to my starting point: the distinction between education as conformity and education as creative transformation.

As I have attempted to point out in this commentary, most of the learning regions literature accepts the capitalist hegemony. Ideas of anything beyond capitalist firms and markets have vanished from the discourse within this branch of economic geography. These kinds of approaches can be dangerous, in that they both underestimate the power of labour in the construction of economic geographies (see Herod, 1998) and discount the importance of symbolic struggles (see Hart, 1998). I argue that it is short sighted not to consider the agency of states and less powerful groups in shaping learning landscapes. My appeal is not for the adoption of idealistic or utopian visions, but for academics to remain ever vigilant to the possibility of education as liberation. It is important that academics consider the ways in which knowledge and learning can help us to envisage a policy that might seriously consider sociospatial exclusion. This, I suggest, is preferable to lying down and accepting learning as simply a route to economic competitiveness while social exclusion is further entrenched. Learning can be part of liberatory processes but it has to be learning that helps us to be critical of, and to creatively transform, the world that surrounds us.

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