The “urgent anthropology” of labor unions

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A propsectivist anthropology should be concerned first of all with a kind of ‘urgent anthropology’ that consists of understanding the social forms into which we may be about to move.

Nash and Hopkins 1976

These co-authored words of feminist anthropologist June Nash are a fitting coda for this set of ethnographic articles on labor unions of miners in Zambia and Democratic Republic of Congo, maquila and agricultural workers on the U.S.-Mexico border, steelworkers in Argentina, and ship workers in Greece.

June Nash was a pioneer in the anthropology of unions. She saw them embedded in community life and as agents of social and political change. She understood that unions—membership in them, identification with them, and the subjectivities they make—combine local social structures, rituals, and belief systems with ideologies, organizational structures, and political aspiration that are authored in national and international arenas. She mapped how unions are connected to uneven capitalist accumulation at a world scale, whether that manifests as the re-imposition of colonial capitalist extraction after the 1964 coup in Bolivia or deindustrialization in a New England U.S. city in the 1980s. Nash was a dedicated fieldworker, and she wrote eloquently about what unions meant to her informants. She dealt in affect, social relations, and politics, and she had her eye on labor and capital at local and global scales.

I offer comments on this special issue as a tribute to June Nash who died in the last weeks of 2019 at the age of 93. We would not have such a developed anthropology of unions today without her foundational scholarship. Her legacy should remind us of the importance of both close ethnography and world historical anthropology for understating the role of unions in the contemporary moment.

The epigraph is taken from Nash’s co-edited *Popular Participation in Social Change: Cooperatives, Collectives, and Nationalized Industry* (Nash and Hopkins 1976). Her own contribution was a chapter on workers’ control in Bolivia during the Revolutionary Nationalist

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Movement (MNR, 1952–1964). Her focus was the tin mines in Oruro, where workers strived for some measure of control over the revolution they helped to make. Watchdog workers' councils were intended to be autonomous from the union, to ensure miners had a voice in the workplace. For Nash, these councils were one example of an imminent social form “into which we are about to move.” She took inspiration from Antonio Gramsci's support for the factory council movement after the 1920 Turin general strike. In Bolivia, Nash saw new labor and social organizations grow alongside of, in cooperation with, and in conflict against established labor institutions. She situated the study of the miners' union within the long arc of colonialism, nationalist revolution, and counter-revolution (Nash and Hopkins 1976; Nash 1979).

After completing the Bolivian study, Nash undertook fieldwork in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. There a decades-old moral economy was dismantled when General Electric (GE) shuttered its massive manufacturing facility. Workers felt betrayed when GE opted out of the community and family ethos it had done so much to nurture, leaving them bereft of a paternalistic, corporate head of the “family.” Nash issued a critique of corporate hegemony (Nash 1989). She did not use these terms but she would have recognized the “kinning practices” of the union and also the corporation, and she would have considered unions to be an “ethical-political project” as contemporary scholars term them (McNamara and Spyridakis this issue, see Kesküla and Sanchez 2019; Lazar 2018).

Carbonella (2014) extended Nash's critique of Fordist hegemony. The threatened community in U.S. industrial centers such as Pittsfield was not so much an authentic expression of workers' social bonds, aspirations, and spatiality, Carbonella argued. Rather it was a historically specific outcome of power exercised by capital and the state against a militant working class. Federal legislation associated with the New Deal (1930s) enabled unions, but it limited their struggle to the wage bargain and industrial action at the workplace. This localism went hand in glove with corporate-installed labor regimes that shaped daily conditions of work, home, and community life. Fordist hegemony thereby narrowed workers' worlds and restricted their political field of vision. Deindustrialization—a world historical process writ small in Pittsfield and elsewhere in the USA—laid bare this reality and its disempowering consequences.

Thomas McNamara and Manos Spyridakis write in their introduction to this special issue that they aim to “connect the interpretive tradition in cultural anthropology (with its focus on ethics, meanings, and imaginations) to the specific political economies of the areas [under] study.” They are “inspired by recent studies that explore how capitalism is enacted through affective relationships and moral norms.” This issue contributes importantly to this anthropological literature. Yet, McNamara and Spyridakis also note that “current assaults on the legitimacy of Global North unions mirror the defenestration of unions in the Global South. Unions were crucial to decolonization and democratization in many countries [...] However, since the 1980s, development planners have encouraged low wages and anti-unionisation measures” in the service of national development at the hands of international capital and international financial institutions (IFIs).

This latter insight urges a more Marxian starting point, from which the enfeeblement of unions looks like one part of the transformation of transnational and national hegemonic blocs, including the disempowerment of some collective actors and alliances and the solidification of others. “Since capitalism is value in motion, not defined by territory and place but by movement in space, a movement led by a succession of alliances of places and nation-states in an open-ended process of accumulation, it is supremely territorially and socially uneven. This unevenness includes subjectivities, moralities, and ideologies” (Kalb 2020, p. 11). The

study of unions is a lens on capitalism, classes, and power in a shifting global terrain (Kasimir and Gill 2018).

Kristien Greenen’s article on miners’ unions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) helps develop the point. The union sector in the DRC was liberalized in the 1990s. From a single national union under Mobutu, there are now myriad unions (as many as 200) neither tied to political parties nor to ideologies. This weakened organized labor at the national level and smoothed the way for international firms to invest in copper and cobalt extraction via joint ventures with the Congolese government. The fragmentation of class hailed by neo-liberalization in many parts of the world materialized in the DRC in a plurality of unions. It led candidates for union office to use patronage to win elections. While these practices draw upon local Congolese understandings of patronage and social proximity, they are put in service within fields of power that involve the state and international capital.

In the 2000s, the Zambian center of mining shifted from the old Copperbelt to the country’s North West, and from a Bemba-dominated region to one populated by Kaonde, Lunda, and Luvale peoples. The movement of capital to the new region exposed how the established union had decade’s earlier crafted meanings of worker and “the good life” from Bemba identity and cultural understandings. This made it visible that the Copperbelt working class—including its moralities, subjectivities, cultural norms, and aspirations—was a time and place-bound formation, made in a particular historical conjuncture. Uncovering this, Robby Kapasea and Thomas McNamara are skeptical of calls for union revival via alliance with community-sponsored organizations. They ask: Whose community and identity is mobilized through such efforts? Which social patterns and values are endorsed? Their case could be productively put in comparative conversation with Nash and Carbonella to make known how “community” is a historically specific alliance among the state, capital, and unions, and closely involved in the making of class.

Given the tripling of the global proletariat, growing economic hegemony of China, imposition of new labor regimes, and financialization of the last decades, we fully expect unions to look and act differently than they did a century ago. Contributions to this issue show that “unions are everywhere re-launching themselves as ‘political subjects’, as actors engaged not just in collective bargaining and workplace regulation, but also in the broader aggregation of political and social interests” (Bacarro et al., quoted in Bithymitris and Spyridakis this issue).

We see one such re-launching in the struggles of independent unions to represent women and indigenous workers in maquilas and agriculture on the U.S.-Mexico border. These new unions disrupt the labor peace guaranteed by state-controlled unions, a corner stone of the Mexican government’s development strategy to attract international capital from the USA and Canada. Together with community-based organizations on both sides of the border, independent unions pursue gains in wages, working conditions, and respect on the job. They also fight for women’s and human rights in indigenous communities. María Eugenia de la O and Christian Zlolski consider “social movement unionism” a promising organizational form that brings together labor and community groups and workplace and social demands (also see Mollona 2009).

Giorgos Bithymitris and Manos Spyridakis find promise in “radical political unionism,” which they see in the shipbuilding and ship repairing industry in the Piraeus port in Greece. After the 2007–2008 economic crisis and EU-imposed austerity, the far-right party Golden Dawn appealed to dispossessed Greek workers along nationalist lines, rallying them against non-Greek workers, neoliberalism, and international finance. The historically militant and

communist Trade Union of Metal Workers of Attica and the Shipbuilding Industry of Greece stood down Golden Dawn in the port zone. In coalition with other trade unions and anti-fascist organizations, it defeated Golden Dawn's effort to establish a nationalist labor association and "only for Greeks" job-matching service. Bithymitris and Spyridakis maintain that the fight against the far right, in Greece and elsewhere, must necessarily be part of a union renewal agenda.

The Argentinian Metalworkers Union is re-launching in the face of privatization and subcontracting by organizing a younger generation of precarious workers. For Julia Soul, this union renewal involves the remaking of a sector of the Argentinian working class. She remarks, "The collective selves rooted in different productive processes are engaged in different labor relations systems and bear uneven working class traditions and histories. As such, unions are the center of a complex interplay among political, cultural and economic relations, in the struggles through which working class(es) are forged." Unions do not simply express workers' interests and identities. Rather, within and against capital and the state, they name who is counted in as a "worker" and who counted out, and they mark boundaries and articulate definitions (also Carbonella and Kasmir 2014).

Unions everywhere have been under sustained attack by neoliberalism, austerity, financialization, and the tripling of the global proletariat. The collected articles detail how unions in different locations attempt to restore their efficacy and relevance by innovating organizational forms, crafting identities and patterns of sociality, forging alliances, and remaking working classes.

When we conceptualize capitalism as "value in motion," it is clear that unions play a singular role in this world-spanning system. Unions take shape when capital lands in places with distinctive histories, politics, and cultural logics. Unions also directly confront the fundamental, contradictory tendencies of capitalism—mobile versus fixed capital; abstract versus concrete labor (Narotzky 2018); the tendency toward homogeneity (collective labor and conditions of work) versus differentiation (many labors and livelihoods). Interpretive anthropology helps us analyze social and cultural embeddedness. But, we need a Marxian theory of capitalism to capture the unfolding of general contradictions, uneven processes of social change, and social forms into which we may move (see Smith 2016). In this way, the ethnographic study of unions advances the *urgent anthropology* that June Nash promoted more than 40 years ago.

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