

## Part 2: Appropriate Spaces Need to be Created

The colloquium did not fulfil the expectations expressed above but did provide various stimuli or provocations to further reflection on the posited relationships. I will detail on both.

First the bad news.

Ghent, I have said, has a remarkable labour history, including the largest collection of historical labour movement buildings of *any* city I have ever visited. The most visible of these is *Ons Huis* (Our House), built around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century, a home for a range of labour organisations, and bearing the historical device: 'Workers of All Lands, Unite!'. The ground floor of this, unfortunately, has been vandalised by some bureaucrat-architect and turned into a soulless 1950s welfare office. This normalisation of a once-emancipatory movement into a state agency, or something compatible with such, presaged things to come.

There was no real morning session on documentation and research, just one or two short presentations, both Belgian. (A whole day would have been necessary to have given his topic more than cursory treatment). Vandana Shiva, reportedly sick, was replaced by a Belgian philosopher - parachuted in and airlifted out. At one stroke there fell away a Feminist, Ecological and Third World contribution.<sup>i</sup> The Belgian presentation embroidered, with decorative stitches, on *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (2000). The afternoon panel consisted, for the rest, of five or six speakers, all but one Belgian, and two of whom were unionists of the European social-reformist tradition (one national, one international).<sup>ii</sup> Any hypothetical discussion time was monopolised by the chair, leading to vigorous protest by Oupa Lehulere, from South Africa, that this was contrary to the spirit of dialogue and participation in the newest social movements. It only then occurred to me that there had been, at this supposedly international event, only two platform speakers from outside Belgium, one from the Netherlands,<sup>iii</sup> one from Canada. And that of all the platform speakers, only one, the 80-year-young François Houtart, could be possibly taken as speaking for a significant movement tendency sceptical of the discourse of 'global governance' and suspicious of strategies of dialogue with such (but who then appeared on the platform twice!). In almost all aspects, except for size and hospitality, the colloquium was a step back from Linz. It was another iteration of 20<sup>th</sup> century Eurocentric incrementalist strategies on the international stage. Indeed, the most dramatic dissenting platform voice was another archaic one, suggesting that capitalism could not be overthrown without armed force – something unlikely to appeal to labour and social movements, whether in Belgium or Peru.<sup>iv</sup>

So what could the good news possibly be?

There were several scholarly presentations, which might result in original and provocative books or papers.<sup>v</sup> Francine Mestrum (2002, 2005), a forceful critic of neo-liberal globalisation and a leader of Attac in Flanders, reinforced the orientation of the event as a whole, arguing, 1) that most members of the anti-globalisation movement

were really nationally embedded and that nation states were the only real power on the international scene, 2) that, as far as movement relations with the world of politics are concerned, it had to recognise that elected representatives are the only legitimate representatives of the people. Thomas Ponniah, from Canada,<sup>vi</sup> argued that two main orientations or foci were identifiable within the World Social Forum process, a 'Participatory Democratic Statism' and 'Horizontalism'. These were not, Thomas later informed me, intended to reproduce the old reform/revolution dichotomy, since he sees each as having its own radical and reformist tendencies, and because the two anyway interpenetrate. The first was exemplified by him with the participatory-budgeting process of Porto Alegre, Brazil, the second by the now-worldwide Indymedia websites (see, e.g., <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/regions/world/topics/socialstruggles/>) and by the youth camp at the WSFs (for which see Nunes 2005). François Houtart proposed re-theorising the 'old/new' conceptualisation of social movements in terms of Marx's distinction between the formal and real subsumption of labour (for which see 'subsumption' at <http://search.marxists.org/cgi-bin/htsearch>).

Unfortunately, brief plenary presentation, to a hall of 150, was hardly conducive to the discussion such papers might have deserved. But let me anyway respond, if also summarily:

*Francine Mestrum.* Her two statements seem to me traditional assumptions that fail to take account of the extent to which globalisation, the GJ&SM, and emancipatory theorists, have profoundly challenged them. Indeed, the world's population seems somewhat more sceptical about politicians – and less identified with the nation-state – than Mestrum might be taken as suggesting. While I was writing this piece the BBC report on a Gallup poll which revealed that:

Sixty-five percent of citizens across the world do not think their country is governed by the will of the people...The Gallup International Voice of the People 2005 poll questioned more than 50,000 people in 68 states for the BBC World Service survey about power...The survey also found that only 13% of people trusted politicians and only 16% thought they should be given more power... Nationality was used by a third of those surveyed to 'define' themselves. About a fifth chose religion.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/4247158.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/4247158.stm)

*Thomas Ponniah.* I cannot identify the principle of difference – the logic of distinction – between the two tendencies identified. And the question remains in my mind of whether it does not anyway conceal *other* significant lines of tension within the new movement, or reduce or subordinate them to this primary one.

*François Houtart's* appeal to Marx is based on a recognition that most of the world's working people are exploited not through the wage relationship but through multiple other forms. This argument, it seems to me, runs the risk of merely turning upside-down the political-economic-determinist assumption that real subsumption gives the waged working class a privileged role in global social emancipation. I have been long interested in the implications, for an emancipatory and internationalist social movement, of recognising the full true dimensions of 'labour for capital' in the contemporary world. But I am equally sceptical of any assumption of revolutionary or internationalist privilege attached to this much more extended class.

More stimulation to thought was, fortunately, provided - as at all academic conferences - in the interstices. For me this was particularly in discussions with the South Africans, Oupa Lehulere and Mondli Hlatshwayo, and in publications from their Khanya College. And then on the bookstalls, with a publication of the French BDIC (Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine), and two Belgian magazines. Again this requires detailing:

*Khanya College*, Johannesburg, is an adult-education, research and publication operation, with one foot in the traditional labour and community movements, one in the new social movements of South Africa. Apart from the resources it might provide to such traditions in the country itself, it has a Southern African solidarity programme. And two of Lehulere's conference teeshirts happened to concern campaigns against (popular) South African xenophobia in the face of foreign immigrants! Khanya is hosting, October 2005, a conference marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the national union confederation, Cosatu. And, indeed, Oupa Lehulere has himself intervened, forcefully and at length, in local debate about the relationship of the South African unions to the ruling party, to working people and to the new movements (Lehulere 2005). A special issue of the quarterly Khanya magazine, guest-edited by Hlatshwayo and distributed at the colloquium, was devoted to the unions (Khanya 2005). One article directly addresses the union response to immigrant labour, appealing to principles of solidarity against those of competition. National and international union activist, Maria van Driel 'argues that social dialogue, which is the policy of the main South African trade unions, cannot advance the interests of the working class under conditions of neo-liberalism' (van Driel 2005:27). One would have liked to have heard this kind of sound, discussion on this kind of debate, within the colloquium itself (see the relevant contents list at **Appendix 1**).

*Matériaux*. The high point of the event for me was, however, another publication, in French, a special issue of *Matériaux* on 'Internet and Social Movements: New Militant Practices, New Sources for History' (*Matériaux Pour L'Histoire de Notre Temps*. 2005). Over 100 pages long, in double-column format, this could have served as a pre-colloquium reader, lacking only explicit address to 'anti-globalism' and 'global governance'. This was not a great loss when one bears in mind that the compilation represents both an empirical account and conceptual discussion of the a global and movement-informed civil society in construction. And that it recognises both implicitly and explicitly that cyberspace represents a privileged place for struggle under the informatised networked capitalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The collection is not, however, a partisan volume since it provides space to relevant state and traditional academic practices as well. The compilation deals first with new forms of informatised work, with practices of French trade unions and parties and with national/international social movements. It deals secondly with the collection and protection of relevant electronic archives, with contributions from France, the US, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Switzerland and Flanders itself.

It is impossible to here summarise the collection, which one hopes will appear both in print and in English. Fortunately, six or seven of the contributions in English are on the website of the Feltrinelli Foundation (see Websites and Lists below. The contents of the relevant issue are in **Appendix 2** And I have indicated one or two relevant URLs

from this collection under Websites and Lists below). A taste of the nature of the collection is given by the following quotations from the Introduction:

We have...carried out two series of interviews. The first were done with representatives of what one might call the traditional social movement, that means essentially with union organisations... We were thus able to note that the commonly-held feeling that these organisations only use the Internet 'vertically' – without the employment of NICT [new information and communication technologies] modifying pre-existent structures - has to be qualified. This perception may be true at the level of the confederations... but appears more problematic when one asks about the manner in which certain unions have made use of the Internet tool, particularly within the framework of social conflicts: ... From here to the notion that NICT modifies the very forms of union democracy, requires a step which we cannot claim to take: it is still difficult, at our level of research, to affirm the order of causes and effects. Does the apparition of new forms of participatory democracy make possible a certain use of Net tools (including within the old structures), or is it, on the contrary, that the development of the Internet has facilitated the apparition of the new kinds of behaviour?

A second series of interviews were carried out with what for convenience we have decided to call 'new social movements'... If one accepts certain analyses, these movements bring together militants coming from fractions marginalised from the political chessboard, for whom the [national French] strike of 1995 could have played the role of a (re)founding moment, to which the alter-globalisation theses might have given new legitimacy, and mobilised themselves thus in search of solutions alternative to the taking of power. The NICTs are clearly particularly appropriate for the development of militant structures of a horizontal type, functioning in networks, and the members of which seek a participatory and consensual democracy. The use of Net tools has been very useful also, evidently, for the development of transnational militancy (of which, in addition to the nation-state, the scales of action are on the local or global level). Without going too far, one could thus say that if alter-globalisation was not born from the Internet, it certainly could not have existed without it. (Matériels 2005:7)

*The Belgian magazines.* One of these was the Flemish *MO Mondiaal Magazine*, the other a French one, *Politique: Revue des Débats*. The first is edited by the chair of the afternoon session in Ghent, Gie Goris. The September 2005 issue not only highlighted our own colloquium but appears to identify with such incrementalist aims as the Millennium Development Goals. The second had, in its September 2003 issue, a special section, entitled 'A journey with the alterglobalisers: a new militant generation?'. Whilst the first magazine was more popular, the second more political, the existence of such publications attests to Belgian interest in globalisation and the GJ&SM. Both magazines were clearly well-established, professional and attractive.

I may seem to have wandered a certain way from not only the colloquium itself but from my own remarks and hopes in Part 1. There I concentrated on critique of what

we might now call – at a deep-point in UN reformist illusion – ‘global-governance-babble’. But I also expressed the hope, based on labour history conferences since the millennium, that these provided spaces within which serious dialogue could occur on the relation between the historical labour movement and the contemporary social justice one. Ghent demonstrates that this is not necessarily the case, and that it is possible for academics and activists attached to the historical movement, to continue to repeat, with blind self-confidence, 20<sup>th</sup>C Eurocentric and incrementalist discourses and practices.

The publications I found at Ghent nonetheless suggest a possible way forward. This lies precisely in the area of communication, broadly understood so as to include information at the low or narrow end and culture at the high or broad. I note that neither in the colloquium specification, nor my comments, nor at the colloquium itself was much attention given to what Manuel Castells (1996-8) has called the network society. Marcel v.d.Linden presented the transformation toward information capitalism less as a ‘tectonic shift’ more as a set of new technologies: ‘the emergence in the 1990s of the widespread use of powerful new communication media: the Internet and cellphones’. In the colloquium more generally, NICT was seen as something used, or to be used, by the labour and global justice movements, rather than as the Mother of all Tectonic Shifts. Castells, on the other hand, likens this transformation not to the technological revolutions of the last century or so (radio, photography, telephone, the internal combustion engine, cinema), nor to the steam engine on which industrial capitalism was based. He calls it an epochal transformation and compares it to the invention of the alphabet, around 2,700 years ago (discussed Waterman 1998)!

Although the collection from *Matériaux* did not enter this kind of discussion, and although the Khanya material was in old-fashioned print, I think that they collectively indicate significant ways forward for global social emancipation. *Matériaux* suggests this not only in its consideration of the manner in which work is being informatised in call centres (though it does not consider the full extent nor the international/ist implications of this), but in its attention to the transformation of social movements and relations within and between such by networking, and the possibilities this provides for both participation and horizontalism (thus further challenging the Ponniah distinction/opposition?). The Khanya material, as well as the forceful colloquium intervention of Lehulere, illustrates the other end of the spectrum, that of a new emancipatory labour and social movement culture. Coming out of 30 years of labour struggle in South Africa, yet cognisant of the new movements of the poor in South Africa, this issue represents a social movement challenge to institutionalised trade unionism. Moreover, this challenge has, as mentioned, a significant presence on the Web in South Africa.<sup>vii</sup>

The point here is this: that the forms and shapes of alienation have changed and broadened; that the working class - assumed to be homogeneous and the privileged bearer of emancipation and internationalism - is being re-divided; that the trade-union form, as we have known it for 50-100 years, might have been appropriate for a national-industrial capitalism but is inappropriate for a globalised networked one; that the international union organisations, might unite or restructure, and claim 150+ million members, but these members are hardly aware of their membership of such; that the unionised only represent some 13 percent of the world’s labour force; that the historical labour movement (unions, parties, cooperatives) has little if any presence or impact on the culture, nationally or globally. One could continue. But the main point is that we are

living the most profound crisis in the history of the labour movement – only emphasised by the high profile enjoyed by the tiny and diverse global justice movement, with its potential appeal to working people, unionised or not.

A re-invention of the inter/national labour organisations as a global labour movement, a re-assertion of labour in the global arenas of information-communication-culture, would seem to be the only alternative to reiteration of old formulas (sometimes on new but unexamined political levels or using, but not living in, the new networked capitalism). So I am wondering whether we should not be identifying as a privileged site for dialogue the triangle mentioned above or a *quadrangle* in which the emancipatory role of communication, in all its senses, is given full recognition.

I have earlier used this parable:

The trade unions turn out to play football against the capitalists, only to find that the football field has been turned into an ice stadium. The capitalists are kitted out for ice hockey and are whizzing around the footballers, practicing their devastating shots. Appealing to the state-umpire, the unions complain against this un-negotiated change in the nature of the game. ‘But what can I do?’, the umpire complains, ‘If I don’t let them play here they will simply shift somewhere else’.

It is a cruel parable but actually inadequate to the case. The capitalists are not playing hockey in an ice stadium. They are playing computer games in cyberspace.

---

<sup>i</sup> Dieter Lesage has not only written a major reflection on *Empire*, in Dutch/Flemish (Lesage 2005?), but also spoken, more relevantly than at the colloquium, about the global justice movement (in Dutch <http://www.indymedia.be/news/2004/10/88654.php>). I am inclined to feel, however, that Lesage was discussing the wrong book. The more recent work by Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* (2004), would surely have provided a more relevant point of reference. It addresses itself to new forms of labour, to workers, peasants, unions, to a new understanding of oppression/exploitation, to new emancipatory forms of articulation and sites of struggle, to war and to democracy – and even to the reform of interstate institutions! There is, of course, no reason why the colloquium should have felt obliged to start with this book, but it would at least have begun the event in the right century.

<sup>ii</sup> I was assured that every effort had been made by Amsab to obtain Southern speakers. But this hardly explains the presence of the Brussels-based union twins, whose institutional declarations added nothing to my earlier characterisation of the ICFTU.

<sup>iii</sup> This was Marcel van der Linden (2005), making an original contribution of wide empirical and literary reference.

<sup>iv</sup> This voice was somewhat surprising given that it was that of Anne Morelli, whose co-edited compilation (Gotovitch and Morelli 2003), makes a serious contribution to the history of internationalism.

<sup>v</sup> My reporting here should be considered only approximate, in so far as I am depending on notes, authors’ drafts, and brief comments by a couple of the authors referred, on which it is to be hoped they will expand.

<sup>vi</sup> Ponniah, of Indian descent, co-edited the first-ever collection on the World Social Forum (Fisher and Ponniah 2002). He is completing a related PhD. Ponniah, like Mestrum and myself, is a member of the Helsinki-based Network Institute for Global Democratisation <http://www.nigd.org/>. This raises the possibility of an exchange on the Colloquium issues within that forum itself.

---

<sup>vii</sup> Thus, Debate List is a remarkably busy, lively and virtually unedited left list, covering matters national, regional, continental, international (other countries) and global (globalisation and the global justice movement). Whilst leaning in the direction of the new movements in South Africa and internationally, it is also pluralistic, permitting contributions from anarchists, autonomists, Cosatu officers, Communists, African National Congress supporters, social democrats, liberal democrats (I think) and half a dozen other possibly unidentifiable tendencies. It should not, moreover, be assumed that South Africa is the only country in the South in which traditional union practices are being forcefully questioned. In Argentina, and elsewhere in Latin America, related challenges are being made. Consider <http://www.iisg.nl/labouragain/publications.html> and other pages on the Labour Again site at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. Nor is the necessary new orientation confined to the South. A modest Canadian socialist initiative seems to me rather more open to the global justice movement than the Belgians appeared to be. This is the Socialist Project <http://www.socialistproject.ca/>, which has published a provocative piece on a new labour internationalism (Gindin 2004), and has proposed the necessity for networking if the labour movement is to be revived [http://www.web.net/~sclstpj2003/relay/r01\\_Rethinking\\_the\\_Labour\\_Movement.html](http://www.web.net/~sclstpj2003/relay/r01_Rethinking_the_Labour_Movement.html).