

## **Can Dialectics Break BRICS?**

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Our most basic question regards the communist and the current: *do the emerging economies of the BRICS nations provide material conditions for communist struggle organized around the party form?*

The currency of communism confronts us with two not-yet-synchronous sequences. One is "The Idea of Communism." This eponymous sequence began well before the conference at Birkbeck Institute and the following "Pocket Communism" texts from Verso. A committed band of thinkers have labored to preserve communist thought in the anglophone and western european world during communism's version of what modernism named "the vortex" – a disorienting break in historical tradition following the collapse of the communist bloc. If this preservation has occurred largely within the various formalizations available to philosophy and political theory, this can be understood as an artifact of its own conditions, developing in a period largely lacking avowedly anti-capitalist antagonism within the Anglo-European sphere.

The second current is that of struggle itself. Following on an uneven global economic collapse circa 2008, social antagonisms burst forth from a period of seeming quiescence or dissipation: struggles at least partly communist in character, yet not easily assimilated to older organizational logics. The aforementioned thinkers have turned to these events in various ways, seeing in them the actuality that must be grasped by ideas.

We should not assert too swiftly that these currents have run together; they are sometimes river, sometimes riven. It is from this ambiguous historical position that we approach recent work

by Bruno Bosteels and Jodi Dean, pivotal thinkers within the former current. Their work provides both renewed openings and equally renewed limits for grasping the matter of communism as contemporary possibility.

Bosteels' theoretically capacious and archivally rich considerations of Latin American communisms, from the 19th century through to the present moment, provide a significant contribution to the field of study, refiguring contemporary debates too easily stuck on the *idées fixes* of the Paris Commune and European trajectories of communism. This opening of the field, of "the lessons learned as part of this displacement—from Commune to commune, as it were," to use Bosteels' words from elsewhere ("The Mexican Commune" 26) is most evident in the bravura fifth chapter of *The Actuality of Communism*, via its engagement with the thought of Álvaro García Linera in the context of actually existing politics in Bolivia and Latin America more broadly (Actuality 225–268).

Dean, even more catholic (if less global) in her theoretical assemblage, has along with Slavoj Žižek, been foremost among those revitalizing the question of the party in communist theory. Routing her agreement through Bosteels, Dean affirms Žižek's proclamation that "a politics without the organizational form of the party is a politics without politics" (Dean 9). Noting that the question of the party has been equally cast into the fire by the anti-totalizing left and drawn into the abyss by somnolent democratic centralist organizations, Dean seizes on the largely failed promise of the waves of struggle post-2008, corruscatingly skeptical of the "horizontalist" ideology antithetical not just to leadership but formal organization as such. This ideology, often understood as inherited from the alterglobalization movement and purportedly anarchist at its root, offers a political imaginary which, in multiple accounts including Dean's, draws its internal logic not from a rejection of hierarchy but a

replication of frictionlessly networked neoliberal marketplace:  
"This is movement as commodity and fashion choice" (Dean 245).

Likely all would admit that this political model offered certain virtues (not least an appealing sense of participatory possibility); it seemed as well to reach real limits. Now, in the face of its failure, the question of organization must again present itself. The political force and demand of what might be called "program without apologies," unremitting in its insistence on the political desirability of party and state form toward seizure of production, and absent any undue patience for the caviling of beautiful souls, has been Dean's signal contribution to political thought. The vanguard party maintains "the collective desire for collectivity....As it learns from the struggling masses, the party provides a vehicle through which they can understand their actions and express their collective will, much as the psychoanalyst provides a means for the analysand to become conscious of her desire" (Dean 207, 243).

The political desire for this organizational model, however, does not equate to its political possibility. This is the import of Marx's timely reminder that "[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Brumaire 1). We argue here not against revolutionary strategy as such; contrarily, we affirm that strategy and tactics must arise from conditions as they have developed historically. As will shortly become clear, a materialist analysis has dissuaded us from believing that the old capitalist core, its industrial basis hollowed from within according to exigencies of competition-driven development, might provide for the advance of a party along traditional Leninist lines (even with certain modifications). Indeed, the evidence points strongly to the contrary.

The collective experience of work and life that gave rise to the vanguard party during the era of industrialization has passed away with industrialization itself. We recognize as materialists that the capital-labor relation that made such a party effective – not only as idea but as reality – is no longer operative. A changed capital-labor relation will give rise to new forms of organization. We should not criticize present-day struggles in the name of idealized reconstructions from the past. Rather, we should describe the communist potential that presents itself immanently in the the limits confronted by today's struggles.

In making this argument, we anticipate the following objection: if the demand for the party as a route toward a communist social relation is foreclosed in the deindustrialized core of capitalism's home counties, might the material conditions amenable to the class/mass/party sequence still exist elsewhere, in the industrial zones of the "Global South"?

We take this question of the party beyond the overdeveloped economies of the initial OECD nations to be a critical area of research and potential place of struggle, and one not yet adequately addressed. This is the simplest formulation of the matter toward which we might orient ourselves via Dean and Bosteels, via the one's insistence on a given organizational strategy, and the other's salutary recommendation that we understand this as a global question to be extricated from the anglo-european theatre. *The party, then – but elsewhere.*

If Dean and Bosteels provide our initial coordinates, a sort of pole star but bipolar, our own compass will be that of political economy and its critique – not as complement to, but as inseparable element of, the historically concrete dimension of communist thought. For it is this orientation which inaugurates communism as an historical possibility rather than a horizon or ideal. It is this insistence on evaluating proposed politics not

according to their desirability but their material possibility that will safeguard us from drifting into the wide Sargasso of left idealism.

#### VALUE AND PROGRAM

Class struggle, among its many descriptions, mediates between the value-relation and the mode of production. Surplus value is "the invisible essence of capital," in Marx's words (*Capital* Vol. 3, 134); the struggle over its appropriation puts the class relation at the center of this mode of production. The mode of production is then the historical category wherein communism becomes possible within given material conditions. To think communism as possibility, historical circumstance and the motion of value must be thought together as they have developed together in an unfolding dialectic; changes in the latter cannot be disarticulated from changes in the former. It is class struggle that articulates them as social fact, such that they move together.

As we are insisting that there is no thinking the concrete possibility of communism without reference to the seeming abstraction of value theory, we must here offer a brief specification of what is meant by that contested term. We do not particularly mean the more-and-less Hegelian varieties of "value-form theory," of late largely a German disease best known under the name of *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. Rather, value theory here designates something closer to the arguably more pragmatic and even empirical tradition, often anglophone, interested less in the kinds of consciousness that correspond to the value-relation than in the "moving contradiction" of the *Grundrisse*. "Capital itself is the moving contradiction," Marx notes, following with the crucial specification of this contradiction's contents: capital "presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it

posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth" (*Grundrisse* 706).

That is to say, it is the historical dynamic between profit and accumulation, price and value. Thus the moving contradiction appears within capitalism as the restructurations of capital's schemes for reproducing itself, under duress from changes in its own composition – changes which include both class composition as well as the technical and organic composition of capital, that is, the ratios of both the mass and value ratios of constant to variable capital in the production process. The post-industrial "new economy," i.e., is not some new way of producing value; it is what an economy looks like that has achieved a certain value composition in industry. Such restructurations are neither aid nor impediment to Marx's "real movement which abolishes the present state of things"; they are the real movement, expressed in the categories of political economy (*German Ideology* 57).

Value itself is not a substance but a social relation within which capitalist accumulation is possible, within which the law of value might assert itself. Dean is rightly skeptical of understanding the proletariat as "an empirical class" – as are Marx and those who take up his analytic tools. Hence the useful distinction between "the working class" as a positivist designation devised by factory inspectors, and "the proletariat" as a structural position, one that moves and changes both internally and in its external relation. The proletariat is that class which, "without reserves," is separated from its capacities; into the opposition of workers and means of production enters the value form as mediation.

One disables the possibility of capitalism – whether organized by corporations, states, or workers – by annihilating the value relation, not by standing astride its preserved aspect. The mere seizure of production and its surplus may provide the socialist

horizon, but "The abstract domination and the exploitation of labor characteristic of capitalism are grounded, ultimately, not in the appropriation of surplus by the laboring classes, but in the form of labor in capitalism" (Postone 161). It is for this reason that one grasps communism as a qualitative break: the abolition of any index between labor contributed to society, and one's access to the social store. This is merely a value-based formulation of, "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." Such a definition has a sharp edge. If one takes it up, it immediately severs certain conceptual knots (such as the revenant question of labor chits on which Marx himself was inconsistent). Moreover, it is logically inconsistent to affirm such a definition of communism while identifying communism with control over production as it presently exists.

It is according to this understanding that Postone develops the category of "traditional Marxism," which, despite casting production as the place of struggle and the industrial proletariat as the subject of history, resolves finally into distributive formulations – in that it takes labor to be "the transhistorical source of wealth and the basis of social constitution" and thus preserves the indexing of labor to social goods. In so doing, "Traditional Marxism replaces Marx's critique of the mode of production and distribution with a critique of the mode of distribution alone" (69). This misrecognition expresses itself in the gesture through which the end of capitalism is identified with the realization of the proletariat rather than its abolition, that is, with the command over the value form rather than its annihilation.

It is precisely at this moment that Postone pauses to reflect on the distributive conception as something more than an exegetical misstep – something that "requires a social and historical explanation" (69). His own gesture toward this remains incomplete, arguably in keeping with his theoretically-inclined

(so necessarily less historical) analysis. Separating the problem into "two levels," he leaves largely untouched the question of "how the relations of distribution *could become* the exclusive focus of a social critique" [emphasis ours]. But this is the right question. The phenomenon he is describing falls within what has been called *programmatism*, a set for which the integral is probably *lower limit councilism, upper limit dictatorship of the proletariat*.

Although he does not use the term, Gilles Dauvé describes programmatism as follows: "The reality of the enterprise, as a form of production specifically capitalist, was not questioned. Thinking the abolition of economy was even less in the cards [...] Self-management by the workers' councils is capital seen from the point of view of the worker, i.e. from the point of view of the cycle of productive capitalism" (Dauvé 6). This is not a transcendental vision. The program wherein a worker's movement organizes itself toward the seizure and preservation of production so as to transform distribution arises as a possibility in a concrete situation. What are the historical conditions in which this political sequence holds sway?

Once this question is asked, one can avoid dismissing programmatism as mere error – which would itself be an error of transhistoricism, of idealism. Marx was at least occasionally a programmatist *in his time*, as were Lenin, Pannekoek, and Luxemburg. Programmatism is an historical form of class struggle. It is a category through which we might understand a past era and our distance from it, as well as the present and its particularities, the concrete circumstance available to present struggle.

Here we might take a last thought from Postone, one left frustratingly incomplete. Before letting it drop, he suggests that the task of understanding the basis of traditional Marxism

would involve taking up the tension between *Capital* Volumes 1 and 3, which he rightly understands as tilting toward analyses of value and of price, and thus capital as seen from the positions of production and distribution respectively (Postone 134).

The contradiction between value and price, wherein the fratricidal intercapitalist struggle for profit must expel labor from the production process, increases the organic composition of capital and identically the ratio of surplus to productive labor. It is these changes that correspond to the eclipse of the worker's movements in the now post-industrial core.

To argue that there is a set of relations that unify the value/price dynamic, the eclipse of the worker's movement, and the foreclosure of programmatism in these nations is no great matter. Dean writes that "In the US, the political power of organized labor has diminished together with the substantial decline in private sector union membership, the spread of an individualist conception of work, and the realignments within the Democratic Party. The importance of manufacturing and industrial production has likewise decreased as the US economy has shifted away from the production of goods and toward the provision of services." Citing Judith Stein on the exchange of factories for finance, the passage concludes that said process "is generally linked to a shift to neoliberal economic policies" (Dean 75-76).

All of this is true, but any underlying historical dynamic goes unremarked. For all our dialectical *delicatesse*, if we are to speak of what it would mean to enter into communist struggle, we must sometimes speak of causes. Why did these shifts happen? Surely we aren't meant to believe it was the spread of certain conceptions, or parliamentary realignments arising *ex nihilo*. "Neoliberal policies" are here identified – in line with David Harvey's account – as a class strategy for securing a greater share of the wealth. But the capitalist class is generally intent

on such things, in all places and times; why, there and then, was the victory of neoliberalism both compulsory and possible?

If this resists specification, it may be because neoliberalism itself lacks specificity. Indeed, it is not a coherent object of study. No doubt the era has its ideologues, but neoliberalism isn't an ideology, a plan, or set of policies except in the sense that any aggregate of *things that were done* is a set of policies. It is a dog's dinner of ad hoc ploys, by turns virtuoso and ungainly, attempting to restore profitability to the US-centered cycle of accumulation in train of the secular collapse in profits around 1973 (Brenner 5-7). The partial restoration that follows before again failing, however, shifts profits to sectors which generate price but not new value – sectors which are zero sum (i.e. finance and insurance), or in which increased valuations are nominal (real estate). This in turn assures the intensifying recurrence of crisis, and the increasing production of non-production, which appears as surplus capacity and surplus population. It is in this situation – fewer workers generating less value, much as Marx foresaw – that programmatism, however desirable, ceases to be the form of struggle available.

#### CLASS COMPOSITION AND COMMUNIST CONTENT

Thus the great puzzle of the claim that “a politics without the organizational form of the party is a politics without politics.” The formulation effectively constitutes organization and party as normative, offering a “required standard” and therefore an ethics. Inevitably, only ethical criticisms of such organization are admissible: “Some depict the Leninist party as a spectre of horror,” which is heir to all manner of villainy – hierarchy, vanguardism and centralization, opacity, authoritarianism, and so forth. From this opposition of virtues and vices the requisite concluding move affirms that “A communist party is necessary because neither capitalist nor mass spontaneity immanently

produce a *proletarian* revolution that ends the exploitation and oppression of the people" (242). *We must have the party – regardless of whether there are material conditions for the formation, growth, and massification of a party – because otherwise we will lack a politics.*

Alas, it can be rather difficult to impeach material conditions and elect new ones.

Zizek and Dean might suggest, as a rejoinder, that they are precisely trying to extract the transhistorical kernel of communist politics from its historical shell. The Leninist party must be saved from the workers movement and thus preserved (*aufgehoben*) for this era of the movement's eclipse. In so arguing, Zizek and Dean decline to consider the underlying links between the party form of the twentieth century and the workers movement of the same vintage. And indeed, thorough analysis of the workers movement is notably evaded in their work to date. Absent material analysis of the trajectories of the twentieth-century workers movement, they rather admit that actually existing socialism was a disaster, and swiftly turn from the wreckage: *now we must have the courage to try again!*

But then, the whole point of a Leninist materialist politics, unlike anarchist or utopian socialist idealism, was that the strength of the party, the probability or in some versions the inevitability of its success, was based in a tendency of social reality itself. What was the material basis of the party strategy?

The environment of the party was the labor movement, in essence. The expanding power of that movement was given in the expansion and then the industrialization of the class. That is to say, the *people* – fundamentally disunited in distinct classes: peasants, shopkeepers, artisans, the lumpen – had to be transformed into

the *proletariat*, as the class with radical chains, the class "without reserves." But then, in a second moment, this proletariat had to be industrialized. Industrialization would take the formal transmogrification (people into the proletariat) and give it a material expression, an organic unity.

Thus, the party did not just sum and average the interests of workers, or provide a compromise among class fractions. Instead of representing a constituency, *à la bourgeois* parliamentary parties, it must present an organic unity of class interests. Industrialization would materially transform the class, the "in itself," which might then become "for itself" by making proletarians' class-belonging the most important fact about them.

Party cadres were not expected to overcome the internal division among proletarians – race, gender, trade, religion, local or regional origin, nationality – by force of will. These were solids that would melt into air, holies profaned. Cadres instead expressed the coming into being of proletarians' self-consistency as such, supported by the tendency of reality itself.

It is according to this reality that industrialization indexes the growing strength of the class in movement and the capacity of the party to present class interests in an organic fashion. Hence also the metaphors of the party likened unto a machine, or the class as a machine put to work by the party. It is a class homogenized and trained by the motions of the machine, in the factory, to act in concert, not only economically but also politically. These metaphors are not incidental. Hence also the vanishing of this party form's possibility along with the end of programmatism in the core, indexed by the limit of industrialization. When actual machines replace the living labor of class and party machine to such a degree that the internal unity of the proletariat is broken, the dream of program, with or without apologies, is at an end.

Here, we have not engaged in a critique of the Leninist party form; we have only grounded materially the theory of the party in the Second International from which Lenin derived much of his fundamental orientation. Any attempt to extricate the party from this, its programmatic context, would have to be explicit about how that extrication is possible without becoming an idealism, divorced from the inner tendency of reality.

Another way to pose this necessity is to inquire after the content of communism – or perhaps, to turn toward a somewhat more concrete formulation, a communist social relation capable of reproducing itself beyond the shell of capitalist production and the domination of the value form. To insist that one desires the party as a pure theory of seizing power, without a clear account of what communism designates as a social relation, verges on blank insurrectionism in its separation of means from ends. Is this not the truth of Žižek's already-encountered blandishment, reducing politics to an identity with "the organizational form of the party"? We would suggest that this turning away from any sense of what "communism" might mean regarding social existence beyond capital is itself a registration of the eclipse of the worker's movement: unable either to think the material basis of class belonging or abandon a willful adherence to the idea of the party, formalism is all that can remain.

#### PARTY IN THE BRICS

But now we must be clear about the limits of this claim – of a link between changing technical compositions, their reflection in value compositions as a decline in the demand for industrial labor, and the end of programmatism – in a way that will open up the possibility of empirical inquiry. As noted earlier, Dean's analysis recognizes the eclipse of the worker's movement in given conditions in given places and times, indexed most systematically

to compositions of class and capital in the capitalist core. It is not clear that these conditions obtain elsewhere, as the weight of the global proletariat increasingly shifts away from the deindustrialized countries.

Hence we must ask the question of whether composition beyond the capitalist core might be more fertile for the growth of parties able to seize state power and control of production. The worldspace of capitalism, even if it no longer preserves any substantial non-capitalist enclaves, is nonetheless politically and economically variegated. If we associate party and program with a struggle to alter distribution by managing production such as possible within certain limits of labor-intensiveness in the value chain – that is, if we associate a redistributive socialism with an industrializing economy featuring real accumulation over given levels – we would properly look at something like the organic composition of capital in emerging economies as an index of the possibility for struggles toward such goals. Might the BRICS support a programmatism?

The question is the obverse of the Arrighian finding that when the center of the capitalist world system shifts, it transfers to a container of power with an economy still ascending its industrial phase, i.e., one which features a lower organic composition of capital, where investment-driven productivity has not yet reached limits of profitability, the dialectical development of value production is in its glorious springtime, and thus provides an economy which might more effectively soak up mobile capital in search of better returns (Arrighi 219-246).

There is a trajectory of capital's development, that is to say, that moves with the moving contradiction of the value form. There are moments along that arc when a worker's movement can achieve both the scope and unity to provide the environment for a mass party, before deindustrialization sets in. We are further down

value's rainbow here, but might matters be different elsewhere? Might Dean's communism be best considered for its actuality in something like Bosteels' elsewhere, albeit for somewhat different reasons than either suggest? It is with this question in mind that we turn to some suggestive data, in hopes of glimpsing shadows cast by the moving contradiction and the dialectic of capital, espying in them the currency of the party form.

Looked at from one angle, that is, comparatively, the periphery seems ripe for a programmatist politics, since capital accumulation is now proceeding there at rates greater than the core. This is a historically new phenomenon: the long-term trend in the global economy has not been one of convergence between peripheral and core economies. "Catch-up" has been extremely rare; its exemplars (the USSR, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) can be counted on one hand (Allen 6). For the rest, the long-term trend has been "divergence, big time" (Pritchett 3). In the past few decades, however, this trend seems to have reversed itself, at least for the BRICS. Convergence has proceeded rapidly in China and India, which have achieved growth rates superior to the OECD for three decades (beginning albeit from extremely low GDP-per-capita levels). In Brazil and South Africa (as in Russia) growth has been shakier. There too, however, growth rates accelerated after 2003 (OECD 15).

Not only has capital accumulation in the BRICS proceeded at a fast pace, suggesting a 'take-off' in some of the largest countries in the world, by population.

This seeming "take-off" in some of the globe's most populous countries, suggested by rapid capital accumulation, has been accompanied by a major shift in the location of global manufacturing, both in terms of output and employment. Developed economies were responsible for 79 percent of manufacturing value added in 1990, but only 64 percent in 2010 (UNIDO 142).

Peripheral countries are now responsible for more than a one-third of global manufacturing output. The shift in employment has been even more pronounced. Peripheral countries, already responsible for half of manufacturing employment in 1980, accounted for more than two-thirds by 2008 (UNIDO 150, chart). At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, China's share of manufacturing employment dwarfed that of major core countries. There were 97 million manufacturing workers in China, in 2007 (Bannister and Cook 41, table). This is roughly three times the number in the US, Japan and Germany combined (BLS table 2-4)

So things appear from the standpoint of a hegemon and a workers movement in decline. However, such comparative analysis tends to obscure conditions in the BRICS themselves. Are they tracing the same course traversed by the core in prior decades? This will not be answered by the magnitude of the industrial proletariat relative to that of the deindustrialized core, but rather, the size and character of that class as a portion of BRICS' national workforces. An immanent grasp of emerging market economies presents a different view. China's 97 million manufacturing workers provide a less impressive picture when viewed as an aliquot part of its total workforce of 770 million (OECD 116, table). In 2007, manufacturing employment accounted for only 12.6 percent of China's workers. Similarly in India, manufacturing made up 12.1 percent of the workforce in 2004/5 (OECD 170, table). Of this, 61 percent of workers, most of them informal, were in micro-enterprises of fewer than five employees (OECD 26). By contrast, at its height in early 1970s, manufacturing accounted for around 27 percent of the workforce in the developed countries, and more than that in Germany, Japan and the UK (UNCTAD 95).

Patterns of peripheral industrialization have not replicated those of the core. It is true that an exodus from agriculture has

taken place; concomitantly, the population has shifted into urban areas, in tandem with a massive increase in total population. Despite a geographically uneven unfolding, these trends have followed the well-worn paths cut by the advanced capitalist countries – albeit on a much larger scale. Yet, in the core, the population released from agriculture found itself divided more or less equally into industrial and service occupations (industry is a broader category than manufactures, as it includes construction, mining and utilities). At its peak in 1973, industry accounted for 47 percent of employment in Germany, 37 percent in Japan, and 41 percent in the UK (BLS table 2-7). Such developments early on enabled a vision wherein the industrial proletariat would come to make up the majority of the population. In some industrial towns (though not administrative cities) the industrial proletariat was already a majority in 1900.

In the BRICS, industrial employment has grown only slightly since the 1980s, if at all, as a percentage of total employment. Non-agricultural employment has thusly tipped decisively towards services, at much lower level of GDP-per-capita. This tendency is most advanced in Brazil, where agriculture represented only around 12 percent of employment as of 2007. Since 1985, industrial employment has remained stable as a percentage of the workforce, at around 23 percent. Meanwhile, the service sector has swelled to consume around 65 percent of employment (Menezes-Filho and Luiz Scorzafave 15, chart). This phenomenon is to be expected, since “for late starters, the industrialization process tends to be more capital-intensive” (UNCTAD 93-4). In other words, and this is perhaps the crucial summary point, *the organic composition of capital is already higher in contemporary emerging economies*, so “successful industrialization in developing countries is expected to create fewer jobs in industry at any given level of income” (UNCTAD 94).

But then, to speak of even a relative stabilization of industrial

employment in the BRICS is perhaps too optimistic. One recalls the passage in Godard's *Tout va bien* wherein, after a sequence showing the various classes going about their business, a voice warns, "Under a calm surface everything is changing." Lest the implication be lost, another voice adds, "for every class." Recall that industry, as a category, includes mining, utilities and construction, as well as manufactures. Stimulated by inflows of mobile capital, attendant on financial liberalization, property markets in the BRICS have been superheating (not for the first time). This has generated a massive boom in construction, and concomitantly in construction workers. Meanwhile, manufacturing has reoriented from producing for domestic markets toward exporting to the core. In the process, manufacturing employment has stagnated or in some cases, *even shrunk*. In the developing countries as a whole, manufacturing fell in the 1990s, as a share of total employment, from 13.6 to 12.5 percent (UNCTAD 95, table). Recoveries after 2003 balance uneasily on a massive property bubble spread across many of the core countries.

In the 1990s, the rise of the sun-belts, competitive in international markets, failed to balance out the decline of the rust-belts, which had been producing for domestic markets at internationally uncompetitive prices (these regional designations, familiar from the US in the 1980s, could apply equally to any of the BRICS; see Ching Kwan Lee on China). China's manufacturing workforce was about 10 percent larger in the mid-1990s than in 2007, after reforms forced state owned enterprises (SOEs) to shed their bloated workforces (Bannister 41). "At the end of the 1990s, 4 million jobs were lost per year due to the restructuring of the SOEs" (OECD 24). A similar fate befell firms in Brazil, South Africa, and post-communist Russia, in the chaotic blowouts of IMF-led structural adjustment and shock therapy. However, it is worth pointing out that the same process of partial deindustrialization unfolded even in slowly reforming China and India. Such changes then do not seem to be

assignable to contingent shocks so much as a broader dynamic in the development of the global economic system during the current era, which allowed only firms and regions with the lowest wages and the highest levels of labor productivity to survive. It was largely winner takes all, even after 2003, when manufacturing briefly recovered from its late-1990s malaise.

Consequently, China took an outsized share of manufacturing value added (MVA). Beginning with 13 percent of developing-country MVA in 1990, China's share rose to 43.3 percent in 2010, while the next largest competitors, India and Brazil, controlled only 5 percent of MVA each (UNIDO 143, figure). China may be the new "workshop of the world" (again, only when seen from the perspective of the world, rather than that of its own class composition). But unlike England, it is impossible to imagine that all the world will soon to be made over in its image. The expansion of China has meant the ceding of territory – not only by capital in the developed countries, which happily relocated labor-intensive elements to China – but also, by other developing countries. Brazil and Mexico, like many others, saw their shares of developing-country MVA contract substantially in the face of China's growth. The outsized role played by China in international markets for manufactures sheds light on the peculiarity of India's growth trajectory, which seemed to skip industrialization altogether; instead, fast-growing firms have mostly specialized in tradable services (OECD 19).

What sorts of industrial enterprises, then, have survived the killing fields of international competition – and could they serve as an incubator from which a new workers movement might eventually spring to life? Developing countries now provide two-thirds of global manufacturing employment but only one-third of global MVA. Peripheral manufacturing firms have expanded, not only in labor-intensive industries, but more precisely, in the labor-intensive segments of sprawling global supply chains. Many

of the factories in low-income countries do not house massive quantities of fixed capital, set to work by human appendages. Production and assembly have largely been separated, globally. Stuff produced elsewhere is assembled for re-export. This technical composition must affect the character of workers' experience, their sense of the communist horizon. Is it possible for workers to read their activity as the real source of material wealth, when they know themselves to be part of a vast logistical web that escapes their – and our – understanding?

In fact, some of the BRICS have already had workers movements of the classical sort, arcing toward the party form – movements that have petered out alongside their industrialization drives, much as both history and our model would predict. Those movements had at their hearts semiskilled workers in heavy industry, particularly in automobile parts production (see Seidman 1994). The *Partido dos Trabalhadores* and the African National Congress, presently in power in Brazil and South Africa, cut their teeth in these vibrant movements, which played essential roles in deposing long-standing military dictatorships and ending apartheid.

Here it is necessary to add to the comments above, concerning the material unification of proletarians: the importance of industry in the classical workers movement was not only about unification, but also about power, the power to shut down production. That power was wielded effectively in strikes at auto plants in the 1970s and 1980s: those strikes were able to force huge blocks of fixed capital to stand idle, at great expense to capital. But such power hardly exists for many industrial proletarians today in the BRICS; its eclipse is that of the workers movements. The staggering, back-footed social democracy of associated parties measures this powerlessness with acuity.

None of these queries should be read as implying that the industrial workforce plays no role in social antagonism today, or

that the vision of a unified proletariat, its interest presented organically by the party, is now simply to be replaced by the fantasy of an internally differentiated mass subject – as if the problem of unification could simply be sublated into the shared character of difference. The key question of the political composition of the class, today, remains unanswered. Instead of a composition, there is a “composition problem” (Endnotes 47). Within the terms of that problem, the industrial proletariat (and in addition, the organized class fractions outside of industry: in education, health care, sanitation, and so on) plays a key role in struggles. Witness the Arab Spring, wherein rolling strikes played a major role in bringing down long-standing dictators. The industrial working class continues to present itself as a key minority, but one which no longer bears a universal interest. Instead, it confronts a diverse class, spread out in the vast informal sector, which encapsulates “one half to three-quarters of non-agricultural employment in developing countries” (ILO 7).

#### CODA: DIALECTICS AT A GALLOP

This is only the briefest survey of the data. Some preliminary conclusions might nonetheless be drawn. It is not clear that there are significant labor-intensive and value-productive sectors in the BRICS (or elsewhere) of the sort that accompanied the formation of the SPD in Germany or the rise of the worker’s movement in the US, nor does labor-intensive collective agriculture seem likely to play an outsized role in world history, as it once did across the global periphery.

In short, the historical conditions in which programmatism – and the preservation of capitalist production under worker control – provided the horizon for a communist or quasi-communist politics are certainly more closely matched in BRICS nations than in the capitalist core. But the dissimilarity is far greater than the

generic likeness. They seem to have moved more swiftly along the value trajectory than did emerging powers of the nineteenth and twentieth century. As the critical moment of hegemonic unraveling arrives, they have arguably passed the point in which they might either, on the one hand, take over as new hegemon of a capitalist world-system according to the Arrighian schema, or on the other, ground an antithetical state program. The dialectic, as it were, is moving faster, racing along at breakneck pace. Whether or not one finds the formulations handed down to us from the programmatist era seductive – particularly against the pathos of recent failures – it remains difficult to affirm their actuality.

We do not think it is evident what a communist transition would look like and are thus disinclined to reject possibilities out of hand. We wish only to ground our analysis in the intransigent material particulars of our historical moment rather than in any normative politics. From this standpoint, a communist critique of political economy does not particularly put the program of party organization toward the seizure of state power on offer.

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