

Pillay, Devan; Williams, Michelle

Working Paper

Rekindling the utopian imagination: Intellectual diversity and the GLU/ICDD network

Global Labour University Working Paper, No. 45

Provided in Cooperation with:

The Global Labour University (GLU)

Suggested Citation: Pillay, Devan; Williams, Michelle (2017) : Rekindling the utopian imagination: Intellectual diversity and the GLU/ICDD network, Global Labour University Working Paper, No. 45, International Labour Organization (ILO), Geneva

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/189832>

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Working Paper No. 45

May 2017



International
Labour
Office



GLU

Rekindling the Utopian imagination: intellectual diversity and the GLU/ICDD network

Devan Pillay
Michelle Williams

GLOBAL
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Contact Address

Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin

IMB - Prof. Hansjörg Herr

Badensche Str. 52

D-10825 Berlin

E-mail: glu.workingpapers@global-labour-university.org

<http://www.global-labour-university.org>

Layout: Harald Kröck

**REKINDLING THE UTOPIAN
IMAGINATION:
INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY AND
THE GLU/ICDD NETWORK**

Devan Pillay

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First published 2017

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ILO Cataloguing in Publication Data

Pillay, Devan; Williams, Michelle.

Rekindling the Utopian imagination : intellectual diversity and the GLU/ICDD network / Devan Pillay, Michelle Williams ; International Labour Office ; Global Labour University - Geneva: ILO, 2017

(Global Labour University working paper ; No. 45, ISSN: 1866-0541 ; 2194-7465 (web pdf))

International Labour Office; Global Labour University.

labour movement / collective economy / working class / Marxism / democracy facet

13.06.3

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Printed in Switzerland



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1. INTRODUCTION

A delegation of labour scholars and practitioners first came to our university, the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, in 2006, to engage with colleagues about establishing the Global Labour University on our campus. It was to be the second site after Germany, and we were all intrigued by the concept. While some of our colleagues were initially sceptical about the GLU, believing that it might be a northern imposition within the narrow confines of 20th century models that privilege formalised or established labour, corporatist social partnership and narrow workplace bargaining, we were happy to hear that some amongst the delegation had a 'Marxist' orientation and were sensitive to relations between the global North and the global South. This gave a sense of comfort to those amongst us who believed that the challenges of our time demanded a wider consideration of the totality of globalised capitalism, and its differential impacts on the world, North and South.

Indeed, as we heard more, we realised that there was indeed scope to have a more holistic perspective, that took into account not only the established working class organised in trade unions, but also informalised labour, and the broader social and environmental impacts of global capitalism. In other words, a programme that encourages a diverse range of perspectives, including both short-term 'possibilist' perspectives, and longer-term visions that sought to keep alive the 'necessity of Utopian thinking' (Turner, 1972/1980).

The success of the GLU network is underpinned by one firm principle in our relationship between university academics and officials in the trade union movement, as well as the ILO – namely intellectual and academic independence. This is not always easy, as unions and institutions are keen to further the goals they have set within their own particular, often short to medium term, frames of reference, whilst academics insist on the right to think freely, with longer horizons. In other words, not to be the instruments of either the state, corporations or civil society—yet, as progressive scholars, to remain sufficiently rooted so as to be true to their sympathies with the causes of 'working class' civil society, including that of the trade union movement, and their institutional allies such as the ILO. The other dimension of this intellectual independence lies within the academy itself: academics come from a variety of intellectual traditions and disciplines, which can be either productive or destructive for such a network. Within the GLU network there are a range of intellectual traditions from economics and the social sciences that include various Marxist, Keynesian, social democratic and syndicalist orientations. To complicate the heady mix of organisations and intellectual traditions even further, the GLU network also includes partners from the global South and global North, which brings unique dynamics that have to do with unequal histories of the respective countries, funding inequalities, unique intellectual traditions, and language issues to name just a few. It is in part thanks to our collective efforts that the plurality of institutions, intellectual traditions, interests, historical trajectories, and country

specificities that make up the GLU network have been productive and not destructive.

Indeed, the GLU and the International Centre for Development and Decent Work (ICDD) have grown with these principles firmly entrenched. It is in this spirit that we offer a perspective here that highlights the organisational and intellectual plurality of the GLU network. For GLU South Africa¹, the programme has included perspectives that go beyond traditional Marxist and Keynesian modes of thinking, which have dominated the labour movement. While the South African programme does not exclude traditional paradigms, it also opens up questions around the very growth paradigm that has underpinned a twentieth century post-war consensus amongst all modernist paradigms, even seeking out lineages with early thinkers going back to ancient times.

2. DEPARTING FROM TWENTIETH CENTURY ORTHODOXIES

As argued in Pillay (2013), during the 20th century the widespread belief was that Marx, as an enlightenment thinker, had a Promethean faith in the power of science and technology, in the progressive march to higher stages of historical development – from slavery to feudalism to capitalism, and then finally to socialism and communism. Capitalist economic growth, in this view, was a revolutionary advance over feudalism, despite its destructive pathways – but it had its own gravedigger in the working class movement, which would inevitably overthrow the system. The pain of accumulation by dispossession, turning rural peasants into an urban proletariat, would eventually yield to socialist revolution, as the urban working class became the new ruling class, to lead the struggle for socialism. This was the dominant *Leninist* (or twentieth century) version of Marxism (whether Stalinist or Trotskyist) - although it was powerfully countered by the Maoist deviation, which placed the rural peasantry at the forefront of revolution.

The other controversy was whether the proletariat would automatically develop a revolutionary consciousness during the impending capitalist crisis (from a class in itself to a class for itself); or whether such a consciousness needed to be induced from the outside, by professional revolutionaries trained in working class parties. More cautious Marxists like Rosa Luxembourge reminded the left over a century ago that Marx did not believe that capitalist crisis made socialism inevitable - barbarism was also an option (McLellan, 2007).

In the past, when capitalism went through severe crises of both profitability and legitimacy, revolutions often brought about dramatic changes. However, these were either of the reactionary kind, such as the rise of fascist barbarism, or socialist revolutions from below seeking (in principle if not in reality) the welfare

¹ For further information about the GLU South Africa programme see <http://www.global-labour-university.org/3.html>

of society in general and subordinate classes in particular. The social democratic parliamentary route also brought about more peaceful social change, the most extensive being in the Scandinavian countries after World War II. The neo-liberal counter-offensive since the late 1970s eroded much of the welfare structures introduced in these countries, although key aspects remain intact. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 Eastern European countries adopted neo-liberal agendas, along with most countries around the world. None of these 'experiments' (social democracy or state capitalism/socialism), however, truly identified the full extent of the social and natural limits to growth, which has now come to the fore. As noted before, all of these are examples of statism (Olin-Wright, 2010).

Whatever the differences, all statist alternatives converged on key articles of faith: the belief in the wonders of science and technology, which itself arose out of western modernity and means-ends rationalism (with roots in ancient Greek philosophy and the Roman-Christian belief in the domination of nature); the use of fossil fuels and natural resources as free gifts of nature; rising production (measured by increased GDP) and equitable consumption for all; and the capture of state power through a working class party and allied organisations (such as trade unions and other social forces). Of course, the social democratic parties went on to forge a Keynesian compromise between capitalism and socialism, and honed the party form into an effective electoral machine to win elections in multi-party democracies (before losing their dominance during the post-1970s neoliberal era).

The rise of "New Left" politics in the 1960s (initially in Western Europe and North America) was a reaction to both the failures of corporate capitalism in the West, and state capitalism (or statism masquerading as socialism) in Eastern Europe. It arose amidst a range of social and political upheavals, including the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Cuban revolution and subsequent missile crisis, the anti-war movement in solidarity with Vietnam, the US civil rights movement, student uprisings and a rejection of the bureaucratic, patriarchal-conservative and materialistic values of western Christian-capitalism (expressed through the hippie movement and popular culture that emphasised personal freedom).

The New Left by and large embraced a more critical, open Marxism as an alternative to the sterile and authoritarian Marxist-Leninist-Stalinism practiced in both Eastern Europe and China. This included the work of Gramsci, whose notions of workers' control through workers' councils resonated with the participatory-democratic ideas of Rick Turner in South Africa. Both had a profound influence on the South African student activists who became part of the re-emerging trade union movement during the 1970s, as well as in community organisations that became part of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and other formations in the 1980s.

Turner² was a highly popular and influential Political Science lecturer at the University of Natal in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before he was banned by the apartheid regime and later assassinated. He promoted 'workers' control' of both unions and industry, as a stepping stone towards maximum participatory democracy for society as a whole – a *society-focussed* socialist vision, as opposed to the traditional *statist* emphasis of much of the 'socialist' world at the time. His brand of open Marxism, primarily influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reasoning*, was infused with a 'transcendent' (or if you like 'spiritual') essence that believed in non-violence, universal love and the unity between inner and outer transformations.

Turner's notion of workers' democracy is captured in this quote from his seminal work *Eye of the Needle Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (the title is a biblical reference to the alleged saying of Jesus that a rich person had as much chance of going to heaven as the camel had of going through the eye of the needle):

"Workers' control is not only a means whereby I can control a specific area of my life. It is an educational process in which I can learn better to control all areas of my life and can develop both psychological and interpersonal skills in a situation of co-operation with my fellows in a common task.....participation in decision-making, whether in family, in the school, in voluntary organisations, or at work, increases the ability to participate and increases the competence on the part of the individual that is vital for balanced and autonomous development. Participation through workers' control lays the basis for love as a constant rather than as a fleeting relationship between people." (Turner, 1972/1980: 39)

In many ways he embraced the concept of revolutionary love articulated by Che Guevara:

"At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality." (1965)

Indeed, if socialist 'love' means rising above ourselves as individuals, and embracing the whole of humanity, as well as non-human nature, then it is no different to the 'spiritual' essence conveyed by religious philosophers, some of whom imagine an external god or gods as the embodiment of the totality of Love, whilst others, like the Samkhya school and the Buddha (see later), finds that capacity *within* all of us. Turner easily made connections between his Marxism and the 'spiritual' (without necessarily embracing a theism or belief in an external god).

² This short exposition is based on the 1980 edition of Turner's seminal book *The Eye of the Needle*, which includes a biographical introduction by Tony Morphet, as well as a comprehensive recent MA thesis by William Hemingway Keniston (2010).

As will be shown later, eastern and other traditional beliefs, such as that of different Native Americans (*buen vivir* or *sumak kawsay*) and Africans (*ubuntu*) inform much of the eco-socialist perspectives that converge around the solidarity economy movement, transformative politics, the degrowth movement, and considerations of happiness, well-being and localised Buddhist economics. While ecological Marxism has some differences with these perspectives, there is no Chinese Wall between them. What follows is a brief elaboration of these linkages, in order to see the connections with Marx in his writings as a caring Humanist (as opposed to the cold 'scientist' imagined by 20th century Leninism), whose theory of alienation had strong 'spiritual' meaning, and whose desire for social equality and human flourishing connected strongly with the yearnings of ancient philosophers seeking the end of human (and often animal) suffering.

3. ANCIENT LINEAGES, MODERN RE-AWAKENINGS

If alternatives to the hegemonic paradigm are to be considered, it is necessary to dig deeper into the roots of modernity, and fundamentally question some of the core beliefs of the 20th century. An ecological Marxist (or eco-socialist) perspective, which seeks to both deepen our understanding of the promises and pitfalls of modernity, as well as to build bridges with other paradigms (secular and religious) that are potentially counter-hegemonic, must of necessity engage with the insights of the philosophies of the Axial Age (around 800-200BCE) which were themselves a reaction to rising class domination and inequality during their times.

They departed from other more tribal, patriarchal and socially violent religious dogma and practice during their time, by placing emphasis on universal love, respect for all human beings and nature, social equality and social justice for all – with a strong emphasis on personal liberation from suffering, as a vital precondition for the liberation of others. Key sayings that captured this essence, later popularised by Christianity in the west, include 'Do to Others as You would have Them Do to You' and 'Love your Neighbour as Yourself' (see Armstrong, 2006).

In modern terms, these are socialist precepts with a strong pacifist bent, summed up by the notion of 'Turn the Other Cheek'. They arose out of the lament of prophets and philosophers who saw violent upheavals in their societies, brought about by the rise of private property, patriarchy, money, greed and the Ego as dominating principles – which overcame the more solidaristic modes of being previously, based on substantial social equality (akin to what Marx recognised as 'primitive communism')³. The Marxist scholar Chattopadhyaya (1970) gives a detailed account of how the Buddha learnt about social equality, non-violence

³ We are not romanticising 'indigenous' traditions and recognise that many were based on patriarchy and hierarchies of power and wealth. The point here is that there is a long tradition of solidaristic relations among humans that fundamentally differ from the possessive individualism of modern times.

and democracy from classless tribal societies in India which were by then being threatened by the class-divided kingdoms, which proceeded to plunder and subjugate them.

These philosophies were absorbed into or spawned religious movements, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – but bear little responsibility for the tribalistic, patriarchal and oppressive doctrines and practices associated with these religions through the ages (just as much as Marx bears little responsibility for the debased theory and practice of various shades of what was called Marxism during the 20th century).⁴

While Marx does warn against religion as the ‘opium of the people’, his critique was much more nuanced than that. He saw that religion was the ‘sigh of the oppressed’, or more accurately the “groaning of the labouring creature” or the “soul of a heartless world” and the “spirit of spiritless conditions” (quoted in Duchrow and Hinkelammert, 2012:244). Marx, as an atheist, did not believe that religion should be suppressed, but felt that with the rise of a Humanist atheism – where all human beings could develop to their full potential in harmony with the laws of nature (or a form of sustainable human development under communism) - it would eventually die out. In other words, the ‘spirit’ of religious spirituality would be replaced by the ‘spirit’ of atheist socialism, where alienation from the self, fellow human beings, nature, production and consumption would be overcome (Fromm, 1961). The metabolic rift between humans and nature, and by extension between humans and their individual and collective selves (who are part of nature) would be restored (Foster, 2009).

In this sense, Marx, who desired the overthrow of “all conditions in which the human is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being” (Marx, 1978 [1843]: 60; Duchrow and Hinkelammert, 2012: 245), and who believed that labour and the land (ie nature) are the only sources of value (Marx, 1981 [1894]), could be said to be advocating the restoration of the soul or the spirit in a caring world, based on social and environmental justice. His Humanist-atheistic yet ‘spiritual’ socialist vision – pivoted around human flourishing of all humankind - resonated strongly with that of the Buddha (approximately 400BCE) who drew on the rationalist-atheist Samkhya school of ‘Hindu’ Philosophy (approximately 800BCE) (Armstrong, 2006; Walters, n.d.). Indeed, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, has on a number of occasions declared that, on socio-economic matters, ‘I am a Marxist’ (Smithers, 2014).

This transcendent thinking together with more recent traditions in feminism, indigenous communities and the democratic left more broadly informs alternative pathways out of the hierarchical, patriarchal politics of the 20th century, which focussed narrowly on the state, and conformed to conventional Growth (production-consumption) treadmill thinking. Today, there is increasing recognition that alternatives, if they are to serve ALL the world’s people, and

⁴ We are not saying that any of these philosophers were perfect saints in their personal lives, but rather are referring to their ideas and the impact that the ideas have had on the world.

preserve the natural environment for current and future generations to enjoy, must be substantive and go beyond the interests of only the state and the market, the political and economic elite. It underlines the need for a *society*-focused development path, which means unleashing the power of ordinary citizens as agents of their own destiny, where the state and market are subordinate to societal (or the people's) general interests. The challenge is to build a participatory political and economic system for people in harmony with nature.

4. SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

There are a number of examples of society-focused initiatives such as food sovereignty, the solidarity economy, and worker cooperatives. To take one example, the solidarity economy emerged in Latin America in the 1990s in the search for more humanist approaches to economic activity that challenged capitalist forms of production, consumption, and finances (Williams 2014; Satgar 2014). For example, the Brazilian solidarity economy forum supports worker-owned production units for waste pickers, small scale farmers, and clothing and textile cooperatives by creating internal markets and hosting festivals. Another example is the Argentinian recovered factories' efforts to work together to create solidarity relations in production, distribution and consumption. Indeed, the solidarity across recovered factories through information sharing, financial and legal assistance, and sharing space has been an important part of the survival of the recovered factory movement in Argentina. To take another example, the ninety-year old Uralungal construction cooperative in Kerala, India has pioneered democratic decision-making and collective ownership in the construction sector. Not only has the cooperative pried open the sector, but has also used its leverage to get the state to adopt policies that favour cooperatives in state-funded infrastructural projects. In addition, as part of its commitment to transform society it has nurtured other construction cooperatives over many years to increase alternative production activities in the construction sector. Crucial in all of these activities is the central role of workers, which provides important linkages for our curriculum in the GLU programme. In this search for alternatives, the solidarity economy developed key principles of democratic self-management, redistribution, solidarity and reciprocity in which there is no predefined goal, but rather a continual process of (re)making social relations based on democratic practices, local bottom-up experiments, redistribution, solidarity, interconnections, reciprocity, and social justice.

Reflecting the transcendent thinking discussed above the solidarity economy seeks to create a new culture (in opposition to the passive individualism of consumerist culture of modernity), foster new consumer attitudes, change the way in which the financial sector is regulated, alter the way in which political power is structured and exercised, and create sustainable relations between human activity and the natural environment. Ultimately, it tries to build an ethos of reciprocity, redistribution and engaged citizenship through concrete practices.

While it seeks to move beyond capitalism, its locus of energy comes from the concrete experiences of cooperatives and community-owned initiatives in their efforts to create economic activity that places human beings—as opposed to profits—at the centre and which link up into networks of production, consumption and financial activities. For example, the South African Solidarity Economy movement has consciously worked with small-scale farmers and farm workers in the food sovereignty campaign to develop linkages between urban food consumption and cooperative forms of food production. With over 50% of the population food insecure, issues of access, production, and consumption of healthy and culturally appropriate food is central to any alternative in South Africa. The vibrancy of this initiative was demonstrated in their 2015 and 2016 food festivals which brought together over 250 people (including unionists) united in a common effort to create food sovereignty in South Africa through worker-owned agro-ecological production. These experiences also teach us what many of the scholars discussed above theorized, namely that human development can happen in solidarity with individual aspirations, community rootedness, and nature. The role of the state is also crucial in providing financial support and access to markets, developing favourable policies, and creating conditions for solidarity economy market relations to flourish.

To summarise, the solidarity economy seeks to transcend capitalism through creating new ways of engaging economic activity. This vision requires solidarity among members of individual enterprises, among enterprises and initiatives, and between them and the community. The solidary economy also promotes collective ownership, in order to ensure that assets and resources benefit everyone within a given enterprise and the community at large. Collective ownership also implies self-management, which gives members (women and men) the power to engage in decision-making on an equal basis, and ensure accountability and responsibility. Self-management requires on-going education and training. Control of capital is a further defining feature that helps to secure benefits for individual enterprises, the wider solidarity economy, and the community. It requires developing mechanisms to build up capital from below and subordinating it to democratic control so that the vision, values and principles of the solidarity economy informs lending practices.

Obviously, the solidarity economy is not just a structuralist approach to change, but is also deeply embedded in human relations. Thus human-centred values are vital in promoting human wellbeing, cooperation, trust, reciprocity, and redistribution as well as an ethic of social justice. Elements of the solidarity economy are practised, amongst many other places, in Brazil, North Hessen in Germany, Quebec in Canada, Kerala in India, Mondragon in Spain, and Emilio Romagno and Trentino in Italy. One of the important strengths of the GLU programme at Wits is the way in which it introduces alternatives into trade union curricula. For example, in the certificate course for trade unionists, there is a dedicated module on alternatives that pushes unions to think beyond their shop floor issues to include the reproduction of families, communities, and society through alternative forms of production. All these experiments seek to develop

alternative economic relations that subordinate the economy to social needs. Some believe in delinking from the capitalist market; others see the market as the only way to survive under current conditions, but retain the goal of creating a different economy and society. All are looking to more humanist approaches to human existence. The GLU programme believes unions have a vital role to play in this process, and that trade unionists must be exposed to these alternatives.

5. CONCLUSION

This short reflection on the challenges facing the working class in general, and the labour movement in particular, which challenges dominant 20th century paradigms and points to alternatives developing in the 21st century, is a tribute to the intellectual diversity encouraged by the GLU and ICDD. For example, in recent years members in the GLU network have published on issues of inequality: a special issue journal in the *Global Labour Journal* (2015 edited by Michelle Williams) looks at transformative unionism and innovative campaigns challenging inequality and in 2016 Alex Gallas, Hansjoerg Herr, Frank Hoffer, and Christoph Scherrer edited a volume, *Combating Inequality: the Global North and South* (Routledge 2016) that takes up the issue of causes of and challenges to inequality.

Moreover, the range of issues our students choose to study demonstrates the relevance of thinking about alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism: unions and ecological issues, women and mining, participatory democracy within unions, food sovereignty initiatives, social protection and unions, relation between parties and unions, corporate control of the food economy, and so on. The GLU and ICDD are unique in the world and the success of the programmes is a modest, but nonetheless important part of building a humanist world in which workers and their organisations have a fair share of the fruits of their labour. It took vision, perseverance, and organisational acumen to get such a complex network to take root.

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About the authors

Devan Pillay is Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand, and a former chairperson of the GLU programme at Wits. A former trade unionist, labour writer and editor, and government official, he co-edits the *New South African Review* (Wits University Press), and co-edited *Labour and the Challenges of Globalisation* (Pluto), and a special GLU edition of *Labour, Capital & Society*. He has published widely on labour, politics, globalisation, media and civil society.

Michelle Williams is Associate Professor in Sociology at Wits University and is the Chairperson of the Global Labour University Programme, also at Wits. Her books include *The Roots of Participatory Democracy: Democratic Communists in South Africa and Kerala*; *The End of the Developmental State?*; *Marxisms in the 21st Century*; *South Africa and India: Shaping the Global South*; and *Labour in the Global South*.

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Global Labour University
c/o Bureau for Workers' Activities
International Labour Office
Route des Morillons 4
CH- 1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

www.global-labour-university.org

glu.workingpapers@global-labour-university.org

ISSN 1866-0541