Interview - Ronaldo Munck

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Ronaldo Munck completed his PhD in political sociology at the University of Essex in 1976. Since then he has developed a broad set of overlapping interests under the general rubric of political sociology and more recently the globalisation problematic.

His work on Latin America has been a constant from his first book*Politics and Dependency in the Third World: the Case of Latin America* (1984), which was a development of the dependency perspective in the field of political economy. This strand of work culminated in *Rethinking Latin America: Development, Hegemony and Social Transformation* (2013), which brought a Gramscian perspective to bear on Latin American history. Another strand has been the sociology of work and labour movements from a broad comparative orientation; an early statement of a new field then emerging was *The New International Labour Studies* (1988). This strand of work culminates with the widely cited *Labour and Globalisation: The New 'Great Transformation'* (2002). The impact of globalisation on his work followed a period in South Africa in the mid-1990s, leading to a research programme that resulted in *Globalisation and Social Exclusion: A Transformationalist Perspective* (2005) and *Globalisation and Contestation: The Great Counter-Movement* (2006), both influenced by Karl Polanyi's double movement thesis and seeking to foreground the importance of agency.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in your field?

Well, we certainly live in interesting times! I find it hard to answer, as my 'field' is quite broad, but if pushed I would say I have been influenced since the 1970s by:

- Feminism, which has transformed the way we see the world, what questions we ask, and what sort of future we might aspire to. Labour studies can never again ignore that the working class has two sexes, that the household is as crucial as the factory, and that production is not possible without reproduction;
- Politics of space as practiced by economic geographers in labour studies, which opens up the crucial spatial component of social struggles and brings to bear exciting concepts, such as 'jumping scales', as labour may turn from local to transnational struggles;
- Post colonialism took me into the cultural domain too often ignored in political economy and also foregrounded the always-present importance of the coloniality of power, even if I have found the arguments and the gurus a bit self-referential at times.

But in myself there is always an ongoing debate between the two Karl's: Marx and Polanyi. For a long time, Marxism made sense to understand development and labour, but, of course, like everyone else, I was influenced by the poststructuralist arguments and the framework became less compelling. Then Polanyi came to me in the 1990s with a strong sense that there was always a social counter-movement afoot to contest the self-regulating market; the inspired notion of the double movement was a breath of fresh air. Now I am going back to Marx, conscious that he cannot be blamed for the many faults of Marxism. But I believe the two Karl's are complementary.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I am a child of 1968, even though that year I was still at school! But then in Argentina, our 1968 happened in 1969, with the worker/student uprising of the Cordobazo, after which all changed. In 1969, Onganía closed the University of Buenos Aires and I was lucky to get to the University of Essex in the UK, which was then a hotbed of critical sociology: David Lockwood, Simon Clarke, Ernesto Laclau, Ted Benton, Michael Mann, and many others. When the Pinochet coup in Chile happened in 1973, I lost any inhibitions I might have had about the use of force by the oppressed to fight the might of dictatorship and imperialism. Studies completed, I found myself in Belfast in the mid-1970s, living, writing on, and engaging with the most effective revolutionary nationalist offensive in the West. By the early 1990s, I had relocated to South Africa through my friends in the independent labour movement there. Eventually I ended up back in the Irish capital Dublin, where I look forward to Sinn Féin in government north and south as a fitting tribute for the centenary of those who chose to take on the British Empire in the 1916 Easter rising.

It would be fair to say what has mainly influenced my thinking has been the politics of the real world and not academic debates.

Despite the huge increase in the size of the working class globally over the latter part of the 20th Century, the power of organized labour has been hit hard by the impacts of neoliberal restructuring. Can we see any signs of labour movement revitalization today?

Well, you mention the quantitative increase in the size of the global working class than many commentators don't! I believe that, in recent years, trade unions in most parts of the world have begun to recover from the impact of neoliberalism and its unregulated market approach. This has occurred at peak level with the formation of a unified trade union confederation as a result of the end of the Cold War. The old International Trade Secretariats also become energised as the new World Councils, which organise internationally across a given sector. At a national level, there has been a certain resurgence by trade unions in some regions such as in Latin America, while in the US there was a marked political radicalization at peak level. The growing academic literature on trade union revitalization has found evidence transnationally of advances in key areas of activity such as the organising of new sectors of workers, greater political activity, the reform of trade union structure, building of coalitions, and, not least, an increase in international solidarity activity. I would argue that we are at the start of a phase when trade unionism will yet again be reconfigured and revitalized to meet the new conditions it faces.

Labour has always been slow to adapt to capital's mutations and crises. That there has been a time lag of 25 years between the neoliberal capitalist offensive and labour's re-composition is not surprising and fits the pattern of 19th and 20th century waves of labour disintegration and re-composition. This cyclical nature of labour-capital relations seems to have been ignored by analysts circa 2000, who perhaps reflected the mood at the time that US capitalism had really broken the cyclical nature of capitalism. Thus Castells argued in the mid-1990s that "The labour movement seems to be historically superseded". This statement ignored the reality that labour is a social movement. A more long-term view of the last century would show that trade unions have not only endured, but that they have also been key in making society more democratic and more respectful of human rights. That is no mean achievement, given the brutality of the neoliberal counter-revolution.

Precarious and informal conditions of work, which used to be primarily limited to 'developing' countries, are becoming more common in the 'developed' countries of Europe. Do you think this tendency is here to stay, or are the features of a North-South divide likely to remain profound?

Well, you can have a profound North/South divide and also see a generalising of tendencies once thought of as pertaining to the Third World.

'Brasilianisation' is meant to capture that precarity which is now spreading across the world. I have just completed a comparative project with Swedish, Turkish, and South African colleagues on precisely this element, resulting in the book *Migration, Precarity and Global Governance*. As an aside, I might mention that, when addressing a European trade union audience on this topic, they did not see what was wrong with Brasilianisation insofar as its economy seemed to be industrialising and theirs was de-industrialising!

The term *precariat* is meant to capture the emergence of a new precarious global worker through migration in an age of recession (see my critique from a Southern perspective). They are the cutting edge of neoliberal capitalism's offensive against labour standards. Of course, trade unions and other social movements can respond in different ways. They may incorporate these workers into their organisations and press for the levelling-up of labour standards as against the 'race to the bottom' of neoliberalism or, conversely, they may go along with the mainstream racist and xenophobic discourse and actively lead the exclusionary offensive in the workplace. However, precariousness (as in informalisation or irregularisation) should not be understood in a simple binary opposition to a mythical stable-formal-regular worker status, but rather as a process with many gradations and dimensions affecting all workers.

The long period of neoliberal globalisation, and its current unwinding under the weight of its own contradictions, has undoubtedly accentuated the insecurity associated with capitalist development. These fissiparous tendencies are now clearly present in the once-secure capitalist heartlands of the West, when once they were assumed to be an innate 'Third World' condition where 'marginality' rather than incorporation prevailed. Yet there is something profoundly Eurocentric in a category which still sees the old proletariat as the norm and now seeks to equate the flexi-time European IT professional with the conditions of the 'wretched of the earth' in the South's mega-cities. There is still a qualitative difference, in terms of life chances, between those living in the periphery and those in the core capitalist countries, albeit in crisis and with degraded welfare states. In brief, while tendencies towards 'precarisation' are undoubtedly global, we are a long way from the creation of a new global precariat.

Your recent book *Rethinking Latin America* provides a reading of Latin American history framed by key Gramscian concepts such as 'hegemony', 'passive revolution', and the 'national-popular'. What are the main insights that such a perspective provides in comparison to other interpretations?

For the purposes of rethinking development in Latin America, I decided to return to a quite basic Marxist understanding of capitalism as a relation between capitalists and free-wage laborers in which competition spurs technical progress and capital accumulation. Our attention needs to be focused on the formation of and struggle among social classes leading to the development of specific relations of production. Without entering this "hidden abode" of production and class formation, development can only be reduced to a few quantitative indicators of sometimes dubious validity. While I would not, of course, entertain any ethnocentric stance in regard to development, I would posit that there is only one capitalist mode of production, thus rejecting the search for an "underdeveloped" capitalism, whatever that might mean. Despite its external origins, capitalist development in Latin America needs to be analyzed in endogenous terms – that is to say, in terms of its own dynamic – rather than as a reflection of a perpetually exogenous, or external, phenomena such as a "global system" somehow constraining national development.

Hegemony, my second guiding term, is closely associated with the political philosophy of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, but he was not, contrary to popular belief, its creator. Nor was it designed to act as a bridge beyond revolutionary Marxism to some form of cultural reformism as some of its modern-day proponents seem to assume. Rather, in its original Russian rendering (*gegemoniya*), it was very much a part of the discourse of the Russian Revolution, designed to theorize the role of the working class in what was acknowledged to be a bourgeois revolution. Gramsci was very much aware of these debates, but hegemony in the Gramscian sense must also be understood as an ethical and strategic concept that sought to articulate a coherent and consensual alternative to capitalist rule across the oppressed classes; in his era, of course the proletariat and the peasantry, but today it could be extended more widely across the subaltern classes as a whole. It not only places a strong focus on the "problem of hegemony" that has bedeviled the dominant classes since independence, but also acts as a theoretical and political framework for the awakening of the subaltern and their struggle to forge an alternative world vision to that of dependent development.

Social transformation, my third framing concept, is a more recent term, although its origins lie in the early twentieth century opposition between revolution and reform, and the attempts made to bridge the gap. While this binary opposition had argued that the system could either be overthrown or subject to piecemeal reform, there was, arguably, a third option of pursuing "revolutionary reforms", which could act as a framework for broader social transformation. We can also conceive of molecular changes in society that add up to a genuine process of social

transformation over time, a qualitative shift in terms of social development. We can think of urbanization, the information revolution, and changes in gender relations as transformative of society as a whole. Incremental social change can become, in specific conditions, a step-change in the way societies are organized. Seemingly separate and even piecemeal changes can create a paradigm for social change through which social relations are reconfigured.

My own approach to social transformation is very much shaped by time spent in South Africa before and after the transition beyond apartheid. The social transformation optic was, in part, at least for some, a way of avoiding the language of revolution, but it also became a paradigm for understanding and effecting change with considerable purchase. Its emphasis was and is, to some extent, holistic, moving beyond the artificial boundaries of academic disciplines and giving social change a strongly dynamic emphasis. It is driven by a commitment to empowerment of those who are socially excluded or disadvantaged in any way. The social transformation perspective has at its core an emphasis on not only the reproduction but also the contestation of the social relations of production. It emphasizes how that complex ensemble is articulated across the social formation, what factors assist it, and which might impede it. The language of transformation seeks to be forward-looking and emphasizes the benefits to all sectors of key elements, such as democratization in all its facets, which amounts to much more than a zero-sum game. While it does not eschew politics, it is not centred on it to the exclusion of all other elements of state power. It could be called a radical democratic perspective open to a socialist outcome.

Argentine by birth, you have lived and worked in numerous countries, including South Africa and Ireland. How has this impacted upon your thinking, and do you think that Eurocentrism continues to be a distorting factor in the social sciences?

Well, an interesting question as I have lived it, but not really thought about it! Being a perpetual migrant does tune you in to border thinking. Having multiple identities yourself means you do not seek to reduce others to one essential category. It probably makes you a natural comparativist, as you do not have any innate national understanding of the order of things. Having languages means you can read and understand in different cultures. Being a hybrid is good for social science!

Now as to Eurocentrism, yes, of course it's all pervasive, and it is even in so-called progressive thinkers. You can never understand Europe, let alone the rest of the world, from a Eurocentric angle. The particular issue I have engaged in was around the notion of global civil society, which is so Eurocentric in assuming the rest of the world behaves like this or should. I got into a lot of trouble at an international conference on global civil society when I argued that it was a Eurocentric term and suggested that Al-Qaida could be seen to be part of global civil society as much as Amnesty International, if shorn of its normative intent.

For many years, there has been a tension in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COASTU) between their political affiliation and the economic role they play for their members. Does the recent expulsion of the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) from COASTU represent these tensions coming to a head?

Yes, for sure, but the picture is complicated. For me, there was a defining moment in August 2012 when a conflict broke out at the Lonmin mines in Marikana (Rustenburg) involving, of course, the company, but also the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the newly emerging Association of Mineworkers and Construction Unions (AMCU), as well as local villagers and migrant workers. Whereas in the past all the miners were migrants and most were unskilled, now there was considerable local employment, and post-apartheid black workers occupy all grades and sometimes play a management role. The close and natural cohesion of the pre-1994 days was gone, and collective identity had various fissures. The events themselves are now fairly clear, even if responsibility for some actions is not. The police, backed by special commandos, ordered a group of striking workers off a hill where they had gathered, and in the ensuing conflict, 34 miners were killed and 78 injured. The miners were portrayed as primitive, with a belief in *muti* (traditional medicine) to ward off bullets. The workers, the mining community, and eventually most of South Africa recognised it as a massacre, plain and simple.

The new miners' union AMCU emerged as a serious challenge to the NUM, now widely seen as a conservative force by many miners. Labour legislation in South Africa favours big unions and discourages pluralism, so its emergence reflects clear social and political unrest. AMCU made considerable inroads in the informal settlements, and began to portray the NUM members as a labour aristocracy. While many Lonmin miners were fully proletarianised, there were many who kept roots in their village of origin. But Marikana is about a lot more than just migrant workers, although that remains a core issue. A nationalist, even socialist government allowed a multinational company to massacre workers. The NUM now stood accused of sweetheart unionism and, worse, direct collusion in this massacre. An alternative trade union force has emerged and appears to be growing. For COSATU and the mainstream ANC affiliated trade unions, there truly was a 'Marikana moment' when they began to reflect on how things had changed since 1994. Much work now needs to be done to organise across the growing informal sector and create alliances backing broad hegemonic alternatives to overcome divisions and despondency.

Most observers agree that the COSATU may still have the capacity to broaden its membership and regain its original social movement orientation. In a context of growing unemployment and informalization, the unions will face an increasing crisis of representation unless they return to their previous orientation. The Marikana moment may represent a turning point, a wake-up call, showing that 'business as usual' is simply not an option. In the context of a labour movement renewal, a commitment to the rights of migrant workers would be a key plank. South Africa's labour movement was built on and by migrant labour, and unless we are to see a repeat of the dreadful pogroms of 2008, migrant workers will need to be part of this renewal process.

In *Marx @ 2000*, you critically assessed the record of Marxism at the turn of the century, a period when Marxism was still reeling from the collapse of the USSR. In the wholly different context of global capitalist crisis today, is the relevancy of Marxism more obvious?

I'm glad you asked me this, as I am currently on a six-month research sabbatical precisely to 'update' this text. This one has had a strange life. Published in 1999, I asked the publisher some years on how it has going and they said 'Not so good'. When I asked why, they said 'The usual reasons', which I took to mean the unfashionability of Marx. But, strangely, it had been translated into Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, and about five other languages. There was a bit of incongruence there which I still have not yet explained to myself. Anyway, they have now asked me for a new edition to be released in all possible formats all over the world, so that goes to show things change.

While I am still just getting into this project to write *Marx 2020* (the new edition), I already know it will be very different from my last attempt. There will be a chapter on religion, one of my own personal blind spots, but it will also not see the salvation of the Marxist project to lie with postmodernism as *Marx @ 2000* argued, more or less. It seems quite clear to me that the 2008-09 global capitalist crisis more or less reinstates the classic Marxist analysis and project. It is also clear that Marx himself (never mind Engels and all the epigones) never subscribed to the crass caricature we call Marxism. A Marx for today is worth thinking about. The stakes are high: capitalism as presently constituted really does not have a sustainable future, and we need to think of an alternative.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of political economy and international relations?

Well, to be honest, I do not think there is much an 'early career' scholar could learn from someone who went through the process in the 1970s. They certainly would not have a PhD supervisor who only commented outside the viva room that it was 'OK', as I did! The research training today is much more professionalised. Have we lost something? Maybe a bit of freedom and creativity? What I would say if pressed would be: stick to your own ideas, as your interests and the professors' are not the same. Then build up your personal, professional, and political networks; they are invaluable. You will have to compromise, but know what you stand for and don't let anyone take it away!

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This Interview was conducted by Laurence Goodchild. Laurence is a Deputy Features Editor of E-IR.