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Moral Matters: De-Romanticising Worker Agency and Charting Future Directions for Labour Geography

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Abstract

The rise of labour geography over the last 20 years has ensured that labour politics, worker rights and employment-related struggles have remained strong themes in economic geography. This article provides an updated review of labour geography's development, charting its expansion from an early focus on organised spatial 'resistance' at a range of scales, to a more varied project incorporating a wider range of analytical and empirical inquiries. Despite this progression the paper suggests that work is still needed to address a gap in moral considerations within labour geography as a whole. Specifically, a moral economy approach is offered as a means of explaining the decision-making processes/rationales behind worker actions in the context of particular struggles. This includes a necessary focus on less celebratory, ethical or successful forms of coping with labour market challenges on the part of workers than have typically been discussed in the case studies of labour geography.

Introduction

As a project labour geography has grown steadily over the last two decades, gaining value as a sub-discipline both of and for the interests of workers (Herod 1997, 2001a). Stemming in the main from the pioneering work by Herod (ibid), labour geography's early appeal came from advocating analytic primacy to workers as active agents capable of shaping economic space and the geographies of capitalism. Herod's contribution was to encourage a conceptual shift in understandings of how economic space is actively produced, arguing for a positive role for workers as negotiators – and at times militant protagonists – who utilise collective power to enhance their working lives (Bergene et al. 2010). This, it was argued, marked a conceptual shift from mapping capital-centric 'geographies of labour' to 'new labour geographies'. In recasting situs of conflict and struggle as opportunities for workers to use space and scale to their advantage, 'new' labour geography developed an early appeal (particularly to those on the Left) as a sub-discipline offering optimism for the worker cause.

Since its initial growth phase labour geography has developed several new analytic and thematic canons which have undoubtedly enhanced the contribution of the project to geography and other social science disciplines. These developments notwithstanding, several long-standing criticisms of the project remain intact (Castree 2007). This article focuses on one theoretical gap in particular: the lack of consideration for ethical and moral dimensions in the analysis of worker struggles. Past geographic engagements with morality have explored notions of justice and the ethical and political

import of geographical research on wider society (Barnett 2010; Cloke 2002), the geographies of 'caringscapes' (Popke 2012) and research into ethical consumption (e.g. 'caring from a distance'; Goss 2004; Goodman 2004; Smith 1998). However, to date few contributors have made a concerted effort to integrate moral questions within labour geography (Rogaly and Quershi 2014). This is unfortunate, for as Castree (2007) notes, 'moral geographies matter because they are the ethical basis for all worker solidarity and division, at whatever geographical scale happens to interest us' (pp. 860).

This article reiterates the need for a moral focus in labour geography, making the case for greater engagement with the concept of 'moral economy'. Moral economy is here offered as a means of connecting worker practice to moral–political norms and sentiments formed by workers primarily outside of work in the wider community or societal level. In encouraging this approach the article raises questions and suggests links between moral/ethical concerns and worker actions. As part of this discussion the article also explores whether or not worker agency is necessarily purposive or deliberate in nature. The article proceeds as follows. The opening section provides a short 'state of the field' update on the labour geography project, reviewing both past and evolving tracts of work. The subsequent section then focuses on the issue of a 'missing' moral dimension in labour geography. Theories relating to moral economy are then offered as a means of integrating a moral analytic framework within the project.

The Evolution of New Labour Geography

Building on earlier reviews (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010; Herod 2010; Lier 2007), it is worth recounting a brief evolution of labour geography's and emerging tracts within the project. The initial thrust of labour geography focussed, in the main, on collective forms of action and the efficacy of unions as conduits for social change. Through this medium workers were shown as ready and able to generate 'spatial fixes' in their own interests and image, rather than the interests of capital[1] (Harvey 1982). Economic geographers thus began by focussing on union action as mediated at a range of spatial scales appropriate to particular struggles and contextual objectives, including investigations into (local) strikes at Just-In-Time (JIT) production points (Herod, 2001b; Holmes, 2004), the impact of union-backed rules on the geography of work, and the success of multi-national campaigning orchestrated across a truly global scale (Aguiar and Ryan 2009; Castree 2000; Fairbrother et al. 2007; Herod 2001b; Savage 2006). In a past review Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) surmise this body of work as the 'early foundations' of the labour geography project, marked by a tendency to recount the

[1] Drawing on the work of Harvey (1982), a 'spatial fix' for capital refers to those arrangements which help firms overcome inherent difficulties and barriers to accumulation within locations (e.g. this may include intangible features such as locating in countries with lenient labour laws, to the presence of physical features such as transport infrastructure). As Herod notes 'herein lies a source of contradiction and (potential) struggle, for workers may have very different geographical visions with regard to how the economic landscape should look and function than do capitalists, and may need very different types of landscapes in order to facilitate their own social and biological reproduction on a daily, generational, or any other basis' (Herod 2001a, pp 25).

'upscaling' of labour agency from the local level to higher scalar resolutions (see Table 1[2]; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010).

Notwithstanding its early appeal and uptake, initial critiques of the project drew attention to the institutional focus on unions and organised forms of action, together with the somewhat under-developed explanations of what was meant by worker agency as a theoretical concept (Castree 2007; Lier 2007). Added to this, the accent on apparent 'success stories' often rooted in production cases in the Global North led to calls for both analytical and empirical developments in labour geography. Several such concerns were addressed during what Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) describe as a further 'broadening out phase', through which geographers demonstrated a willingness to address additional sectors (e.g. low-paid service and public sector work) coupled with the production work staples first tackled (see Aguiar and Herod 2006; Savage 2006; Walsh 2000; Wills 2005). Further contributions also expanded the analytic terrain covered by labour geography by focussing on worker agency based in the (social) reproductive sphere, including attention on consumer-based protest campaigns (e.g. see Johns and Vural 2000; Silvey 2004), community unionism (Lier and Stokke 2006; Wills 2001) and protests against state cutbacks and amenity closures within local labour market control regimes (Helms and Cumbers 2006).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

This tract of work has continued to grow, and in doing so has helped to redress the noted under-theorisation of agency. For example Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010), as well as Peck (2013), encouraged a relational understanding of worker agency linked to places (i.e. as sites in which workers are embedded) and the structures workers necessarily encounter. In response to other criticisms – namely the lack of focus on worker mobility – the project also witnessed an increased focus on the role and agency of migrant workers in the context of discrete labour market structures (Gialis and Herod 2014; Mitchell 2011; Rogaly 2009) and the work experiences of those based in specific nodes in Global Production Networks/ Global Value Chains (GPNs/GVCs) (Carswell and De Neve 2013; Coe 2015; Lund-Thomsen 2013). As part of this development further progress was also made developing a holistic framework for incorporating worker lives outside of workplace: one which stresses connections between the worlds of work, the reproductive sphere and other sites which feed the coproduction of worker identities (see Cumbers et al. 2010; James and Vira 2012).

As noted in prior reviews, labour geographers have increasingly made space to appreciate those more subtle acts of worker agency which stop short of formally contesting power relations (Coe and

[2] Although these phases are presented in consecutive order in Table 1, it is acknowledged that these approaches have evolved in an overlapping manner in practice.

Jordhus-Lier 2010; Cumbers et al. 2010; Scott 1985). This case is perhaps best illustrated by works which have drawn on Cindi Katz's '3 R's' approach to understanding worker agency (essentially adding 'resilience' and 'reworking' forms of coping to 'resistance' acts which formally contest; see Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010; Cumbers et al. 2010; Gialis and Herod 2014; which draw on Katz 2004). These approaches are ostensibly similar, although resilience is best described as (small) autonomous acts of getting by and obtaining needed resources; whereas reworking approaches are geared to progressively altering (i.e. 'reworking') difficult conditions. In Compass Rogaly (2009) has also surmised agency as those acts intended and/or practiced by workers in their own interests and/or the interests of others. Such understandings have helped labour geographers to better grasp and articulate different forms of coping, although the onus on functionality in worker coping is potentially problematic in this instance. Specifically the focus on constructive action on the part of workers implies from the outset that agency should be viewed akin to strategies which are purposive[3].

Alongside these developments several contributors have also sought to integrate a labour process theory (LPT) approach to the geographic analysis of worker struggles (see Table 1; Rainnie et al. 2010; Bridi 2013; Neethi 2012). This uptake has developed somewhat intermittently (e.g. see Gough 2004), although the integration of labour process perspectives in the now extensive analysis of GVCs/GPNs by a range of scholars, including labour geographers, may be indicative of longer-term engagements with LPT (see Newsome et al. 2015). Drawing on Marx, LPT initially evolved in response to Harry Braverman's deskilling thesis (Braverman 1974), and soon grew to incorporate a broad corpus of work geared to investigating workplace control, deskilling and worker 'resistance' to a range of control practices deployed at the point of production (see Thompson and Smith 2001). Like much of this initial work, labour geographers utilising LPT have used case studies to explore how workers interact, survive and (at times) challenge structures of control in local labour markets and the spaces in which work takes place (e.g. see Bridi 2013[4]; Sportel 2013; Neethi 2012; Hastings and MacKinnon forthcoming).

Separate from this approach, Featherstone and Griffin (2016) have also encouraged a merged approach which links both labour geography and labour history. This approach draws inspiration from E.P Thompson's 'history from below' school and the works of Raymond Williams (see *The Long Revolution*, Williams 1961; see also Featherstone 2008; Griffin 2015; Cumbers et al. 2010). Engagements in this field allow for the teasing out of multiple political agencies hidden within class development – viewed, crucially, as processes 'from below' – which emphasise the active role of workers in making their own history (Thompson 1963). Drawing on Thompson and the work of Jim

[3] It is possible that functionalist understandings of worker agency as deliberate and strategic may have encouraged labour geography towards its early focus on worker success stories.

[4] Bridi (2013) has shown how gameplay in the labour process may be utilised to better cope with tight control regimes in the case of tobacco agro-spaces in North America.

Phillips (2012), Crossan et al. (2016) have similarly argued the case for a moral economy framework as a means to explain and explore processes of community formation linked to industrial disputes in Glasgow and North Lanarkshire. Notably, the conflicts in these cases were cast in direct response to violations of an established moral economy geared to maintaining the voice and financial stability of workers in these areas[5]. Featherstone (2008) has also offered further theoretical artillery through the use of subaltern theories to show how labour strategies and identities may be forged through complex, dynamic and spatially stretched 'sharings' of knowledge[6].

Despite this evident progress in the evolution of labour geography the project has arguably made less progress addressing certain points of concern. Of the multiple issues raised by Castree (2007), perhaps the greatest remain the under-developed understanding of agency itself, a lack of sustained engagement with state and regulatory bodies within case studies and a less than adequate commitment to uncovering the moral geographies implicit to worker struggles and the broader objectives of labour geography (ibid). In encouragement of a moral turn in the project, the rest of the discussion focuses on why labour geography has underplayed moral/ethical concerns to date, before offering some suggestions to redress this.

THE MORAL ORIGINS OF LABOUR GEOGRAPHY

In order to explain the under-engagement with ethical and moral concerns, it is worth recounting the initial roots of labour geography. Drawing on a critical Marxist tradition, the project has always operated on the premise that conflict and compromise are necessary features of the geographies of capitalism. The core belief of labour geography – that workers can/do combat the provocations of capital through spatial agency – marks the project with a clear and axiomatic moral objective which makes the underdevelopment of moral issues all the more perplexing. Indeed, it is perhaps the fact that moral concerns operate as *raison d'etre* for the project that a fuller engagement with agentic and moral theorising has been slow to emerge. Bearing in mind labour geography's connections to political and economic geography - subfields which recognise the multifaceted dilemmas behind and implications of actor choices - it remains puzzling that more engagement at the interface of moral and political economy has not taken place (Brook et al., 2016; Sayer 2000). A further explanation may be that moral and ethical concerns have tended to receive greater attention in cultural and post-structural

[5] Based on Phillips' book *Collieries, communities and the miners' strike in Scotland*, a moral economy of the coalfields is understood to have revolved around two core tenets: that changes to the coalfields industry should require agreement from the workforce, and that economic security should be protected (specifically pits should only close if miners could secure employment on comparable terms elsewhere). According to this logic, labour disputes/strikes are understood to have resulted from violations of this code.

[6] In doing so Featherstone has shown how mutinous conspiracies were forged through shared discourse between sailors from disparate locations (e.g. ranging from Jamaica to Ireland) in the late 18th century off the Cape of Good Hope (ibid, pp. 101– 102). This contrasts with simplistic understandings of identity formation and the spread of knowledge as dictated from on high, offering an indication of the complexities involved in generating both cleavages and solidarities which underpin worker praxis.

academic accounts (Bolton and Laaser 2013: 510), approaches which contributed little to the evolution of labour geography.

Past ethical inquiries in human geography more widely have included, to name but three tracts, a focus on the ethical and political import of geographical research across society (Cloke 2002), the geographies of 'caringscapes'[7] (Popke 2012) and research into ethical consumption (Goodman 2004; Goss 2004; Smith 1998). Limited engagements with this work in labour and economic geography more broadly may be linked to a common ethical focus on consumption (i.e. rather than production) geographies, although the same cannot be said of work across the moral-economy spectrum, which offers multiple possible benefits to labour geography. Such an approach is also encouraged by Bolton and Laaser (2013), who usefully synthesise an analytic framework on moral economy as a means of approaching 'critical concerns for the workings of an increasingly disconnected capitalism, its inherent tendencies to treat labour as a 'fictitious commodity' and the impact this has on the well-being of individuals and wider society' (ibid: 508; see also Castree et al. 2004). These intentions have a strong resemblance to labour geography's purposed mission to explore the political struggles waged on behalf of labour amid varied structural constraints.

Moral Economy and Labour Geography

Bolton and Laaser (2013) surmise the work of Polanyi, Thompson and Sayer in formulating a workable analytic moral–political economy framework of use in workplace research. Of these scholars, it is Sayer's work which offers the most accessible definition of moral economy as a framework geared to exploring '…the ways in which economic activities, in the broad sense, are influenced by moral–political norms and sentiments, and how, conversely, those norms are compromised by economic forces' (Sayer, 2000, pp 80). This definition notwithstanding, Polanyi, Thompson (1971, 1993) and Sayer (2000, 2006, 2007, 2011) are seen to bring different contributions to debates on moral economy. Thus, Polanyi's work is seen as important in capturing the tensions between a stable, moral and human society, and the economic practices of self-regulating markets. The value of this (admittedly binary) interpretation of moral concerns in capitalist systems is found in exposing the tension between moral societies on the one hand, and the contradictory logics of capital on the other. Like much of the work which labour geographers have railed against, this account may be seen to emphasise the vulnerability of workers, and in doing so underplays the ability of workers to act and alter their situations. In Polanyi's account it is typically the state, not workers, which reigns in worker exploitation (Bolton and Laaser 2013).

[7] Drawing on feminine understandings of an ethics of care, Popke distinguishes such a perspective as 'more than simply a social relation with moral or ethical dimensions', but also 'the basis for an alternative ethical standpoint, with implications for how we view traditional notions of citizenship and politics'. (Popke 2012: 506).

Thompson and Sayer are introduced as a means of showcasing labour's own capacity to flourish in concert in spite of contradictory logics and challenges presented by capital (i.e. and evident structural constraints). As with the Making of the English Working Class, Thompson's focus on a moral–political economy (Thompson 1971) helps to abstract generalisable community cultures driven 'from below', demonstrably associated with moral codes, norms and actions key to explaining worker behaviour[8]. Thompson demonstrates this classically in the case of food riots in 18th century England, where a rise in bread prices drew resistance from a peasant class outraged at violations to their (morally entitled) right to eat. In defiance of imbalanced power asymmetries which workers must accommodate, Thompson's moral economy stresses the active role of workers in constructing and upholding the accepted moral norms and customs (Crossan et al. 2016 similarly discuss the role of moral economy discourse in shaping community practices[9]). Despite these virtues, Thompson's work is arguably guilty of romanticising pre-industrial times and worker agencies, and accordingly Bolton and Laaser present Sayer's concept of 'lay morality' as a last means to mobilising amoral economy approach to workplace analysis. Rather than focussing explicitly on higher scaled community norms and values, lay morality incorporates an individual focus to better explain worker judgements. As noted by Bolton and Laaser (2013):

'The notion of lay morality takes an analytical leap further in the way it embodies the practical and instrumental responses of people to given situations, not only as a community as portrayed in E.P. Thompson's account, but also as individuals so that care and concern, misery and merriment, bitching and bullying are revealed as everyday interactional realities within communities' (pp. 516).

This in turn allows for a broader interpretation of the rationale behind worker acts, which amongst other benefits helps to explain intra and inter-class conflicts and choices workers make in response to work-related dilemmas. Accordingly, Sayer's work helps to explain how normative pressures (e.g. associated with economic realities) can lead to individualistic ('selfish') forms of action as well as individual and collective practices linked to the common good. Arguably, it is this latter category of agency which labour geography has tended to focus on at the expense of more extensive and critical accounts of the rationales behind worker action.

The remaining sections of paper illustrate how the above moral economy approach may be mobilised in labour geography to seize a stronger grasp of understanding of worker practices and rationales.

[8] Bolton and Laaser associate this take on consciousness with the work of Gramsci (1971), based on the understanding that theoretical consciousness is linked to both shared experiences of the material world, and also the norms/values of the customs which the actor inherits from the past.

[9] Crossan et al. underline the role of both protest and (union) banner production as practices which drew people together, with banners in particular stirring a view of workplace/factory sites as community assets rather than the property of multinational capital. Crucially the production of union banners and posters associated with protests are shown as a response to the loss of industry and a violation of the established moral economy.

This is achieved through explorations of two areas of concern which relate to morals and worker agency. First, how can labour geography better conceive those acts of coping which may be described as 'negative' or counter-productive for other groups of workers? (accounts which are arguably still underplayed in labour geography). Second, the discussion finishes with reflection on the functionality and the consciousness of many worker actions associated with ways of getting by.

Mobilising Moral Economy within Labour Geography

WORKER AGENCY: SELF-INTEREST AND SOLIDARITY

Labour geography has traditionally operated with a 'nonessentialist' view of actors which emphasises the complexity of worker identities and the potential for self-interest driven action. As part of this understanding, studies in the project typically acknowledge the potential for both intra and inter-class conflicts (fractured classes of workers within the worker class; see Castree et al. 2004).Whilst the project's early focus involved cases of worker solidarity within and across spaces (e.g. Castree's work on the Liverpool dock dispute of 1995–1998; Castree 2000), labour geography is also well placed to explain divisions and spatial praxis which undermines other worker groups on the back of inter-locality competition (e.g. regarding investment and jobs tied to specific places; see Peck et al. 2009; Swyngedouw 1992). Despite this possibility, arguably few labour geographers have focussed on intra-worker conflicts in which the actions of one group of workers negatively impact others. As a result, the moral justification for one course of action over another has rarely been unpicked in any depth. In focussing on spatial strategies which result in worker victories (usually over capital in some shape or form) the project has also tended to romanticise worker actions, whilst inadvertently linking labour's agency with successful outcomes (see Abu-Lughod 1990).

Of those who have raised similar concerns, Gough's work on competing moralities and economic justice (Gough 2010) offers several insights into the 'darker' motives behind worker actions and related motivations for securing jobs at the expense of others[10]. In his account Gough points to a political climate heavily influenced by the ideology of neoliberalism, and what he terms 'bourgeois economic justice': an ethos which encourages self-interest in the context of fierce labour-on-labour competition (pg. 130). In this understanding several factors emerge as explicators of workers' self-interest, including the pursuit of advancement as key to securing/improving job prospects on an individual basis. In addition workers are also shown to play significant roles establishing social monopolies/segmentation patterns, as when certain job types befall particular groups of people (e.g. low-wage migrants). Gough also suggests that worker collaborations with capital commonly take place in order to enhance production efficiency for firms in particular places. In this latter strategy,

[10] Gough links justice based spatial praxis to a political shift towards socialism or socialist ideals, and with this an attendant emphasis on solidarity and altruism as rationales for social action (i.e. as opposed to the current emphasis on competitive relations).

worker agency is often driven by the knowledge that their workplace operates in competition with similar settings elsewhere in the global economy. Accordingly:

'Through these ideologies, a strategy which jeopardises other workers' jobs emerges not as selfish and parochial but as just and even a moral imperative. If unknown others elsewhere suffer, that is merely a side-effect of one's being productive, and the price of maintaining the social fabric of one's territory.'

Gialis and Herod (2014) have similarly explored negative repercussions of worker agency linked to the seizure of jobs. In their case study (on striking steel workers in Greece), one group of workers based in the Attica Region are shown to gift a relocation of their roles to workers elsewhere who are willing to meet the employer's terms following strike action. In their case the authors identify the agency of those accepting firm conditions as a 'hindrance' form of coping, a term used to denote those acts which effectively strengthen the ability of firms to exploit labour as a flexible resource. Such cases chime with lay morality understandings of worker rationales, as purported by Sayer, in which workers weigh up their own options and respond pragmatically to risk-based situations (in this case inter-locality competition). Motivations and actions are thus driven by what seems practically possible and prudent, based on assessments of what is desirable on an individual and collective basis. Work in this vein is beginning to emerge, helping to explain the complexity and competition implicit in worker rationales. This represents a welcome evolution of a moral perspective of use to labour geography which deviates from a necessarily positive or morally just vein.

LESS-FUNCTIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF WORKER AGENCY

A further explanation for worker actions which negatively impacts the lives of others may lie in the subconscious and unintentional aspects of coping approaches: forms of 'getting by' which have received less attention in labour geography thus far. This point on agentic consciousness (which may be linked to counter-productive copings in particular) has been made classically in the case of Willis' Learning to labour (1977), and in other studies in the labour process tradition in which workers undermine their own position in exchange for a temporal set of gains (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Mullholland 2004). In Willis' account a dominant group of schoolboys were shown to use informal misbehaviours to deliver a discourse of 'pisstakes', 'kiddings' and 'windups' geared to challenging teacher authority. Whilst in the short-term these practices were shown to inject a 'kind of meaning and colour into a drab set of life prospects' (Giddens 1984: 292), in the longer term the same habits are attributed with helping to deliver '*The Lads*' into a series of low-end production jobs marked by stultifying conditions and little pay. As Giddens puts it: 'For having left school with no qualifications and entered a world of low-level manual labour, in work which has no career prospects and with which they are intrinsically disaffected, they are effectively stuck there for the rest of their working lives' (pp. 293).

Through this critique[11] Giddens elicits two points of relevance to labour geography. The first is one of temporality; as from this reading it is clear that labour agency has short, medium and longer term consequences for a range of actors involved. When reporting on social praxis, choosing where to 'cut the string', and so chart a justifiable end point (or ultimate 'result') of worker action may be somewhat difficult to justify (indeed, when should this happen in the case of the *The Lads*?). A related point on agentic awareness is also made by Giddens with respect to a 'partly unconscious' use of humour, sarcasm and irony implicit in the schoolboy acts. This point is useful as it is suggests that worker actions are often unintended – perhaps also in the case raised by Gialis and Herod (2014) – and in many cases actions emerge from limited planning or foresight (Coe 2015; Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2011; Das 2012). Work within the labour process tradition is replete with such examples of coping and getting by through social interactions and subtle, normative habits which presumably require little thought on the part of labour (see Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Roy 1973; Zimbalist 1979). It is thus typical to find ways of coping with (for example) mundane environments through tacit, informal and 'second nature' acts of wit and humour (Taylor and Bain 2003). Accordingly understandings of worker agency as necessarily linked to purpose may prove unhelpful as a starting point for exploring a moral focus vis-à-vis modes of worker conduct (Castree 2007; Das 2012; Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2011). With reference to a forthcoming moral dimension, then, further work in the latest vein of labour geography's development may usefully re-clarify what counts as worker agency in the first place.

In addition to the non-intentional aspect of worker coping, those actions which are deliberate and/or strategic need not stem from a formal or strategic engagement with politics, as is sometimes implied (Gough 2010). Worker agency is not synonymous with political action, as theory on the moral economy again demonstrates. Thompson's moral economy approach (the 'moral economy of the crowd') is useful here and demonstrates the innate sense of moral responsibility and social expectation which often drives worker action. This is true, for instance, in the case of the food rioting accounts mentioned earlier, in which rioters reacted to attacks on morally (if not legally or politically) established customs (see Borch 2013). Brooks et al. (2016) have similarly emphasised what might be referred to as the 'non-deliberately political' striking of junior doctors in the NHS, whose testaments often reflect little experience of industrial action, political aspiration, or acknowledgement that strikes themselves are even political in nature. Rather, in their account the oral testimonies of junior doctors more often reflected an instinctive, obligatory defence of the NHS geared to preserving free health service as a traditional right/custom of people in the UK. Understandings of moral economy values may thus help to explain why particular (often worker based) struggles occur in certain places at specific points of time.

[11] This view is itself overly deterministic as 'The Lads' still maintained the *potential* to become 'unstuck' from these realities.

Accordingly a fuller appreciation of processes in which values, norms and customs are established – and their historical lineage – may also help to explain why resistance is seemingly 'present' in some contexts and 'missing' in others. Given labour geography's turn to both the labour process and labour history traditions, it would appear the project is now well placed to embrace a moral perspective on both past and present labour struggles, which in turn may offer important insights into the theorising of worker agency. Such an approach opens up a wealth of possibilities for labour geography as history is replete with complex, subjective battles not just between labour and capital, but also intra-labour conflicts wherein the self-interest of particular worker groups typically wins out over others.

Conclusion

In conclusion labour geography has made considerable strides developing a conceptual toolbox suited for exploring the agency of workers. As this article suggests, efforts to incorporate labour process theory (LPT) into the sub-discipline together with a history from below approach, incorporating accounts of class formation and agency as lived practice, are of significant import to the goals of labour geography. These latter developments are ideally suited for gaining a rich, holistic understanding of both work and non-work realities and copings over a longer-term procession of time. However, in order to fully appreciate what is meant by more resilient forms of coping and 'getting by', this article has argued that understanding the motivations of worker actions may require a return to the ontological question of what is meant by labour agency. Accordingly it has been argued that subconscious and non-deliberate acts of agency are part of the story of worker copings. In turn, it is also worthwhile as part of this opening up of the agency term, to explore the futile and often counter-productive forms of coping which are also part of the story of working life.

Further to this emphasis on unintended copings, and building on the work of Crossan et al. (2016), the article has supported the use of moral economy approaches and perspectives in labour geography. Such perspectives it is argued, are useful as a means to better understanding worker solidarities and rationales, and for revealing 'the struggle below the surface of the homogeneity of the capitalistic system between different parties that evaluate, renegotiate, revise and re-establish the conditions they live under' (Bolton and Laaser 2013: 515). Despite the intention to tell worker stories, few have focussed on the geography of labour divides, and the implicit damage that workers wreak on one another through acts of 'getting by'. Such an appreciation, as part of a moral 'turn' within the project, is likely to aid labour geography's development as a sub discipline not only devoted to labour's successes, but also emergent failures (and those outcomes that lie between). Indeed, an understanding of the latter is also likely to enhance the potential for labour geography to positively impact workers involved in spatial struggles, by elaborating on weaknesses in agentic practice and elucidating strategies for coping with formidable structural constraints (Das 2012). Appreciating the reality of

conflicting labour situs is important to the goal of labour geography – i.e. a discipline both of and for workers – as forms of coping may be drawn across the moral spectrum. It is also the case that a focus on agency as self-interest linked to worker cleavages may assist a stronger appreciation for how spatial visions (and struggles to achieve these) play out in practice. Research which properly engages in this vein is likely to generate more complex pictures of the struggles of engagement between workers themselves rather than more abstract (and frequently romanticised) battles between labour and capital alone.

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