WORKING PAPERS ON ASIAN LABOUR

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A Debate on Culture, Consciousness and Representation

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A paradox: Asia is undergoing an historically unparalleled rapid economic transformation and a massive increase in the extend of proletarianisation. Wage work has become the predominant form of work in large parts of Asia and wage-workers have come to constitute the largest social group replacing the peasants. However, this transformation finds relative less importance in the intellectual landscape. Within the social sciences labour studies are a comparatively minor subject. A review of major journals and publications on Asia of the last ten years would confirm this very easily. It is not just a function of the relative backwardness of the disciplines *vis à vis* Western scholarship on labour. Three reasons come to mind. The political marginalisation of the working class, the lingering image of Asia as essentially a peasant society (with its emphasis on the rural and tribal world) and, finally, the theoretical retreat of marxism and marxist social sciences consonant with the capitalist triumphalism. There is further disappointment in store if one goes looking for the cultural aspects of labouring lives within labour studies itself.

This is not to deny the function culture has played in the dominant approaches in labour studies in Asia. Here I identify two major approach: that of `modernisation' and `marxism' (their many variations notwithstanding) in labour studies. I shall discuss the issue of workers culture locating both its lacunae and strengths.

Consciousness and culture

Culture has had a peculiar location in labour studies in Asia - both in the marxist tradition as well as the functionalist modernisation school. I will argue that it has served to mark the difference between the ideal type of the working class and the really existing workers. In the case of the `modernisation' school which dominated the field in the 1950s and 1960s, working class cultures of the developing Asian countries were seen initially to have been dysfunctional to the emergent industrialisation: they were marked by persistent undercommitment to work in the industrial setting, attitudes and behaviours carried over from `traditional' cultural milieus hampered the emergence of a proper industrial culture - lingering ties with the countryside from which the bulk of workers were recruited were seen to be barriers to the emergence of

the new breed of `industrial man'.[1] Though largely discredited through careful empirical work they have had a surprising revival in the 1980s in work culture and organisational behaviour studies mainly in relation to the galloping success of industrialisation in East Asian NICs and Japan. Interestingly, now `traditional' values such a confucianism, group orientation, culturally sanctioned hierarchical values, obedience to superiors, consensus rather than conflict enhancing aspects, kinship and community bonds that reduce state dependence for welfare etc., are seen as enabling labour commitment to high industrial growth.

Let me note three features about cultures and working class behaviour which are tacitly assumed in these studies. Whether functional or dysfunctional `culture' more often than not is equated with `tradition' - specifically pre or non-industrial heritages of particular societies or civilisations. Thus the historical development of working-class culture or the tradition itself is rarely an issue. It is assumed to be deeply rooted in the historical past and timeless and essential non-contradictory and thus internally immutable. Finally, the notion of culture employed in these studies is remarkably narrow with selective attributes of `traditional cultures' being matched with workers behaviours that are either functional or dysfunctional to the goal of continues growth of enterprises.

If `behaviour' was associated with working class culture in the modernisation school, in the marxist tradition `culture' was almost exclusively discussed in relation to class consciousness. A great variety and highly sophisticated accounts of Asian working class have been produced by authors of this school and any summary of this work would do injustice to the often nuanced exploration of the subject.[2] Yet there were several common features that need to be noted. First a theory of correspondence of the structure of society (mode of production, extent and type of capitalist penetration, technological composition, scale of enterprises etc.) with the level of consciousness underlay most accounts. Second the model of development of class consciousness was that of the classical Western working class, i.e. a teleological transition from peasant/rural/craft consciousness to trade-union consciousness and

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[1] C. Kerr, F.H. Harbison, J.T. Dunlop, and C.A. Myers, "The Labour Problems in Economic Development", *International Labour Review*, March 1955; idem, *Industrialism and the Industrial Man: The Problem of Labour and Management of Economic Growth* (LOndon, 1962); O.A. Ornatti, *Jobs and Workers in India* (Ithaca, 1955); M. Morris, "Labor Discipline, Trade Unions and the State in India", *Journal of Political Economy*, August 1955; B.F. Hoselitz, "The City, the Factory, and Economic Growth", *American Economic Review*, May 1955; C.A. Myers, *Labour Problems in the Industrialization of India* (Cambridge, MA, 1958); UNESCO: Research Centre on Social and Economic Development in South Asia, *Social and Cultural Factors Affecting Productivity among Industrial Workers of India* (Delhi, 1960); W.E. Moore and A.S. Feldman (eds), *Labor Commitment and Social Change in Developing Areas* (New York, 1960); S. Kanappan, "Labour Force Commitment in Early Stages of Industrialisation", *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, August 1970.

[2] R. Chandavarkar, "Industrialisation in India before 1947: Conventional Approaches and Alternative Perspectives", *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (1985); D. Chakrabarty, "Class Consciousness and the Indian Working Class: Dilemmas of a Marxist Historiography", *Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 28 (1988); J. Chesneaux, *The Chinese Labour Movement 1919-1927* (Stanford, 1968); F. Deyo, *Beneath the Miracle: Labour Subordination in New Asian Industrialization* (Berkeley, etc., 1989).

finally to the highest form, i.e. revolutionary class consciousness. Lastly, the indices of consciousness were very often derived from the level of organisation and the militancy of the workers, in other words they were focussed on situations of overt conflicts (strikes, work stoppages, etc.). Yet the situation of the working class in Asia seemed always to escape the teleological framework of such studies.

The first problem was to account for the persistence of particularist forms of consciousness in the shape of caste, religion, region which the supposedly universalist class consciousness seemed unable to transcend. In this situation class consciousness seemed to have been infinitely deferred - it was always in an embryonic or incipient stage - mired immediately as it was hatched in the press of primordialism. The second related problem was that the `pure working class', bearer of revolutionary consciousness, never seemed to materialise fully, surrounded and linked as it always was with several forms of labour that were only partially or not proletarianised. Much theoretical and investigative energy went into locating the blockages in the development of or distortions in a full blown class consciousness. The answers to these deviations were sought in the realm of structures (economic and political) and by an extension in the realm of culture. Thus persisting rural linkages of the workers, coexistence of multiple modes of production within the same formation, segmentation of labour market, supposedly facilitated the persistence of pre-modern mentalities and hampered the emergence of a proper proletarian culture.

Both the structural and cultural arguments relying on the assumed correspondence of structure and consciousness have had a great salience in labour studies in Asia. Two books both published in 1989, in their own ways demonstrate the strength and weaknesses of the structuralist and `culturalist' arguments.

Frederic Deyo's pathbreaking *Beneath the Miracle* (1989) was perhaps one of the most sophisticated renderings of the structuralist theme. One of his aims was to explain the differing levels of organisation and militancy displayed by workers of the four East Asian Tigers in the post-war period. He identified three prevailing labour systems: a stable proletariat based on heavy industries (as in South Korea and Singapore), a non-proletarian (patriarchal/patrimonial) labour system which combined various forms of wage labour with non-wage labour and a hyper-proletarian system market by rapid turnover of workers (often female). The level of organisation and militancy of workers were shown to have varied according to the degree to which they approximated the proletarian system exception (Singapore's case was exceptional because state action preempted the formation of solidarities based on the work and neighbourhood connection). Though Deyo explicitly criticised the `culturalist' explanation for labour consciousness/quiescence his argument is ultimately (in so far is it relates to determinate cultural resources of specific labour systems) prone to the charge of tautology.

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The tautological and utilitarian strains in the structuralist argument, especially in the case of Indian marxist labour historiography was trenchantly critiqued by Dipesh Chakrabarty nearly ten yours ago because "the way the category of class consciousness is commonly employed in Marxist histories of the Indian working class is one which produces little or no understanding of `culture' and its relationship to consciousness".[3] He argues instead that the consciousness of the workers was culturally formed and the reasons for their behaviour are to be located not in the logic of structures or the way such cultures were functional to such structures (labour market etc.) because they cannot explain `the inner logic of culture' i.e. "the signifying systems the different communities use to make sense of their lives". Yet after such a sweeping dismissal of a whole tradition, in his own work on jute mill workers all he could do was to ascribe essential attributes to pre-capitalist cultures of the workers in order to explain the persistence of sectionalism, hierarchy and their spasmodic acts of violence. Workers seemed doomed to reproduce their culture of origins in the work context. Thus neither the timelessness of pre capitalist culture nor the actual work culture that was developed by the workers was the subject of his enquiry. However, he forcefully directed attention towards taking culture seriously in any study of consciousness.[4]

This brief survey of issues was meant to indicate the problematical location of culture and consciousness in the major historiography and in the sociological trends in Asian Labour studies. That both these tendencies shared important features must be immediately evident. In both culture functioned to mark out the irreducible difference between the `ideal type' and the real worker, between the Western and Asian experience of Labour. Both shared an explicit evolutionary teleology though the desired goals were radically different, a stable collective bargaining industrial man in one case and the class conscious proletariat in the other. And finally an explicit and sometimes implicit correspondence between structure (industry, economy, class) and consciousness and culture was assumed.

Emergent Trends

One can, however, discern several pointers to new directions in the research on workers,

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[3] "Class Consciousness and Indian Working Class".

[4] D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History. Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton, 1989). See K. Tajbaksh, "History of a Subject or the Subjects of History? (Or is a Labour History Possible?)", *Studies in History*, 11/1 (1995), for a critique of Chakrabarty that notes the internal tension within this work between a universalist and a particularist characterisation of working-class culture.

culture and consciousness which has gone against the grain of the dominant motifs discussed above. Conducted mainly since the mid 1980s and consciously eschewing the evolutionary and teleological assumptions these researches have presented a picture of Asian workers' experience in industrialisation which is much richer and varied. It makes it possible to locate the present research agenda in the context of Asian debates in social sciences and as well as gaps that remains in such endeavours

It is interesting to note that the emergent trends in Asian labour studies have occurred at the same time as the classical model of industrialisation and working class experience in the West has itself been challenged in several areas.[5] It is no longer certain that the working class experience in the West was subject to linear and uniform transformation towards ever increasing factorisation and class consciousness and neither was the persistence of several particularist identities within the working-class cultural forms a privilege only of the unchanging `East'. Multiple identities of workers and several forms of coping strategies linked to combinations of modes of labour have now been discovered within the classic heartland of workers experience.

Simultaneously several studies in history and anthropology of Asian studies (not linked to labour studies) have thrown doubts on the validity of unchanging traditional institutions such as caste and communal identities as survivals of the past, they have stressed their socially constructed character as well as their coeval emergence with institutions of modernity such as modern state, networks of Communications and associational developments of civil society etc.[6]

`Primordialism'

The shifting emphasis from `structure' to the process of such identity formations has had a liberating impact on the studies of labour, the social constitution of identities and their contingent nature; this has made possible the investigation of several hoary items of Asian Labour studies as rural connections, caste and religious identities and ethnicity as being produced in the industrial and modern setting and the ways in which they were recast within

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[5] See e.g. D. Cannadine, "The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution, *Past and Present*, 103 (1984); C. Sabel and J. Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in the Nineteenth Century Industrialisation", *Past and Present* (1985); R. Aminzade, "Reinterpreting Capitalist Industrialisation: A study of 19th century France", *Social History* (1985); and also P. Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge, etc., 1987) and S.L. Kaplan and C.J. Koepp (eds), *Work and Its Representations* (Ithaca, 1987).

[6] See e.g. B. Cohn's essays on the Census and caste in India in his *Anthropologist among Historians* (New York, 1985); also G. Pandey, *Construction of Communalism in North India* (New Delhi, 1990).

the formation of class consciousness. Thus research along these lines has shown the profoundly ambivalent nature of `traditional' consciousness, both providing resources for class solidarity as well as for enduring divisions.[7]

The debate on Universalism vs. Particularism and Tradition vs. Modernity in the case of the workers in Asia appears to be, if not entirely futile, at least distracting from several interesting aspects regarding the process of the formation of working-class culture and its mutation over time. These studies have increasingly emphasised closer attention to the everyday life and sites of working class experience in the workplace, neighbourhood and the proletarian public sphere where so-called traditional and primordial consciousness were constituted and recast providing both the building blocks for a specific working-class culture and marking the fault lines of its fractures. It is in this context that Boulanger's call to locate both the way in which class was ethnicised and ethnicity inflected with class in the `day to day experience' and in `micro dealing' of the workers acquires significance.

It might be said that given the overwhelming weight of Asian scholarship on the problem of particularist and primordial consciousness both in the field of history and social anthropology it is in a particularly advantageous position *vis à vis* Western scholarship where it is only very recently that the problematic issue of racism and religious divisions within workers has received attention.[8] Yet several aspects of the issue of `primordialism' and traditional' culture remain to be explored in the Asian workers' context, the contribution they make to the formation of a specific working-class culture - in particular the ways in which cultural forms and rituals associated with religion, caste and ethnic groups have been incorporated into it, providing enduring patterns of skill formation, leisure and expressive activities for the workers.[9] It is important too to stress the dynamic nature of `primordialism', its mutation and adaptation to changing historical circumstances to explain both its long-term stability as well as its social contingency. For this it is essential that `primordialism' is explored not merely as a set of norms and values and rules of behaviour but also as materialised cultural practices of the workers, performed in rituals of assertion of particular identities (religious processions, competitive regional networks of kinship, sisterhood rituals among women

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[7] See for suggestive treatments of ethnicity and class D. Simeon, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: Workers, Unions and the State in Chotanagpur* (New Delhi, 1995); C.L. Boulanger, "Ethnic Order and Working-Class Strategies in Western Malaysia", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 22/3 (1994); R. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and Working Classes in Bombay 1900-1940* (Cambridge, 1994); Ch. Joshi, "Bonds of Community, Ties of Religion", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 22 (1985).

[8] D. Roediger, "Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labor History", in: Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *The End of Labour History?* (Cambridge, 1994); idem, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness. Essays on Race, Politics and Working-Class History* (London and New York, 1994).

[9] See for instance the work of Gerard Heuzé on religious rituals among Indian workers: *Travailler en Inde* (Paris, 1992).

workers) by which they related to and communicated their identities to themselves and other social classes. It is in performances that cultural codes are objectified at the same time as they are altered.

Gender

Several issues that connect the `primordial' and `class' overlap with another significant emerging trend within Asian studies, that of gender relations. Gender, the most `primordial' of categories is also most socially constructed, and it is from this fundamental standpoint that feminist scholarship in the last two decades has launched important critiques of `essentialism' whether of the modernisation or marxist variety. In the case of labour studies a dominant trend of gender studies has been to investigate women's work under capitalist labour relations. This has done a lot to redress a grievous imbalance in previous accounts of the working class which have been (to use a mild phrase) happily gender blind. Contrary to earlier accounts we now know that women were mobilised in large-scale industrial/plantation enterprises in great numbers beginning from the late 19th century in colonial Asia and in some industries as in Meiji Japan silk and cotton mills almost exclusively.[10] Their experience hidden from history till now is the subject of several interesting studies.[11] These studies have highlighted the contradictory experience of freedom and constraint that marked the lives of women subject to patriarchal exploitation in industrial settings and at home. In the process they have problematised the perennial question of transition from `pre-modern' to modern industrial settings by focusing solidly on power relations in both contexts and tracing the differential impact capitalist industrialisation had on the lives of men and women. It is also evident that the situation seemed to change in the early twentieth century with the steady withdrawal of women from industrial, non-agrarian work under the combined pressure of state and capitalist policies that now pushed women to the sphere of the `working-class family', under a reformulated gender division of labour with men populating the sphere of capitalist production and woman in the sphere of reproduction.[12] This trend has been significantly reversed in the new phase of industrialisation in Asia with return of the `Factory Girl' as the new hyper

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[10]   E.P. Tsurumi, *Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton, 1990).

[11]   G. Hershatter, *Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949* (Stanford, 1986); E. Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949* (stanford, 1986); Samita Sen, "Unsettling the Household: Act VI (of 1901) and the Regulation of Women Migrants in Colonial Bengal", in: Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *`Peripheral' Labour? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization* (Cambridge, 1997).

[12]   See Amarjit Kaur's Malaysian paper in this series.

proletariat in the Free Trade Zones s and as casual and part-time workers in millions of home industries and homes (as domestic servants). These changes in the lives of working women in Asia has been sensitively portrayed in three recent anthropological works.[13] What these studies have in common is a focus on `experience' and the processes of self-making that women undertake from highly unequal positions of power *vis à vis* men. They made workplaces, families and public spheres contested sites where not just unities but also divisions are fostered along gender lines in rituals of sisterhood, bouts of spirit possession and resistances to discipline power of capital and sexual power of men. In the process they have questioned assumptions about the docility of female labour that has been a hallmark of recent studies of women's work under new Industrial Division of Labour.

In line with the focus on `experience' of woman workers, these studies have been very innovative in so far as methods to interrogate these experiences are concerned. Close participant observation of day to day interactions in workplaces and family and dormitory settings (Kondo, Wong and Wolf), use and analysis of factory songs (Tsurumi), and extensive use of life history approach,[14] mark their methods. There is no doubt that these technological practices have to be integrated into any research on working-class culture and consciousness in Asia.

If there are any limitations in the approach and scope of these studies they seem to be a result of a gendered division of labour in the larger field of labour studies. It is not merely a coincidence that the emergent trend is almost exclusively the result of the work done by women anthropologists and historians, it is as if a specialisation of sorts has occurred both in the subject matter and methods of analysis with women scholars focusing on women workers and their subjective experiences while male scholars are still concerned with the big structures and large processes of predominantly male workers. The tendency to identify gender studies exclusively with women's lives and work is perhaps a necessary stage in the development of the field but it also means that the larger agenda of gender as `social organisation of relations between sexes' (Catherine Hall and Leonara Davidoff) remains still to be explored. After Joan Scott and Joan Kelly's perceptive critique it is not enough to look at social relations of work and experience from the standpoint of women. The experience of work and identity of workers or more generally workers culture and consciousness must be considered as gendered from the outset, and this thus necessarily means exploring the formation of male working-

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[13]   D.L. Wolf, *Factory Daughters. Their Families and Rural Industrialization in Central Java* (Berkeley, etc., 1995); A. Wong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* (Albany, 1987); D. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender and Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Berkeley, etc., 1990).

[14]   Janet Salaff is a pioneer in this field, see her *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety and Power in the Family* (Cambridge, 1981).

class identities in all its contradictionary ramifications. Masculine working-class cultures with several contextual inflections were forged on the same sites that feminist scholars have so perceptively outlined for us i.e. in works places, in their ethnic and religious practices, in the family, neighbourhood as also in the male proletarian public spheres. These have to be explored in the characteristic leisure activities, in the formation of a `physical' culture of drinking, gambling and sports, in the formation of street gangs as also in the religious and ethnic festivals. They are to be crucially discerned in the large-scale class actions in situations of overt conflicts with capital as well in everyday relations within and between men of different classes. This is a research agenda that can only learn from the insights developed in the research methods developed by feminist scholars.

Nationalism

I shall now turn to the other great competitor for allegiance of workers apart from class, gender and `primordial' consciousness, i.e. nationalism. That working-class cultures and consciousness have in large measure been shaped in the arena of the nation, state in spite of the presence of several inter national migrations is a truism.[15] Yet unlike in the West where nationalism has been seen as distorting' class consciousness, in most of Asia due to the colonial context of industrialisation nationalism has been generally viewed as having a stimulating impact on the formation of class identity. Anti-colonial nationalism widened the scope of class conflict placing it in the wider area of the emergent nation while working-class militancy gave a sharper edge to it and widened the mass base of nationalist struggles.[16] Through nationalism workers were promised participation in the process of nation building as `citizens' with equal political rights. The political promise of citizenship in the immediate post-colonial nation states had a profound impact on workers consciousness the contours of which are still to be charted. Yet the contradictions between their new identity as citizen and the reality of capitalist subordination now under the state aegis were soon evident to the workers as the state started directly to repress labour movements or to regulate conflicts with capital in increasingly unfavourable ways.

Post-colonial states in their drive towards industrialisation have continually exhorted workers to sacrifice for the greater cause of the nation, both in the import substitution (ISI)

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[15] E.J. Hobsbawm, "What is the Workers Country?", in: idem, *Worlds of Labour* (London, 1984).

[16] Chesneaux, *Chinese Labour Movement*; Honig, *Sisters and Strangers*; J. Ingelson, "Workers' Consciousness and Labour Unions in Colonial Java", *Pacific Affairs*, 54/3 (1981); Simeon, *Politics of Labour*.

and export (EOI) phases, and in some instances as in India and China emerged as significant and major employers themselves.

While transformations of state policies are fairly well documented[17] the worker response to the changing state discourse of nationalism and nation building remains a grey area of research. It is very often assumed that there was an unbridgeable gap between state discourses and workers attitudes to nationalism. This assumption greatly underplays the ideological power of nationalism and does not help to understand the way in which both state and workers could negotiate in different ways. In the phase where states are withdrawing from their role as direct employers (as in India and more recently in China) and the prospect of `deindustrialisation' in several sector is already a reality, it would be interesting to see how workers respond to such changes. The only interesting study that I am aware of is the ongoing project of Jonathan Parry on the Public Sector Steel Plant of Bhilai in India which traces the changing nature of state discourse on industrialisation over time and shows the different ways in which workers and displaced villagers related to the demand of sacrifice for the nation.

I would suggest two areas of comparative research: (i) the changing discourse of nationalism in the post-colonial Asian societies over the last fifty years in relation to the working class; and (ii) a special focus on the Public Sector workers.

Resistance

Another important set of issues relates to the theme of worker resistance and its relation to worker consciousness and culture. In both the marxist and functionalist studies (as would be evident I am using these labels short-handed) workers' resistance held a central place. It was an index of the permanent antagonism between capital and labour in one case and instability of labour relations in the other. The causes and forms such resistance took over time were however, very differently conceptualised in these alternative approaches. As it happened in these studies, overt, organised and large-scale conflicts between capital and labour were usually the focus of attention even though a pre-history of `small scale, spontaneous and short lived' conflicts was given a place. Both recognised however that withdrawal of labour power by the workers was the most common form in which such conflicts were manifested. Thus from such observable facts as the number of strikes and work stoppages, their intensity and duration, conclusions were drawn as to the nature of consciousness and the cultural

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[17]   See Deyo, *Beneath the Miracle*, for East Asia.

characteristics of the workers that were brought into play. The problem was however, that overt conflicts were not the most common form of workers resistance - punctuated as these were by long periods of `labour peace'/quiescence when work went on as usual.

The focus on organised and overt conflicts emphasised trade union industry relations and centred around issues relating to wages, dismissals, etc., i.e. economic issues emanating from workplace relations. An older version of trade-union history thus focussed on the organisational capacity and political acumen of trade unions to articulate and force these issues and management strategies to frustrate them.

Small Acts, Big Consequences

Yet, as I said earlier workplace conflicts are not necessarily always overt, there are a thousand ways in which small acts of worker insubordination and resistance are expressed in the workplace which go unnoticed to the external observer as it is camouflaged in the quotidian and everyday routines. These acts can range from the abstraction of material from workshops (theft), insubordination in gesture and voice, grumbling and insolence, wasting time by loitering, work sabotage to lessen the speed of production to direct refusal to obey orders. These acts are not meant to directly overthrow the authority structures at the workplace so much as to constantly undermine them. But these acts could cascade into large-scale conflicts. In fact if we look behind the bland strike statistics and the ascribed causes for them in official statistics it is possible to see these small acts of resistance — an insulting gesture to the manager, a piece of metal hidden in the overclothes and discovered by the supervisor — quickly snowballing into a major strike on the issue of bonus or wages.

Collectively known as `workers misbehaviour' in management parlance, such acts of resistance have been studied in great detail in the British labour-process studies but have been a neglected aspect in the study of work culture in the Asian context (as far as I know). In historical studies, I can think of two essays of Chitra Joshi on Kanpur workers in the early nineteenth century which have dealt with the issue. She detailed the way in which workers, through struggles over time and place in the cotton mills of Kanpur, were able to modify and alter management's perspective on the workplace.[18] Capitalist work disciplines were resisted not because of the inherent `peasant mentality' of the workers but because they impinged directly on their effort to retain and extend a degree of work control. `Work culture' did not

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[18] Ch. Joshi, "The Formation of Work Culture: Industrial Labour in a North Indian City, 1890s-1940s", in: Heuzé, *Travailler en Inde*; idem, "`Defining their Worlds: Kanpur Workers in the 1930s and 1940s", paper presented at the workshop on "South Asian Labour: Linkages Global and Local", International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 1995.

consist only of attitudes to work and motivation displayed by workers reflecting management practices on their inherent cultural dispositions,[19] but was the resultant of the daily struggle to redefine the power relationship between workers and managers.

But workplace culture goes beyond even this, in the sense that it encompasses the relationships workers enter into with each other (sometimes solidary and often competitive) - a whole range of emotional and affective pressures is brought into play here, reflected in the jocular insults to each other, caste and racist remarks, physical fights and also spying for the foremen to gain his favour etc. They are the stuff of daily life of work and - as historians of the *Alltagsgeschichte* school have said[20] - we ignore them to our own peril as they go a long way in explaining not just collective acts of refusal but also apathy and withdrawal from action. Workplaces engendered solidarities as well as divisions and were intersected not just by the immediate conflict over work between workers and managers but also by the way in which the division between work and non-work (classically manifest within the factory gate itself) was breached.

Neighbourhoods

A major cause for dissatisfaction with old trade-union and industrial relations studies was that they neglected the way in which the workplace was imbricated in other sites of workers lives and how issues of work spilled over into families, neighbourhoods and cities and vice versa. It became increasingly clear that the causes of success and failure of overt conflicts were to be situated equally in these areas of workers lives located outside the workplaces. In his study of working-class neighbourhoods in Bombay Mill districts in the 1920s and 1930s,[21] Raj Chandavarkar reveals how the power relations that were forged and patterns of association that were fostered have been a significant factor in explaining the puzzle of a series of militant strike actions of a working class that was otherwise highly disorganised (trade unions were often the product of such strikes rather than their initiators) as also the roots of their failures. Both the management and the workers were shown to have utilised the neighbourhood

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[19]   See F. Deyo, "Ethnicity and Work Culture in Thailand", *Journal of Asian Studies*, August 1975, for an investigation of work culture purely in term of workers attitudes derived from their ethnic dispositions, and D. Arnold, "Industrial Violence in Colonial India", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 18 (1980), for the peasant mentality reflected in industrial violence in Colonial India.

[20]   A. Lüdtke (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life. Reconstituting Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, 1995).

[21]   R. Chandavarkar, "Workers Politics and the Mill Districts between the Wars", *Modern Asian Studies*, 15 (1981); idem, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*.

patterns in their conflicts. John Ingleson has pointed to the workers *kampongs* in Colonial Java to have fostered organisation of trade unions among workers. Fred Deyo has also suggested that the difference between organised militancy in South Korea and Singapore with a similar `stable heavy-industry proletariat' was partially due to the character of the working-class neighbourhood.[22] But neighbourhoods are important not just for either fostering or dampening class consciousness. They are areas where vital aspects of workers lives are expressed in leisure activities, where they most intensely interact with members of other classes as much as among themselves, where vital cultural resources are generated and transmitted through the generations, connections forged for social mobility, where jobs can be obtained through contacts. They are also extremely important areas of informal work. Neighbourhoods can be constricting also, and make workers try to escape. They are not communities unaffected by power both internally and externally. They are also sites where workers experience intensely their subordination to the power of state and capital and where conflicts can animate the divisions fostered in the workplaces. These contradictory aspects of working-class neighbourhoods are very well captured in Michael Pinches study of the Tatalon slum in Manila.[23] Neighbourhoods of course vary across countries and types of industries, and have changed historically. With the massive urbanisation of recent years in Asia they present us with a prospect of exciting comparative research, across time and place.

Other Resistances, Other Oppression

Workers however, do not resist the oppression of capital alone. In so far as the consciousness of the class is never only of class, they experience oppression of several other types of domination. Emily Honig's women workers in Shanghai feared the prospect of rape and forcible abductions by the members of the Green Gang more than the bosses overworking them. Honig has shown how women workers mobilised limited help through sisterhood to help each other out both at work but more importantly in combining to escort young females back to the dormitory. If the Mahar workers in Bombay Mills were continuously excluded from spinning sections because of their untouchable status, they withdrew to form their own specific crawls, protected their limited access to specific jobs by intensifying kinship networks. They did explore alternatives to union organisation in Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party.

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22 Deyo, *Beneath the Miracle*.

23 See Pinches' essay in M. Pinches and S. Lakha (eds), *Wage Labour and Social Change: The Proletariat in Asia and the Pacific* (Clayton, 1987).

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Similarly, ethnic slighting of Adibasi women by upper caste workers in Jamshedpur forced them to break strikes and join the management `to teach the Hindustani a lesson' (D. Simeon). On the other hand national and racial oppression by European supervisors in colonial factories and plantations fuelled class militancy. Where lines of social oppression coincide with class oppression, resistances resonate with each other and escalate but they are dampened mutually where such oppressions do not coincide. Any study of historical forms of resistance must necessarily take into account the subjective experience of different types of domination by the workers and the strategic modes of their responses.

Representations

A final theme which I discuss more due to the almost complete lack of significant literature available on the subject, is related to the question of methods of interrogating the cultural experience of workers. How do we study consciousness? I have indicated throughout the earlier discussion the pitfalls of deriving it immediately from or reducing it to the objective structures. I would like to say that `experience' (a much maligned term and denounced for its implicit psychologism and subjectivism) retains analytical valence; experience mediates structure and consciousness. Yet experience is not merely the subjective apprehension of structures; it also produces practices that are aimed at representing in Stuart Hall's sense: `There is no cultural experience without representations'. Representations are, to put it simply, (i) the images that workers have of themselves and which they wish to convey to others and (ii) the images which others have of them which they contest or seek to change. I would say that the study of such processes is important in getting a handle on the cultural experience of workers. I would broadly think that three categories of such representational practices can be useful for our purpose.

- Workers self-representations: These range from the autobiographical memoirs of workers, to forms of cultural representations as in processional activities, demonstrations etc. There is an urgent need to collect and study these forms; almost complete absence of studies of workers memoirs renders this task difficult. But one can always make a beginning. Life stories are another way of generating such materials and very good work mainly on women workers lives exists (Janet Salaff), but more needs to be done as well for male workers.
- Representations by the State and Market: This would include the study of processes by which the state seeks to represent workers in legal forms, as well as in the state-generated reports and investigations into workers lives. They have to be mined for the facts so much as the way workers subordination is normalised in these works.

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- Market representations: This is about the way in which workers are represented in mass products targeted at them. An important area of such study would be the way workers and work are represented in cinematic media.

Finally we can think of representations by the intelligentsia which seek to `represent' or speak for or give voice to workers. Novels dealing with working-class issues are an important source, and also political parties (especially working-class parties) which seek to court and represent workers as their constituency. And then in the end even the historian or the anthropologist who writes `objectively'. These studies can complement each other and provide us with the gamut of representational strategies pursued by workers and others and the contestations that occur between and within each of these categories.

<div align="center">***</div>

I have discussed the dominant motifs in the approaches to working-class culture within the context of Asian labour studies. I have argued that they have served to occlude a vast area of working-class life, and obscured the ways in which Asian workers have actively shaped both the immediate world of work and the larger social world which impinges on their lives. I would plead that any agenda of research on working class culture and consciousness needs to be self-conscious about the evolutionary/technological underpinnings. Secondly the tight connection between structure and consciousness needs to be loosened considerably. The relation between them obviously has to be recast and mediated. I would suggest that cultural experience provides the crucial middle term in this relation. Cultural experience of workers is not to be conceived as only purely subjective experience related to individual or group `interiority' or the purely symbolic ordering of norms and values, but rather as a set of practices that are at the same time oriented towards the structure (subjectively) and towards consciousness (objectively). They are as I have tried to argue also co-shaped by representations which workers themselves have and which others have of them.

Comment I

Andrew Wells

I would like to use this opportunity as a discussant to both comment on Prabhu's excellent paper and to reflect more widely on the themes, ideas and propositions advanced over the past two days. Let me say by way of explanation that I am a beginner in the field of Asian Labour Studies and thus have necessarily pitched my observations at the programatic and conceptual level. I hope that this adds another perspective to the daunting task of locating our "object of investigation" and determining the appropriate concepts and analytical tools.

It seems to me that one key issue that Prabhu addresses is the neo-classical and modernisation school's deployment of the category "culture" and thus consciousness as an explanation of why people eschew market rationality, especially in an Asian context. And by extension why culture and the pre-modern state work to divert and subvert so-called universal human attributes. What I think is the root of this problem - the role of culture in explanation - is a conceptual manoeuvre that reduces the economy to the market and culture and ideology to those practices and modes of representation that reject, subvert or ignore the market. It is especially tempting to import this frame of reference from "Western industrialised" societies into an explanation of Asian difference or backwardness. Popular journalism, neoclassical economists and business leaders often share this conception of the inadequacies of Asian economies, institutions and values.

Any number of phenomena can be explained - corruption, profligate public expenditure, gender, ethnic differences by recourse to a kind of precapitalist, non-economic irrationality. We should recall that Schumpeter's analysis of colonialism and imperialism was cast in this mould. Enough for a moment on the neoclassical or modernisations school's emphasis on culture as the repository of the primordial, the irrational and the timeless. But I think for project on Asian labour relations this deployment of culture as the residual and irrational factor needs our concerted attention. But there are other sources for this problem.

A more complex crisis arises from the fact that the alternative discourse of development and modernity, namely marxism, shared something of the same logic, while placing culture or consciousness in a similarly problematic role. While the problem was posed differently the consequences were similar: consciousness was false, manipulated of pre-political. Worse still it stubbornly refused to accurately correspond to its designated and supposedly universalist role.

Elaborate theories of class consciousness were developed to explain why the last instance - in

which structure and consciousness would finally align - never arrived.

That is the marxist like their neoclassical adversaries despaired that social actors behaved badly and worse they did this over long historical periods. They lacked an understanding of their own needs, interests and appropriate actions. We are speaking here, of course of tendencies and these tendencies allow of exemptions and variations. The point I want to underline is that culture, consciousness and the irrational become used not to explain what workers did but why they didn't behave as theory and ideology prescribed.

In turn these categories become identified as part of the neo colonial or imperialist project itself, as a means of inserting complex nation and regional experiences into the master narrative of capital versus labour. We should be wary of this style of labour historiography. Alternatively we can suggest two types of response. One focuses on difference and identity and makes the case that nations, regions (or perhaps religions) are so very different that concepts that arise so to speak from distinct social identities should be prioritised over imported "foreign" and misleading universal categories. Thus we more to a kind of culturalist and relativist historiography and sociology of difference. This rather undermines the idea of a comparative approach to a potential universal category, that is labour. We would have thereby traded one form of cultural essentialism for many other, and reproduced another version or many versions of "Asian difference".
Versions that are perhaps this time constructed by " postcolonial subjects" rather than "the imperial master narrators". But should we applaud new essentialisms trading under the guise of postmodernism. I think not: because it returns us to the same problem of ahistorical cultural essentialism, by a convoluted route.

Fortunately for us Prabhu does not leave us without direction - not so much a clear path but he provides us with important bearings. He insists correctly that we should reconsider culture, consciousness and I would add ideology in a different way.

First we must delink it from the prevalent notions of essentialism and teleology. And indeed we should step aside from the larger danger of the unilinear European mind-set. In doing this he points out that a valuable corpus of writings displacing the neat sequences of European social and labour history has already emerged. The logic of capitalism and modern state formation are thus reconceptualised outside the mythological notions industrialisation, stages of economic growth and nation and state building.

Second social structures, even those where capitalism has been unquestionably dominant should be understood as considerably more complex that the idea of capitalism implies. I guess he is taking us further down the road that sought to see social formations (or modern nation-states) as containing complex articulations of production relations).

Third the simultaneous presence of precapitalist residues and the traditional practices

of family, kin, belief system and the resultant form of representation cannot be easily dismissed.

Four, the forms of ideology and consciousness are thus both more complex at a structural level and less determined by structure than many social theorists allowed. It followed from these points that resistance, both the active agents, their practices and ideologies do not correspond to the neat theoretical patterns. Resistance takes place in a form of double subversion: it attacks the wages system with understandings that are exterior to the logic of commodification.

For these reasons, if I understand the argument correctly the resistance of labour to capital was and is to be found more frequently outside organised labour than within it. For organised labour might be thought of as not simply the point of resistance to the commodification of life, but as an effective part of the process. And this might apply with equal force to unions created by colonial legislation, postcolonial states and under the auspices of the Comintern. Indeed the highly structured and discriminatory sexual division of labour (with all the attendant implications for the economic role of the family and agricultural communities) might also be seen as a further product of the partial commodification of economic life under colonial, state and with active   union participation.

As Prabhu takes us through various sites of struggle and resistance I think he begins to sketch out a richer, more historically nuanced labour historiography. And this labour historiography, no matter its European or Asian parentage provides the way ahead. It has at its heart a kind of marriage of marxist and postmodernist sensibilities. It seeks to combine the universal categories of capital and the commodity, with the particularities of local traditions. But it refuses to reify either - modern capitalism and traditional Asian values are both social constructions and are perhaps part of the same transformative eruptions we call modernity. Second this labour historiography does not assume the forces that inhibit or facilitate the "emancipation of labour", the forces may operate in a counter-intuitive fashion. They remain to be established by historical and sociological investigation of the evidence not my conceptual fiat (neo-classical, marxist or postmodernist). And finally they do not require any reductionist conception of ideology: action occurs within social relations and structures but within fields of discourse that help organise experience. But structures do not create ideology in the same way that ideology does not create structures - there is a complex circle of mediation which links experience, ideological systematisers and social practices. And here we should take Gramsci as one point of departure.

It was said yesterday that the themes of research must be historical, maybe, but what I would want to insist is that they need to be historicist and therefore non-essentialist. The historians

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have warned us against falling for the idea of the "timeless peasantry" and this paper against "traditional ideology". It has been suggested that the forms of land ownership, family and kinship relations and patterns of mobility and migration were transformed in the colonial period to generate the stereotypical "Asiatic mode of Production". We were also reminded yesterday that gender relations did not emerge as it were from tradition but were actively manipulated by colonial powers as part of their creation of gender and ethnic divisions. In short the "cultural traditions" that plays such a large part in the popular story were historical creations. Thus they are not simply the context of the story of "Asian Labour" but the everpresent text. And we cannot simply get the context right and move on, we have to start by "denaturalising" our analytical categories. Fortunately we are not alone in this task.

I would like to commend Prabhu's attempts to sketch out a labour history appropriate for our purposes. It still leaves us with the problem of how to relate structure and organisation (as discussed this morning) with ideology and residence. What is the relationship between the mobility and location of work and social life? How to link the long-run globalisation of capital with its specific Asian and local effects? And it forces us to place gender at the analytical core of our activities, since this is the category around which so much of labouring activity revolves. In all these discussion I think we perhaps need to make explicit that which is latent in Prabhu's paper. The object of our studies of labour in Asia cannot be broken from the issue of the structures, processes, organisations and ideologies that have constrained or enhanced the capacity of labour to be an active, self conscious historical subject.

Comment II

Samita Sen

The notion of mapping three kinds of representations of the industrial working class - by the state and capitalists, by workers themselves and by the intelligentsia - suggests a new approach and direction in Indian labour history. While the first and the third have of necessity been the stuff from which the bulk of Indian labour history has so far been written, there has been far less than desirable awareness of the `representation', the authors of that representation and the politics involved in the choices among available representations. The project thus involves first, a re-working of many of the `facts' of workers' behaviour and life-styles as authored representations. In the second instance it also requires a determined excavation effort for workers' self-representations - an aspect notably absent in Indian labour historiography. The problem lies in the ubiquitous illiteracy of the industrial working class. The workers seem to have left no written records behind them. We have accepted this proposition so far. We need to make a greater effort to look for new material. It is suggested that we can read from workers' actions - their responses to policy, their everyday behaviour and, of course, the modes of resistance they adopted. For the more remote historical period we are slightly hamstrung because workers' actions too come to us as written - by officials, journalists and other middle-class literate observers, sympathetic or otherwise. Thus, they are `representations' in the first and third categories mentioned above. For the more proximate period, however, recording memories through oral history is an urgent necessity not tackled suffiently seriously yet.

I would like to offer two caveats, both terminological and both as suggestions for further problematisation, i.e., as food for more thought. The first involves our use of the term `consciousness'. We use the term frewquently and not only in the context of industrial workers. Revealingly, when we use it to `explain' the behaviour of workers we use it in a (wider or narrower) sense of `class consciousness'. We beg more confusion by attributing consciousness to a category like labour rather than to individual subjects (as the title of the sub-theme) because we thus pre-define the content of consciousness to its narrowest meaning. Although the labouring experience is of necessity imbricated in a wider social context and a variety of experiences, the labourer's `labour consciousness' becomes almost insidiously prioritised. More, we often end up explaining that the worker also has `other consciousnesses' - kin, caste, community, gender, and so on. If these are `competitors' for workers' consciousness (or allegiance) then they essentially imply external political forces which can lay some kind of `claim' on consciousness or allegiance. Thus we presuppose a `movement' or an

`ideology'. The relationship between the `claims' and the `consciousness' seems highly problematic. If a heterogeneity of consciousness is practically a condition of consciousness itself (since there is no state of `not-conscious') then the explanatory and analytical power of the term seems unclear.

This brings me to my second question which relates to `primordialisms'. In the orthodox Marxist view, all `competitors' of `class' consciousness are arising out of `primordial' relations and are `residues' of a pre-capitalist social order. Prabhu Mohapatra has persuasively argued that these should be treated as `produced in industrial settings' and `recast within the formation of class consciousness'. Is that to say that like class, many other relations are produced in capitalism each of which interact on the others? To give an example: do I say that the experience of being a woman is inflected by the experience of industrial work or that class is experienced differently by women? The question of the centrality of `class consciousness' remains in such formulations. And they continue to produce `priority' arguments between class and gender, between class and community.

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1.   Prabhu Mohapatra, Andrew Wells, Samita Sen, *Asian Labour. A Debate on Culture, Consciousness and Representation*. Amsterdam, 1997.