Labor-oriented intellectuals and the promotion of Labor revitalization

A case-study of the ILR School at Cornell

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The « New Labor » project reflects a change in the way intellectuals consider their relationship to the Labor movement

- Few studies about its origination in the Labor movement and no such work about its intellectual origins
- How do initiatives made by intellectuals relate to the institutional logics of their own field of action?
- Answering that question implies deconstructing « the intellectual », in order to consider specific groups and the organizations that give them a social status
- Studying labor-oriented scholars can in turn shed new light on the « New labor » project by stressing its contradictory aspects.
The case of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations

- Created in 1945 as a public service institution in the private, Ivy League University of Cornell, NY
- A key actor in both the institutionalization and transformation of the IR field (from IR to Labor and Employment relations)
- Data: a research stay at Cornell, Ithaca (Feb.-Apr. 2013); interviews, observations, archives (Office of the Dean of ILR, Cook papers, Nash papers, UCLEA/UALE...). Main source today: the annual reports of the dean of ILR to Cornell Provost.
- A starting point: questions and hypotheses rather than answers...
1. There is not one, but two groups of Labor-oriented intellectuals in the world of US higher education: labor scholars and labor educators

2. The «New labor» literature gave academic visibility to issues long addressed by labor educators

3. Some blind spots of the literature are related to the practical constraints of work for both labor scholars and labor educators

4. The public visibility of «New labor» and its actual appropriation by workers: a democratic contradiction?
1. There is not one, but two groups of Labor-oriented intellectuals in the world of US higher education: labor scholars and labor educators

- The differentiation of labor educators from labor scholars through the extension division: from the enlightenment of IR community by Academics to the technical training of Labor, Government and Corporations by specialized instructors

- The professionnalization of labor educators: emergence of « labor studies »

- The intertwining: IR-in-crisis scholars get more labor-friendly while labor educators get more credentials
2. The « New labor » literature gave academic visibility to issues long addressed by labor educators

- Issues long addressed in labor education: union democracy and leadership, organizing, representing women and minorities, building labor-community alliances...

- An increased demand for intellectual assistance from the changing leadership of organized labor

- Questions of education turned into questions of research

- Research circulates in conference papers, articles, and books and gets labeled as « New labor »

- The globalization of Academic markets gives it international visibility
3. Some blind spots of the literature are related to the practical constraints of work for both labor scholars and labor educators

Why is the routine work of union representatives neglected?

- The transformations of the Extension division: priority to « strategic leadership » and « global issues »
- « Innovation » adds value to consulting work, « routine » does not.
- The « de facto privatization » of ILR School:
  Public funding by the State of New York: 90% in 1960; 75% in 1970; 60% in 1980; 40 % in 1990; 30 % in 1996 (dean Lipsky, 1996)
  15% in 2013 (interview with faculty, 2013)
4. The public visibility of « New labor » and its actual appropriation by workers: a democratic contradiction?

- The creation of the Worker institute strengthened the public visibility of ILR’s labor-oriented work and thus gave increased legitimacy to controversial issues (e.g. precarious workforce)

- But it also reflects the transformations of the institutional infrastructure of ILR’s Labor side: organizational centralization, global development at the expense of its local anchorings, market strategy, interruption of the statutory convergence between resident and extension faculty (no more tenures)...

⇒ Isomorphism with the management side... but asymmetry

- « New labor » is also about « empowering workers ». Workers’ access to labor education is an important means for it. It is not only a managerial but also a democratic issue: ILR’s contribution to that task may have declined.

- Have other institutions taken over from it? Further research would request expanding an ecological approach to other relevant actors (rival institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations...).