

Body politics and the struggle for a living wage

1 The political body in the body politic

Bodies embedded in a social process such as the circulation of variable capital are never to be construed as docile or passive. It is, after all, only through the ‘form-giving fire’ of the capacity to labor that capital is produced. And even if labor under the domination of capital is condemned for the most part to produce the conditions and instruments of its own domination (as much in the realm of consumption and exchange as in production itself), the transformative and creative capacities of the laborer always carry the potentiality (however unimaginable in the present circumstances) to fashion an alternative mode of production, exchange, and consumption. Those transformative and creative capacities can never be erased. This poses acute problems for the maintenance of capitalism’s authority while providing multiple opportunities for laborers to assert their agency and will. It is no accident, therefore, that Marx attaches the appellation ‘living’ to the labor embedded in the circulation of variable capital to emphasize not only its fundamental qualities of dynamism and creativity but also to indicate where the life-force and the subversive power for change resides.

An analysis of the circulation of variable capital shows that ‘body politics’ looks different from the standpoints of production, exchange, and consumption. Trade-offs plainly exist between how laborers submit to or struggle with the dictates of capital at one moment to enhance their powers at another. Abject submission to the dictates of capital within production, for example, may for some be a reasonable price to bear for adequate pleasures and fulfillment of desires (presuming such are possible given the multiple fetishism of the market) in the realm of consumption. But what dictates whether that price is judged too high? The working body is more than just ‘meat’ as William Gibson so disparagingly refers to it in his dystopian novel *Neuromancer* and laborers are more than just ‘hands’ (presuming they have neither head nor belly as Charles Dickens mockingly observes in *Hard Times*). The concept of the body is here in danger of

losing its political purchase because it cannot provide a basis to define the *direction* as opposed to the *locus* of political action. Those (like Foucault and Butler) who appeal to the body as a foundational concept consequently experience intense difficulty in elaborating a politics that focuses on anything other than sexuality. Concern for the broader issues of what happens to bodies inserted into the circulation of variable capital typically disappears in such accounts (although Butler [1998] has recently taken pains to point out the connections between body politics and political economic questions). Yet a concept of variable capital which posits the laborer as the pure subject of capital accumulation cannot help solve the problem either. 'Body politics' in this narrow reductionist sense then becomes just as disempowering *vis-d-vis* capital accumulation as the idea of globalization. Something else is required to translate from the realm of body as 'meat' for accumulation to the concept of laborer as political agent.

The body cannot be construed as the locus of political action without a notion of what it is that 'individuals,' 'persons,' or social movements might want or be able to do in the world. Concepts such as *person*, *individual*, *self*, and *identity*, rich with political thought and possibilities, emerge phoenix-like out of the ashes of body reductionism to take their places within the firmament of concepts to guide political action. Marx has this in mind as he contrasts the deadly passivity of the concept of variable capital with the concept of 'living labor' or, more broadly, of 'class for itself struggling to redefine the historical and geographical conditions of its own embeddedness within capital accumulation. It is the laborer as *person* who is the bearer of the commodity labor power and that person is the bearer of ideals and aspirations concerning, for example, the dignity of labor and the desire to be treated with respect and consideration as a whole living being, and to treat others likewise.

Some may be tempted at this point to abandon the relational view for, as Eagleton (1997, 22) complains, 'to dissolve human beings to nexuses of processes may be useful if you had previously thought of them as solitary atoms, but unhelpful when you want to insist on their moral autonomy.' Marx (1973 edition, 84) demurs:

[T]he more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole ... Only in the eighteenth century, in 'civil society', do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch that produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a [political animal], not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal that can individuate

itself only in the midst of society. Production by an outside individual outside society... is as much an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other.

Marx here builds on Aristotle's view that human beings are both social and political animals needing intimate relations with others and that such forms of social relating constitute and sustain civil society. How human beings have gone about this task has varied historically and geographically. The sense of self and of personhood is relational and socially constructed (and Marx here anticipates Strathern's formulation cited above) in exactly the same way as the body is a social construct except that the forces at work (and it is no accident that Marx cites language as his parallel) are significantly different. The notion of 'individuals possessed of moral autonomy,' for example, is not a universal but arose in the eighteenth century in Europe as commodity exchange and capital accumulation became more generalized. The task of active politics, in Marx's view, is to seek transformations of social relations in the full recognition that the starting point of political action rests upon achieved historical-geographical conditions.

We here encounter a reflexive point from which to critique certain versions of that 'return to the body' that has been so strongly evidenced in recent years. The dangers of 'body reductionism' - the idea that the body is the *only* foundational concept we can trust in looking for an alternative politics - become plain to see. But, in contrast, in searching for associative concepts (such as those of 'person', 'self, and 'individual') there is an equal danger of reconstituting the liberal eighteenth-century ideal of the 'individual' endowed with 'moral autonomy' as the basis for political theory and political action. We have to find a path between 'body reductionism' on the one hand and merely falling back into what Benton (1993, 144) calls 'the liberal illusion' about political rights propagated with such devastating effects through the crude association of capitalism and bourgeois democracy on the other;

In societies governed by deep inequalities of political power, economic wealth, social standing and cultural accomplishments, the promise of equal rights is delusory with the consequence that for the majority, rights are merely abstract, formal entitlements with little or no *de facto* purchase on the realities of social life. In so far as social life is regulated by these abstract principles and in so far as the promise is taken for its fulfillment, then the discourse of rights and justice is an ideology, a form of mystification which has a causal role in binding individuals to the very conditions of dependence and impoverishment from which it purports to offer emancipation.

The need for the relational view does not disappear but deepens. For while Benton has one side of the picture he loses sight of the ways in which

socially embedded notions of personal autonomy and of the power of individuals to regulate their own lives in accordance with their own beliefs and desires can also operate as persistent even if subterranean pressures subverting dominant ideologies in surprising ways. Marx (1964 edition, 181) pioneered such a relational conception in his early works when, for example, he argued:

To say that man is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being full of natural vigor is to say that he has real, sensuous, objects as the objects of his being or of his life, or that he can only express his life in real, sensuous objects. To be objective, natural and sensuous, and at the same time to have object, nature and sense outside oneself, or oneself to be object, nature and sense for a third party, is one and the same thing... A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being, and plays no part in the system of nature. A being which has no object outside of itself is not an objective being, A being which is not itself an object for some third being has no being for its object', i.e. it is not objectively related. Its being is not objective. An unobjective being is a nullity - an un-being.

While the prose is convoluted the meaning is clear enough - no body exists outside of its relations with other bodies and the exercise of powers and counterpowers among bodies is a central constitutive aspect of social life. In more recent times we can see in Ricoeur's (1992) trenchant criticism of Parfitt and, by implication, Locke and Hume, a critical reminder of how the clash between the liberal conception of personal identity and, in Ricoeur's case, a relational conception of narrative identity produces a dramatically alternative reading of how body politics might be constructed.

All of this returns us, though via a different path, to the point at which we arrived in our analysis of the phenomenon of globalization. From the standpoint of the laborer, embedded as a political person within the circulation of capital, politics is rooted in the positionalities that he or she assumes and the potentialities that attach thereto. On the one hand there is the revolutionary urge to become free of that embeddedness within the circulation of capital that so circumscribes life chances, body politics, and socio-ecological futures. On the other, there is the reformist demand for fair and proper treatment within that circulation process, to be free, for example, of the ugly choice between adequate remunerations in consumption and abject submission in production. And for those billion or so workers in the world who must live on less than a dollar a day (cf. Chapter 3), the struggle for dignity in the workplace, for adequate life chances, for a living wage, and for some broader conception of human, civil, and political rights becomes a minimalist political program. But different moments generate different political arguments and so the

potential coherency and singularity of the worker's voice has the awkward habit of dissolving into different opinions as political persons choose their positions and assumptions about identities and interests (cf Unger, 1987b, 548). Such politics, as I argued at the end of Chapter 3, are necessarily a global as well as a local affair. So it is to a local manifestation of such a struggle that I now turn.

2 Struggling for a living wage

Ever since Thomas Hobbes roundly declared that 'the value of a man is his price,' the question of the proper value of labor power has hovered over capitalism as a problem as difficult to resolve theoretically as it has been practically. The classical political economists could never quite resolve the confusion that arose from on the one hand equating value with labor and on the other hand having to recognize that the value of labor as an input to production was somehow less than the value it generated (thus leaving room for rents, profits, interest, and the like). Marx neatly solved that problem by recognizing a difference between labor as the substance of value and labor power (the capacity to create value) as a commodity sold by laborers to capitalists. Equally neatly, the neoclassicals eviscerated the political message that came from Marx's formulation by equating proper wages with the marginal return on labor as an input to production (leaving open therefore the possibility for a 'fair' rate of return for capital and land). That idea never worked well for, as Marx pointed out, labor is not a commodity like any other. A host of moral, social, historical and geographical circumstances enters into its formulation and valuation. Chief among these is a long and widespread historical geography of class struggle.

In the United States, for example, the concept of an adequate 'living wage' (alongside that of a socially regulated working day) was fundamental to the agitation that began in cities like Baltimore and Pittsburgh with the massive railroad strike of 1877. As Glickman (1997) shows, this was the kind of agitation that ultimately led to minimum wage legislation, at first at State and then subsequently at the Federal level during the New Deal years.

There has always been controversy as to what properly constitutes a living wage. Since 1968, as Pollin and Luce (1998) document, the value of the minimum wage established at the Federal level has declined by some thirty percent in real terms, placing those with full time minimum wage jobs now well below the poverty level. Its 1997 increase (to \$5.15 from a baseline of \$4.25 an hour in 1994) still kept it well below 1968 standards. With a good deal of frustration at the ability to assure an adequate living wage at the Federal scale, a whole series of local campaigns and agitations

at a more local level have in recent years broken out across the United States. One of the pioneers in this movement exists in my home town of Baltimore. I provide, then, an account of this local struggle as an illustration of how a theory of uneven geographical developments might work in conjunction with arguments for a universal system of human rights (cf. Chapter 5).

The circumstances regulating wages and living conditions in Baltimore underwent significant alterations from the late 1960s onwards (see Chapter 8). Severe deindustrialization of the economy (connected with processes of globalization) meant some radical shifts in the circulation of variable capital within the metropolitan region. In addition to widespread structural unemployment (and the production of a so-called and much stigmatized 'underclass') the effect was to move employment away from the blue collar (largely white male and unionized) industrial sector and into a wide array of service activities, particularly those connected to the so-called 'hospitality sector' (hotels, tourism, conventions, museums) that underpinned the redevelopment effort in Baltimore. The result (in line with much of the US economy - see, e.g., Wilson, 1996, and Kasarda, 1995) was widespread long-term structural unemployment and a shift towards non-unionized and female employment in low-paying 'unskilled' jobs. Low-income job opportunities arose in areas such as cleaning, janitorial, parking, and security services. Paying only minimum wages and often resting on temporary work which yielded even less on a weekly basis (with no health, security, or pension benefits) the growth of this form of employment produced an increasing number of 'working poor' - individuals or families fully employed whose incomes were often well below the official poverty line (a recent report put the number of children of the working poor in the United States at 5.6 million in 1994 as opposed to 3.4 million in 1974 - see Holmes, 1996). African-American women, drawn from the impoverished zones of the inner city, became the main source of this kind of labor in Baltimore, indicating a discursive and largely racist-sexist construction of the inherent 'value' of *that* kind of labor power from *that* kind of place. This stereotyping was automatically reinforced and framed within a circulation process of variable capital and capital accumulation that insisted that this was the kind of labor power that was essential to its own valorization.

These broad economic trends were paralleled by a nation-wide political attack upon working-class institutions and government supports (see, e.g., Edsall, 1984) and a general shift by a whole range of public and private institutions towards political-economic practices that emphasized capital accumulation. One effect was spiraling social inequalities of the sort symbolized by the declining value of the minimum wage in real value terms.

A particular instance of this political economic shift is worth recording. In 1984, the Johns Hopkins University and the Johns Hopkins Hospital (both non-profit and educational institutions) in Baltimore formed a for-profit wholly-owned subsidiary called Dome Corporation, which provides security, parking, cleaning, and janitorial services through another subsidiary called Broadway Services Inc. This firm does some of the cleaning and janitorial work in the Johns Hopkins System as well as in a number of City schools, downtown offices, and the like. Most of the employees are women and African-American, drawn from the impoverished zones of Baltimore City. Most were paid at or slightly above the then-prevailing minimum wage of \$4.25 (raised to \$4.75 in 1996 and then \$5.15 in 1997). Full-time employees paid circa \$5 per week for minimal health insurance, but a significant portion of the work was done by temporary workers with no benefits. The Johns Hopkins System has by this strategy achieved cost-savings on its cleaning bills and a healthy rate of return (circa 10%) on its investment (debt plus equity). It has since been cited by other universities as a successful model of how to cut costs by out-sourcing its cleaning work while also making a profit.

This is an example of how shifts in the circulation of variable capital can occur. Such shifts have radical effects upon bodily conditions and practices. Everyone recognizes that \$4.75 an hour is insufficient to live on. To bring a family of four above the official poverty line would require a permanent job at a minimum of \$7.70 per hour (1996 values) plus benefits, in Baltimore. The lack of health benefits and elementary care translates into a chronic epidemiological condition for many inner-city neighborhoods (and the sad paradox of cleaners unable to use the services of the hospital they clean). The need to hold down two jobs to survive translates into a condition of permanent physical exhaustion from a twelve-hour working day plus travel time on unreliable public transport between job sites and residences. When two jobs could not be had, the effect was to force some of the employed to live in shelters rather than regular housing and eat at charity soup kitchens rather than at Roy Rogers or Burger Kings (the more usual places of consumption that offered cheap minimal nutrition). The demands of the labor process (often late and erratic hours) in relation to restricted locational choices for living (given rents, housing affordability, public transport availability - car ownership is not feasible, and the like) reinforced geographical segregation. The insertion of racially marked and gendered bodies into this system trapped certain social groups into the dead-end prospects associated with these impoverished zones (see Fernandez-Kelly, 1994; more generally, Hanson and Pratt, 1994).

It is hard to do justice to the appalling effects of such conditions at all points in this particular process of circulation variable capital. Lack of

respect and dignity in the workplace, negligible bargaining power in the labor market, minimal and health-threatening forms of consumption and terrible conditions of child-rearing are characteristic. The marks of all this violence upon individual bodies are not hard to read. Systematic studies again and again emphasize the stark impacts of inequalities upon life chances. Baltimore City has the lowest life expectancy of almost any other comparable jurisdiction in the United States (and comparable to many impoverished and undeveloped countries). 'In the groups we studied,' write Geronimus et al. (1996, 1555-6), after a comparative study of similar zones of Detroit, New York City, Los Angeles, and Alabama, 'the number of years of life lost generally increased with the percentage of people in the group who were living in poverty, with the poverty rate accounting for more than half the racial differences in mortality.' The data tell an appalling story; 'the probability that a 15 year old girl in Harlem would survive to the age of 45 was the same as the probability that a typical white girl anywhere in the United States would survive to the age of 65.' While it would be wrong to argue that lack of a living wage is the only factor at work here, the associations are far too strong to deny an active connection.

A campaign for a 'living wage,' organized by Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) seeks to change all this. BUILD was founded in 1978, through the coming together of the Interfaith Ministerial Alliance (predominantly though by no means exclusively African-American) that had been an important church-based force for civil rights with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF, a Chicago-based Saul Alinsky style community empowerment organization). BUILD became an activist voice for social change and economic development in the city dedicated to the improved well-being of impoverished and marginalized populations. It played an important role in struggles to regenerate failing neighborhoods and it initially joined wholeheartedly in the city and corporate-led strategy to generate employment through public investments and subsidies to business (as, e.g., in the Inner Harbor renewal, the construction of a convention center, a new ballpark, etc., all in the downtown core).

In the early 1990s, BUILD recognized that its strategies were too limited. Revitalized neighborhoods lacking adequate employment slipped back into decay. The public investment and subsidies to corporations were producing below-poverty jobs. The corporate-backed revitalization of downtown had not delivered on its promises and was increasingly viewed by BUILD as a 'great betrayal.' The churches that formed the basis of BUILD found themselves pushed to deliver more and more in the way of social services (soup kitchens, clothing, social assistance) to a population for whom Groucho Marx's witticism - 'Look at me. I've made my way up from nothing to a state of extreme poverty' - was cruel as well as a joke.

Consistent with its religious roots, BUILD decided to launch a campaign in the name of ‘family values’ and ‘community’ betterment, for a ‘living wage.’ They argued that business, in return for public subsidies, should commit itself to a social compact. This translated into the ideal of a minimum wage of \$7.70 per hour, permanent jobs, adequate benefits, and career opportunities for all workers. Recognizing the difficulty of achieving this overnight, BUILD proposed an immediate wage hike to \$6.10 an hour rising to \$6.60 in July 1996 and going to \$7.10 in 1997 and \$7.70 in 1999. This is actually a minimalist demand (it is worth noting that the most recent piece of living wage legislation in San Jose, California, set the level at \$10.75).

Like all such struggles, as Marx observed (1976 edition, 409), the role of ‘allies in those social layers not directly interested in the question’ is of considerable significance. The impetus for the campaign came from the churches. This set the tone concerning the definition of moral and civilized behavior that always enters into the determination of the value of labor power. What BUILD in effect says is that the market valuation of labor power as it now occurs in Baltimore is unacceptable as a ‘moral’ datum for a ‘civilized’ country. The focus on jobs connected immediately to the institutions of labor. A new form of labor organizing was needed which drew upon the skills of IAF, the power of AFSCME (State, County and Municipal Employees, which became a full partner in the campaign in 1994, providing personnel and resources). This meant a move away from traditional workplace industrial organizing towards a city-wide movement to change the baseline conditions for the circulation of variable capital. Jonathan Lange (1996), the labor organizer working with BUILD, outlines the strategy as follows:

Organizing is a relational activity, it takes place *in* a place among people, and it is not totally mobile like capital. Ultimately you are not organizing workplaces and factories you are organizing people so ... the industrial model does not make total sense. So you’ve got to figure out how to organize ... a total labor market no matter where people work, to build an organization that is transportable for people from workplace to workplace, which means that the benefit plans have to be portable, the relationships in the organization have to be portable and not built all totally on one work place, which means that you have to understand people are not going to be leaders necessarily right away but potential leaders who can develop a following in their current workplace or when they move into their new one.

It means you have to target those industries and corporations where your ability to withhold labor isn’t the only strength you have, that you have other sorts of ways of getting leverage to try and reach recognition and accommodation ... This is an experiment to try to figure out whether within a

certain labor market if you merge, if you ally working people with other kinds of decency and power and you carefully target institutions that are not totally mobile, that cannot just run away with their capital, can workers get themselves on a more equal footing? And if you do that enough ... can you begin to really raise the basis, the floor of wages in a city?

The strategy is, then, two pronged. First, build a cadre of workers who can carry their leadership skills and potentialities with them. Some workers - mostly African-American women and men - immediately joined up to lead a Solidarity Sponsoring Committee that adopted as its motto 'Climbing Jacob's Ladder.' But others were more reluctant. Second, push hard to create a powerful alliance of forces to change the baseline for the circulation of variable capital. Initially, BUILD's strength lay in the churches. But the fact that it was mainly women and African-American women who were suffering conjoined questions of gender, race, and class in ways that could potentially unify a variety of social movements (including the unions as well as civil rights and women's organizations). The campaign, moreover, made great play with the concept of the dignity of labor and of the laborer, even daring to argue sometimes that the rule that 'any job was better than none' ought to be brought into question when the quality, potentiality, and dignity of available labor processes was taken into account.

The campaign won significant concessions in 1995. City Hall now mandates that all city wages and all sub-contracts with the city should honor the 'living-wage' policy. Though the Mayor initially resisted on the grounds of keeping Baltimore competitive in the face of 'globalization,' he now claims the effort is cost-effective (when the reduced cost of social services to the impoverished poor is factored in). The World Trade Center (run by the State Government) has followed suit (with, interestingly, support from the business tenants in the State-operated building but heavy criticism from business leaders in the State). Early in 1998, the City School Board agreed to a living-wage clause in all its subcontracts. Now the Johns Hopkins System is faced with exactly that same question, both as the supplier of services (through Broadway Services) and, being the largest private employer in the State, as a demander of them (an interesting example of how capital so frequently operates on both sides of the supply-demand equation when it comes to labor - cf. Marx's argument, 1976 edition, 752). To this end a campaign began early in 1996 to persuade the Johns Hopkins System to accept the living wage as part of its own contractual practices.

The search for allies within the Johns Hopkins System became crucial. The Graduate Representative Organization together with some faculty and, ultimately, the Black Student Union and some representatives of the

student council took up the question. Initially there was also a surprising degree of indifference, even on the part of campus groups that ought to have been immediately interested in the question. Some economists in the University argued (rather predictably) against any interference in free-market forces, on the grounds ‘that most people earning the present minimum wage are worth just that’ (Hanke, 1996). Plainly, the outcome of the struggle depended (and continues to depend) not only on the capacities of the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee (SSC) (with AFSCME’s help) to organize and the powers of moral suasion of BUILD but also upon the ability to create a powerful alliance within Johns Hopkins itself behind the idea that a living wage is mandatory for all those who work directly or indirectly (through sub-contracts) within the institution. By 1998, most students and most faculty were persuaded of the idea but were still faced by a recalcitrant administration. By 1999, the latter, in response to both internal and external pressures (both financial and moral), had tardily recognized its responsibilities towards the appalling conditions of impoverishment and ill-health that predominated in its shadow. It also finally acknowledged that its own wage policies might have some role in the construction of such conditions. It announced it would ‘become a leader’ among the universities on the living wage issue and ensure that everyone would receive at least \$7.75 an hour (the 1996 living wage) by 2002.

The Baltimore campaign for a living wage (which is currently being replicated in some thirty or so other cities as well as at the state level elsewhere — see Pollin and Luce, 1998) offers a rather special set of openings to change the politics of how bodies are constructed/destroyed within the city. Its basis in the churches, the community, the unions, the universities, as well as among those social layers ‘not immediately concerned with the question,’ starts to frame body politics in a rather special way, by-passing some of the more conventional binaries of capital/labor, white/black, male/female, and nature/culture. Radical social constructionists should presumably relish rather than frown upon this confusion of terms. If, for example, Butler’s (1993, 9) argument for ‘a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter,’ is taken as the proper framing for understanding the body in a situation of this sort, then the ‘living wage’ campaign is a fundamental form of body politics. This is not to say its mode is unproblematic. Consistent with its religious roots and its emphasis upon a traditional conception of the family as a proper unit of reproduction, the religious side of the campaign could be viewed as or even turn exclusionary. And BUILD in general seeks its own empowerment as a political organization as well as the empowerment of the low-income population it

seeks to serve. Yet these are not reasons to abjure the living-wage objective. In practice many different interests (some secular as well as religious) now support the common goal of a decent living wage for everyone who works in Baltimore.

The 'living-wage' issue is fundamentally a class issue that has ramifications across the moments of production, exchange, and consumption. It has the power, therefore, to define what the 'work' side of current proposals for 'workfare' welfare reform might be about. Unfortunately, this potential relationship is now being inverted as the city is forced to absorb several thousand (possibly as many as 14,000) workfare recipients into its labor force (the total employment in all categories downtown is around 100,000). Both the city and Johns Hopkins began to employ workfare recipients at \$1.50 an hour (as 'trainees'), and in the first rush this meant some displacement of minimum wage workers. The effect was to create an even lower datum than that set by the legal minimum wage for the circulation of variable capital within the city. A political struggle organized by BUILD citywide and a coalition of forces within Johns Hopkins led to the commitment by the Governor and by the President of the Johns Hopkins that there would be no displacement of existing workers by workfare trainees.

This is not an easy political battle to win more generally and its unfolding is illustrative of how class struggle gets waged from the capitalist side. Burger King, for example, has one of its most profitable franchises in Baltimore. Located in an 'empowerment zone' it is eligible for government subsidies and it can employ workers off the welfare rolls as 'trainees' at a cost far below the minimum, let alone the living, wage. Yet Burger King gets cited by President Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union Address as one of the large companies willing to hire people off the welfare rolls, and the President promised to press for special tax credits for companies that did this. Later, however, under strong pressure from organized labor and many community groups around the country, the President agreed (against intense Republican opposition) to bring all workfare employment within the framework of labor laws (allowing organizing of workfare workers and protection from the grosser forms of direct exploitation). Thus does the accumulation of capital proceed, with state assistance mainly going to capital, as class struggle unfolds around one of the most contested and fraught social issues of the 1990s in the United States.

The living-wage campaign integrates race, gender, and class concerns at the level of the 'city' as a whole. In particular, it opens up potential leadership roles for African-American women to alter bodily practices and claim basic economic rights. The campaign furthermore proposes a

different spatial model of political intervention in the valuation of labor power, highlighting Munn's argument that 'bodily spacetime serves as a condensed sign of the wider spacetime of which it is a part' (1985, 17). Creating an alternative spatial frame to that of increasingly fragmented workplaces (within which the value of labor power can only be established piecemeal) becomes part of the means to alter the conditions of circulation of variable capital. The campaign offers the possibility for broad-based coalition politics at a different spatial scale.

Changing the baseline conditions of the circulation of variable capital will not change everything that needs to be changed in Baltimore either within the labor process or without. It will not automatically improve the quality of the work experience. It does not automatically confront the sexual harassment of the women on the job, the rampant racism in the city, manifestations of homophobia, the dramatic deterioration of many Baltimore neighborhoods, or even the stresses within and around the institution of the family. Nor does it open the door to revolution rather than reform of the wage system (abolition of the wages system is hardly an issue here whereas the reformist claim - of which Marx was roundly critical - for a fair day's wage for a fair day's work is). But it does create necessary conditions for the transformation of bodily practices on the part of a substantial number of working people in Baltimore. Without that, many other possibilities for social transformation are blocked. Marx (1967 edition. Volume 3, 320), recognizing the dilemma, put it this way in a remarkable passage that deserves some thought:

[T]he realm of freedom actually begins only when labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy those wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, by bringing it under common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with the realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.

To that remarkable passage with its startlingly reformist last sentence we can also add: ‘an adequate living wage is likewise a basic prerequisite.’ The struggle for a living wage within the space of Baltimore has its place in a more universal struggle for rights, for justice, dignity, and decency in all the interstices of a globalizing capitalism. Its particularities make it peculiar, give it strengths and weaknesses, but they are not irrelevant to the achievement of a more universalizing politics. And while the numbers of people so far affected are small, the manner of these campaigns illustrates how frustration of politics at one scale can potentially be met by a shift to a different scale of political action.

3 Bodies in space and time

The body that is to be the ‘measure of all things’ is itself a site of contestation for the forces that create it. The body (like the person and the self) is an internal relation and therefore open and porous to the world. Unfortunately the relational conception of the body can all too easily take an idealist turn, particularly in academic politics. The body is not monadic, nor does it float freely in some ether of culture, discourses, and representations, however important these may be in materializations of the body. The study of the body has to be grounded in an understanding of real spatio-temporal relations between material practices, representations, imaginaries, institutions, social relations, and the prevailing structures of political-economic power. The body can then be viewed as a nexus through which the possibilities for emancipatory politics can be approached. While there are some remarkable insightful writings on that theme available to us, it is worthwhile remembering the vital insights to be had from Marx’s understanding of how bodily materializations occur within the circulation of capital under capitalist social relations. The body may be ‘an accumulation strategy in the deepest sense’ but it is also the locus of political resistance given direction, as the example of BUILD’s campaign for a living wage in Baltimore illustrates, by the basic fact that we are, in the most literal sense, political animals rendered capable of moral argument and thereby endowed with the capacity to transform the social relations and institutions that lie at the heart of any civil society. Laborers are, in short, positioned to claim rights consistent with notions of dignity, need, and contribution to the common good. If those claims are unrealizable within the circulation of variable capital then, it seems, the revolutionary demand to escape such constraints is a fundamental aspect of what body politics must be about. We shall need to consider it.