



# ISHA NEWSLETTER

International Social History Association

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### Preface

*Marcel van der Linden*



A paradox characterizes the present state of social historiography: we accumulate more and more knowledge, but simultaneously, this knowledge becomes increasingly fragmented. We understand social structures and processes of the past much better than we did a few decades ago. In key areas, in methods and in sources, a cumulative process of knowledge acquisition has taken place. At the same time, much that once appeared to be constant has changed. Our discipline has splintered into numerous disconnected sub-disciplines, approaches and theories. This paradox has made social history into an exciting, but also complex endeavour. The crucial question is whether we will resign ourselves to the current contradictory development.

I would defend the view that we should not accept the present situation as permanent, but attempt to integrate multiple and intersecting narratives. The current paradox can only be solved with a new paradox: extension plus integration. Let me explain. Large parts of the world, especially Africa and Asia, have until recently been neglected by social historians. In other words, more than half of the world's population has usually been left out. Many similarities, differences and interactions between regions and continents were thus obscured. This is gradually beginning to change. Historians from "the North" have not just become interested in "the South's" past, but, more importantly, social history has started to flourish in the South itself. It now becomes possible to start a global dialogue that should enable us to re-contextualize local narratives. The contrast between diverging historical experiences will allow us to discover hidden assumptions, establish unexpected commonalities, and find surprising connections.

This geographical extension (which should probably be combined with a temporal extension) is absolutely necessary, if we want to discover the connectedness of processes in time and space. But it will only enhance the absence of a coherent general picture if we do not take on a very different challenge: the struggle against fragmentation. A disoriented discipline cannot be put easily on a firm conceptual and theoretical footing. In a conservative reflex, we could pursue a new Grand Synthesis that should enable us to survey the whole field in one glance. However, if anything, the "linguistic", the "cultural" and the "interpretative" angles or positions made clear that such a Synthesis cannot be more than an illusion. Every perspective that we choose will be skewed, and a single narrative can never tell the whole story. Like spotlights, they generate a

lot of light, but they also leave something in the shade and may even blind the observer. What we probably need are multiple “large narratives” that may or may not coexist harmoniously.

The International Social History Association was established to stimulate the discussion on these and related issues between social historians from all parts of the world. The organization is young and developing, but it will do its best to build a global infrastructure for social historians in a globalizing world. It wants to do this through panel discussions, conferences, and other means of communication. This Newsletter, under the able editorship of Béla Tomka, will provide information on our activities and plans. We welcome all ideas, proposals and forms of support.

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## **The International Social History Association: Recent Past and Future Directions**

*Béla Tomka*, University of Szeged



In any discipline the existence of learned societies, the publishing of specialized journals and the organization of thematic conferences are among the major indicators of institutionalization and emancipation with other academic fields. For social history these attributes have already existed on national levels for a long period of time. Internationally speaking, however, the institutionalization of social history was not established until recently. There has not been a lack of journals since many prestigious periodicals, although primarily embedded into the academic life of those countries where they were edited and published, provided for a wide range of opportunities for international scholarly discourse—in some cases this aim even surfaced in the title of the journal (*International Review of Social History*). International social history conferences have essentially been the events of certain branches of the discipline for a long time, such as in urban history. However, in the past decade, advancement can be seen in that respect as well. Since 1998, the *European Social Science History Conference* held in every second year, has begun to play the role of a truly comprehensive and representative international conference of social history, at least at the European level.

Learned societies and concerned associations covering special fields of social history have existed and continue to exist; we can refer again to the example of urban history (*European Association for Urban History*). An international organization embracing the whole field of social history, however, has not existed until very recent times.

This lack of an international organization for social history was astonishing since several other areas of history have this kind of organization. For example the society of economic historians has been successfully operating for several decades (*International Economic History Association*) and other sub-disciplines that are even smaller than social history have their own professional bodies, such as the *International Society for the Didactics of History* or the *Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East*. The existence of learned societies of a specific discipline is, of course, not mainly a matter of prestige, they rather have an important practical value for the researchers of the discipline, which we will come back to later.

The reasons for this long-lasting gap—even at the time of the biggest expansion of social history in the 1960s and 1970s—can be a subject of debate: the myriads of research themes in social history, as well as the methodological heterogeneity of the discipline are definitely points we have to take into account here. Subjective factors must have had an effect as well: for a long time, there has not been any social historian with the invention and the broad network of international contacts also undertaking the strenuous and timeconsuming work of organization.

To create a fuller picture, we should add that between 1951–2002 the *Commission internationale d'histoire des mouvements sociaux et des structures sociales* tried to encourage and coordinate research in social history at an international level but this mission could not be completely accomplished. Above all, the

commission, as its name suggests, was originally created with a much narrower scope focusing on specific areas of social history. Besides, this professional body was somewhat isolated and locked into the French academic life, and could not fully open up to broader themes, approaches and other academic cultures. Furthermore, the death of the French chair of the commission made the further operation impossible and lead to the complete ceasing of it.

The gap in the institutionalization of social history described above was considered unacceptable by several social historians. In 2002, after the initiative of Jürgen Kocka (Berlin), social historians representing renowned research centres—Francis Demier (*Institut d'histoire sociale, Paris*), Marcel van der Linden (*International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam*), Bo Strath (*European University Institute, Florence*), Klaus Tenfelde (*Institut für Soziale Bewegungen, Bochum*), Path Thane (*Institute of Historical Research, London*)—founded the *International Social History Committee* in Berlin with a seat in Amsterdam. The committee pursued the preparation of a more comprehensive association aiming at organizing and coordinating international research in social history.

After these antecedents, on 8 July 2005 the *International Social History Association (ISHA)* was established at the *20th International Congress of Historical Sciences* in Sydney by 10 historians from the following countries: Australia, Canada, France, United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands and Sweden.

The main goals of the association written in its statutes are:

- to maintain and improve the personal contacts between scholars of all countries interested in social history in a broad sense;
- to organize academic meetings on social history (including international conferences);
- to encourage all forms of research and publications relevant to the development and diffusion of social history.

Although these are fairly general and long-term objectives, social history might already benefit from the foundation of the *International Social History Association* in the near future. First of all, the ISHA applied for admission to other international academic associations, for example, the *International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS)* that organizes the *International Congress of Historical Sciences* every five years. As a result of its acceptance, it will be possible for ISHA to have an impact on the thematic structure of congresses in the future with greater opportunities for sessions focusing on social history. At the *21st International Congress of Historical Sciences*, which took place in Amsterdam in August 2010, a session was organized by the ISHA (Mass Migration: A Global Perspective in Continuities and Discontinuities in the 19th and 20th Centuries). Second, the ISHA itself is scheduled to organize smaller thematic conferences or workshops—such as the one on the future of social history. Publishing reports about the state of social history research as well as this newsletter in English are also part of the agenda. For the editorial tasks of the newsletter, volunteers with English as their native language have been sought; however, due to lack of time to secure such help, a Hungarian social historian will undertake the editorial tasks. The newsletter will be distributed in electronic form to all of those colleagues who are interested and request it.

Amsterdam was selected as the seat of the Association where one of the world's most eminent research institutes focusing on social history, the *International Institute of Social History*, is located. Its research director, Marcel van der Linden, has already undertaken a great part of the organization of the ISHA. The excellent infrastructure of the Institute can facilitate the work of the ISHA in the future.

The founding members formed the first General Assembly in Sydney and elected the ISHA officials. Marcel van der Linden was elected as the first President of the Association. The Executive Committee—that is, the most important decision-making group between General Assemblies held every five years—consisted of 12 members in the first five years.

All learned societies or individuals dealing with social history can be members of the ISHA. The General Assembly approves admission to membership on the recommendation of the Executive Committee. Applications have to be submitted to the latter body. Membership fees are 25 EUR for individuals, 15 EUR for students and 300 EUR for institutions. Apart from several individuals and the above-mentioned five Institutes, the *Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, the *Canadian Committee on Labour History*, and the *Journal of Social History*—to name a few—have already been admitted.

In summary, compared to other sub-disciplines of history, an international learned society with the intention of embracing the whole of social history was created relatively late in July 2005. Considering the past experiences of other similar institutions we can expect that the activities of the newly-created *International Social History Association* will give further impetus to research in social history. This can be

achieved, first of all, by strengthening its internationalization through the organization of forums for social historians to exchange ideas and through weaving a dense network of personal contacts that facilitates cooperation between social historians working in diverse academic cultures.

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## Second General Assembly of the International Social History Association



The Second General Assembly of the ISHA was held at the 21st International Congress of Historical Sciences in Amsterdam, 27 August 2010.

### 1. Activities during the past five years

At the Assembly, the President of the ISHA, Marcel van der Linden reported the following:

- Gaining legal recognition and opening a bank account for the association in the Netherlands proved to be far more difficult than anticipated, especially since we wanted the association to be truly global; the Sydney assembly (8 July 2005) had elected only two officers (president: Marcel; treasurer: Greg Kealey), of whom one, the treasurer, lives in Canada. Legal and banking documents had to be signed by both *in situ*. It took almost two years (and the help of Lex Heerma van Voss as pseudo-treasurer) until a bank account could be officially opened (ABN-AMRO, account number 57.06.64.985). Since that date, Greg Kealey has taken care of ISHA's finances. The balance per December 31, 2009 was €430.43. The statutes finally fixed deviate in some details from the statutes designed in Sydney, because Dutch law required adaptations.
  - As agreed in Sydney, we applied for membership of the International Economic History Association (IEHA). We became an affiliated member from September 2005, and a full member since the XIVth World Economic History Congress, held in Helsinki, August 2006. The ISHA participated in the XVth World Economic History Congress, held in Utrecht, August 2009.
  - As agreed in Sydney, we organized sessions at the historical world congress (CISH/ICHS), in Amsterdam, August 2010. Dirk Hoerder and Amarjit Kaur took excellent care of this and coordinated three half-day sessions on "Mass Migration: A Global Perspective".
  - As agreed in Sydney, Dirk Hoerder contacted migration history institutions/organizations to join, but to no avail.
  - As agreed in Sydney, Marcel van der Linden organized a workshop on "Indentured Plantation Labour: A Comparative Historical Approach", at IISH Amsterdam, 6-7 June 2006.
  - As agreed in Sydney, Marcel van der Linden contacted the ITH (International Conference of Labour and Social History) in Austria (26 July 2005). ITH and ISHA co-organized a panel at the conference "Labour Crossings", Johannesburg, 5-8 September 2008 (though ITH could contribute financially and ISHA could not).
  - Béla Tomka published an informative article on the association: "Perfecting Institutionalization: The Foundation of the International Social History Association", *Journal of Social History*, Volume 40, Number 4, Summer 2007, pp. 987-989.
  - Other plans were, however, not realized. The electronic newsletter (for which the Australian participants wanted to take responsibility) did not materialize. Neither did the Bellaggio meeting (25 participants) on the Future of Social History, with participants from all continents; nor the session "Beyond the Linguistic Turn" for the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) 2008.
  - All in all, one can say that we have achieved a few things, but certainly not as much as we intended at the Sydney meeting.
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## 2. Results and prospects

The report of the President was succeeded by a discussion which resulted in the following decisions:

- a) The ISHA should have more frequent business meetings, in the margin of conferences like the annual American Social Science History Conferences (in 2010 in Chicago, 18-21 November), the bi-annual ESSHCs (in 2012 in Glasgow), the WEHC (in 2012 in Stellenbosch), and of course the CISH/ICHS (in 2015 in Qingdao).
- b) The ISHA should launch an electronic newsletter, which contains information on organizational developments and advertises conferences where we have a possibility to contribute (e.g., WEHC, CISH/ICHS). Béla Tomka will draft texts for such a newsletter and Amarjit Kaur will do language checks.
- c) Jürgen Kocka and Marcel van der Linden will, on behalf of the ISHA, propose a session at the WEHC 2012 with the provisional title “Capitalism: The Return of an Outmoded Concept?”. Jürgen Kocka will draft the proposal and submit it before the first deadline of 1 September 2010. (The second deadline for proposals for the WEHC will be in mid 2011.)
- d) Lex Heerma van Voss suggests that ISHA could—in consultation with the conference coordinators—organize sessions at the European Social Science History Conferences (the next one will take place in Glasgow, 2012). Marcel van der Linden will explore this option.
- e) Since social history seems to have lost much of its distinctiveness in recent years, while it has become integrated in other historical subdisciplines at the same time, the assembly endorses Jürgen Kocka’s suggestion, that we should propose sessions on “popular” historical topics and give them a socio-historical “twist”. We could, for example, develop ideas for panels on “The Social History of Memory” or “The Social History of Public Space”.
- f) The assembly also endorses Jürgen Kocka’s proposal to organize a session, panel or workshop on “The Rise and Decline of Social History” (working title), at the CISH/ICHS in 2015 or earlier. Marcel van der Linden will approach Peter Stearns and ask him if he would be interested in organizing or co-organizing such an event.
- g) Marcel van der Linden will ask Peter Stearns if it is possible to have some kind of formal relationship with the *Journal of Social History*.
- h) Dirk Hoerder will explore the possibility to affiliate the new *Journal of Global Migration History* (Brill, Leiden/Boston) with the ISHA.
- i) Dirk Hoerder will explore the possibility of financing a series of workshops with financial support of the VW-Stiftung.
- j) The ISHA needs a flyer, to be distributed at conferences, etc.

## 3. Election of a new Board

The Assembly elected the new Board for the period 2010-15. The composition of the Board of the ISHA will be as follows:

President: Marcel van der Linden.

Vice-President: Dirk Hoerder.

Treasurer: Lex Heerma van Voss.

Ordinary members: Christian De Vito, Amarjit Kaur, Béla Tomka.

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## NEWS

### **Capitalism: the re-emergence of an outmoded concept?**

The session proposal prepared by Jürgen Kocka (Berlin) and Marcel van der Linden (Amsterdam) for the *XVIth World Economic History Congress, 9-13 July 2012, Stellenbosch/South Africa* entitled *Capitalism: the re-emergence of an outmoded concept?* has been accepted by the Executive Committee of the International Economic History Association during its last meeting.

Corresponding Session Organiser: Prof. Jürgen Kocka, Social Science Research Center Berlin  
Email: [kocka@wzb.eu](mailto:kocka@wzb.eu)

#### Session Abstract:

In contrast to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the concept “capitalism” has not been central for (non-marxist) economic and social historians, in recent decades. This may be changing, and perhaps it should. This session will discuss these tendencies and explore their potentials.

Since the end of the Cold War, it has become easier to use “capitalism” in a non-ideological way. The recent financial and economic crisis has generated renewed interest in and studies on capitalism, connected to critical discussions of central problems of our time. How to compare crises of capitalism? What can we learn from history for dealing with present problems? The content of “Kapitalismuskritik” is changing. In what ways? The recent advancement of global history allows to discuss the spatial dimensions of capitalism over the centuries in a new light - between the West and other world regions. The ongoing transnationalization of labor history has led to renewed discussions of wage work and free/unfree labor in different world regions as well as of various forms of capitalism in this context. The flourishing field of history of consumption may profit from connections with the history of capitalism, its cultural contradictions (Daniel Bell) and its need for legitimacy. “Varieties of capitalism” have been studied by institutional economics, historians can relate to this.

The concept “capitalism” draws the attention of social and other historians to economic matters (which many of them neglected in recent decades. At the same time it emphasizes the non-economic (social, cultural, legal, political, religious...) conditions and consequences of economic behavior and processes. The notion of “embedded capitalism” deserves particular interest. “Capitalism”, well defined, may generate new ways of cooperation between different types of historians (and social scientists).

The session will emphasize social historical dimensions in a broad sense. It will investigate the usages of the concept “capitalism” in classical studies as well as its role in different subfields of present research and discussion. It will examine the reasons which speak for and against a renaissance of the concept. It will contribute to the redefinition and contextualization of “capitalism” for future research, particularly for the cooperation of social and economic history in new ways.



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## ISHA Newsletter

The Newsletter is the publication of the International Social History Association

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**Submissions** are welcome including brief notes, such as reports on conferences; personal accounts related to ISHA issues; announcements of forthcoming conferences and meetings on issues related to ISHA; readers' comments sharing your reactions to and thoughts about materials published in the Newsletter. All documents need to be formatted using Microsoft Word (.doc). Please send all manuscripts as an e-mail attachment to the editor.

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