

A GLOBAL COLLABORATORY ON THE HISTORY OF LABOUR RELATIONS 1500-2000

Introduction to the first meeting at 13-14 April 2007

1. Historiography: labour history since 1800

Labour history has a long tradition which goes back two centuries. During the first century, those interested in the history of work and labour did not hesitate to throw a wide net. Many an author started in Classical Antiquity or even earlier and included not only Europe but also parts of Asia and Africa, and sometimes even the Americas. In this respect Marx'and Engels' omnivorous curiosity was not the exception, but rather the rule. This has changed in the twentieth century under the impact made by famous labour historians like the Webbs, the Hammonds, the Wisconsin School and others.¹ Their appealing and detailed studies concentrated heavily on the North-Atlantic region in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a consequence the tendency to envisage history as a succession of stages which all societies worldwide had to pass, culminating in the Industrial Revolution and the making of the working class was reinforced. Scholars leaning to the left and to right (like Walt W. Rostow) shared the same more or less unilinear approach.²

A countercurrent emerged in the last decades, in particular under the influence of the concept of "proto-industry" which raised the interest in work, labour, and labour relations in Europe, starting in the High Middle Ages. Somewhat later macro-economic quantification in economic history developed into the reconstruction of national accounts also in remote periods. As this appeared to be become feasible, attempts were also made to apply this method to other parts of the world. A fortunate aspect of this development is the boost which it has given to comparative history. Most famous is the ongoing debate on the decisive differences between China and "the West", initiated by André Gunder Frank, Kenneth Pomeranz and others.³

Partially independent from developments in economic history, labour history as such also experienced a number of tensions which resulted in the blossoming of comparative history. Because of dissatisfaction with over-specialisation as well as with ideological dead-end streets even the explicit question was put whether labour history had come to an end. The answer was no, but on condition of reaching out from Europe to other parts of the world, from the last two centuries to the early-modern period and from the industrial male labourer to other sectors of the economy, to women, and to all shades of unfree labour.⁴

¹ Lucassen 2006.

² Rostow 1960.

³ Frank 1998; Pomeranz 2000; for intra-European comparisons see Lucassen 1995.

⁴ Van der Linden 1993; see also Heerma van Voss and Van der Linden 2002 and Van der Linden and Lucassen 1998.

The outcome of these developments is that we have reached the point where we can and should investigate the feasibility of a global labour history, i.e. a comparative history of work, labour, and labour relations worldwide and over long periods of time. At least two conditions should be met before such a project becomes doable.

- First, methodologically, there exists a long debate about the virtues of such an approach. Especially social historians of Classical Antiquity and of the Byzantine Empire have been split between the followers of Polanyi and the so called “modernists”.⁵ At the moment the latter ones (e.g. Gallant, Rihll, Von Reeden, Schaps, Le Rider, Laiou) seem to dominate the field in a reaction to Moses Finley and his followers who warned against what we now would call cultural imperialism, expressed by the application of modern North-West European concepts on earlier periods and on the rest of the world. This warning is necessary but should not lead to the conclusion that each “civilization” should only be studied on its own. To the contrary, we believe that as long as the basic concepts are open for debate, all parties can gain from a comparative approach because it urges us to sharpen our definitions.
- Second, substantively, working-class historiography in the usual sense will have to collaborate or even merge with the historiography of other labour relations, especially forms of slavery and self-employment.⁶

2. Global labour history at the IISH

As has become clear from the preceding section, the IISH has not been an outsider to the issues at stake. Not only have its researchers actively supported the development of the concept of Global Labour History, they also have initiated a number of projects in this field (see Figure 1).

⁵ Polany, Arensberg and Pearson 1957 started this discussion.

⁶ Van der Linden 2005.

FIGURE 1. A selection of IISH projects and publications which can be seen as building blocks for the concept of Global Labour History, 1987-2007

	Space	time	Aspects
The Formation of Labour Movements 1870-1914: An International Perspective [1990] ⁷	Europe and white settlement colonies	1870-1914	Trade unions and workers' parties
Before the Unions: Wage Earners and Collective Action in Europe, 1300-1850 [1994] ⁸	Eastern and Western Europe	1350-1850	Free labour, crafts, guilds
Racism and the Labour Market: Historical Studies [1995] ⁹	Europe and colonies	1700-1950	Racism, unfree labour
Social Security Mutualism: the Comparative History of Mutual Benefit Societies [1996] ¹⁰	Europe and white settlement colonies	1600-2000	Workers' mutualism
Free and Unfree Labour : the Debate Continues [1997] ¹¹	Europe and colonies	1500-1900	Free and unfree labour
Dock Workers [2000] ¹²	All continents	1750-2000	Work, geography, social protest, etc.
Between Cross and Class : Comparative Histories of Christian Labour in Europe 1840-2000 [2005] ¹³	Europe and North America	1840-2000	Christian trade unions
Global Labour History [2006] ¹⁴	Worldwide coverage	1600-1800-2000	Work, labour, labour relations

In addition a number of regional projects have been organized, plus exploratory projects on textile workers and child labourers across the globe.¹⁵ On the basis of this work and forthcoming publications of conferences over the last few years (i.a. large-scale comparisons of labourers in the textile industry) the Research Department of the IISH will try to develop in the years to come the concept of

⁷ Van der Linden and Rojahn 1990.

⁸ Lis, Lucassen and Soly 1994.

⁹ Van der Linden, Lucassen and Van Arkel 1995.

¹⁰ Van der Linden 1996.

¹¹ Brass and van der Linden 1997.

¹² Davies *et al.* 2000.

¹³ Heerma van Voss and Pasture 2005.

¹⁴ Lucassen 2006.

¹⁵ Ottoman Empire: Quataert and Zürcher 1995; Iran: Atabaki and van der Linden 2003; Southeast Asia: Elmhirst and Saptari 2004; India: Behal and van der Linden 2006.

Global Labour History. Most research projects envisaged follow four axes which are closely linked¹⁶:

- cross sections of labour modes worldwide in 1500, 1650, 1800, 1900 and 2000;
- womens'work in the early-modern period;
- the history of economic growth and social inequality;
- concomittant data-bases on wages and prices, occupational titles, guilds, trade unions and collective actions, in particular strikes;
- Transcontinental transfer of production systems (indigo, tobacco, cane sugar, diamonds, oil).

Here we will concentrate on the first research axis.

Finally two more remarks about the broad setting of our goals. Research in this field has made it clear that Global Labour History greatly enhances the integration of social history with other disciplines, viz. industrial relations research, economy, sociology, anthropology, politology, cultural studies, as well as other historical sub-disciplines. Besides, there is a political aspect to this. As increasingly more people become wage dependent worldwide it is obvious – for those who believe in history – that a historical reflection on the history of work and labour that goes beyond the restricted experience of only a tiny part of the world during only two centuries is a worthwhile endeavour.

3. Cross sections of labour modes worldwide in 1500, 1650, 1800, 1900 and 2000

In the confrontation with areas and periods outside the classical field of labour history we are confronted with basic questions regarding the extent and nature of the labour market, after all preconditions to study labour relations. Therefore we have decided to make an inventory of all types of labour relations worldwide, varying from slavery, indentured labour, sharecropping to free wage labour and self-employment in all its facets and combinations and to reconstruct its developments from 1500 up until now. This certainly also entails ideologies on labour and the place of the labourer in society. On the basis of such an inventory and reconstruction we will try to explain the rise and decline of types of labour relations over the last half millennium.

At the start of the project we need to have a strong conceptual framework in order to make comparisons possible. At the same time we realize fully that this very set of concepts will be constantly under fire because of the evidence which will be collected. As a starting point we would like to make a number of proposals regarding work and labour, the work and labour force and ideology.

Work, labour and labour relations

¹⁶ We should stress that many projects, not mentioned here, nevertheless contribute to GLH, e.g., those on labour migration, the North-Sea economy, etc.

Work – “any human effort adding use value to goods and services”¹⁷ -- will be basically distinguished according to the goal of the production, which means on the one hand work aimed at the maintenance of the household and on the other hand work -- services or goods – to be sold at the market. Historically there is an interesting intermediate possibility, which commonly is denoted as “redistribution”. In that case households have to deliver their output to a public authority which redistributes part of it. This social structure was known in Antiquity, but there are also authors who consider societies like that of the former Soviet Union as an example of a redistributive structure.¹⁸

Production for the market is documented for the first time in Mesopotamia in the third and China and India in the second millennium BCE and from these three centres it seems to have spread over Eurasia and parts of Africa, and finally over the world as a whole. From its inception we encounter three different modes of production:

- So-called “independent” production: household production for the market without or with only one or two outsiders which are to be maintained or remunerated, commonly peasant farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers and the like;
- production by unfree labourers (slaves or serfs) and their masters;
- production by wage labourers and their employers.

It goes without saying that there will be many intermediate stages and combinations when we study individuals. A person can be peasant farmer for part of the year and seasonal labourer during a number of months, a slave even can be allowed by his master to earn a wage from somebody else.

The big challenge of our project will be nevertheless to determine which part of society maintains itself mainly according to the three possibilities sketched above. This does not mean that the project will be blind to all kinds of subdivisions and intermediate forms, or to forms of remuneration - to the contrary if only in order to sharpen our conceptual tools. The end-goal, however, will be the lumping together of all possible sub-categories to the main five: household, redistribution, independent, unfree labour and free labour.¹⁹

Sub-divisions of the labour force: gender and age

A practical problem for anybody who wishes to reconstruct the labour input along the lines set out under 3.1. is the definition of the area to be studied, its population, and the division of this population according to gender and age.

In our project we have to be very well aware of the area we are studying because in the end we have to make comparisons between five cross-sections. In principle we try to cover the whole world which implies that we will try to keep

¹⁷ Tilly and Tilly 1998, p. 22.

¹⁸ Konrád en Szelényi 1979 therefore distinguish in a Weberian manner redistribution which is legitimized on a “traditional “ basis (as in Antiquity) and redistribution which is legitimized rationally (as in “really existing socialism”).

¹⁹ Strictly speaking, we should put employers and slave owners in separate categories, but as their numbers generally are so small, we propose to lump them together with respectively their employees and their slaves.

the areas constant. This unavoidably will lead to anachronistic assumptions. Although everybody knows e.g. that Siberia was not under Russian influence before 1500 and only very hesitantly in 1650, we nevertheless have to list this part of the world under Russia for the whole period 1500-2000 and not for the first or the second cross-section under China. Naturally, anachronisms will have to be avoided as much, but sometimes we will to accept our imperfection.

Labour input reconstructions are impossible without knowledge of population figures. The collection of such figures – preferably from work performed already by historical demographers - is therefore basic. At the same time we have to be aware of the fact that in any society more or less strict norms exist which rule the work and the labour participation of men and women, children and the elderly. Therefore, we have to try to collect data available on sex ratios and age distribution in order to determine which part of the population has to be attributed to one of the five categories mentioned above.

The occupational structure of a given population provides important clues for the data we are looking for. Occupational diversity is generally much bigger in urban than in rural surroundings. Therefore we will be particularly interested in urbanization figures. A useful numerical criterion for urban populations could be 5,000 people.²⁰

The foregoing considerations result in the following diagram.

1. Unproductive		Children under a certain age
		Elderly over a certain age
2. Household producers		
3. Redistributive producers		
Producers for the market	4. Independent producers	
	5. Free labourers	
	6. Unfree labourers	

Ideology

Whether one thinks that ideology determines the division of tasks in society or that it is the result of such divisions, it would be very unwise to discard it as unimportant for labour history. First, the study of ideologies – often in the form of religious or political systems – provides historical sources for the actual performance of work. Second, it sets boundaries for what is possible. Slavery as well as its abolition e.g. is always and everywhere a legal system sanctioned by religion under certain circumstances. Gender divisions of labour or child labour are also determined by ideological rules.²¹

²⁰ See Bairoch 1988, p. 218, argues that 5,000 is a useful criterion, because “the margin of error for people living in cities of 2,000 – 5,000 people is much greater than that for the number living in cities of more than 5,000 people.”

²¹ Max Weber’s studies of the world religions’ economic ethics (Weber 1920) can perhaps be a source of inspiration.

In the project we have postponed a full discussion of labour ideologies to the last phase, but it goes without saying that the participants will have to collect the necessary knowledge in this field from the very beginning of the project.

4. Final Remarks

A comparative project like the “Global Collaboratory on the history of labour relations 1500-2000” asks a lot from its participants. Not only the collection of materials – statistical and more qualitative – will not be easy in many cases. At the same time the discussion of concepts will take a lot of energy if we want to come up with the best possible results at the moment. But we are sure that the intellectual recompense will be great, for everybody in his or her own field, but also for global history as a whole. The results will be the basis for all comparative studies to follow in the future, especially intercontinental and cross-cultural comparisons.

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