

MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN AND JAN LUCASSEN



*Prolegomena for a  
Global Labour History*



*Illustration below left*

Girl, carrying on her head wet, tempered clay from the pug mill to the moulder of the bricks. Like most other children on the original engraving which has to be situated in the Midlands (UK) around 1870, she is barefooted and dressed in rags.

Frontispice after a drawing by Herbert Johnson (London) “taken at the spot” in George Smith, *The Cry of the Children From the Brickyards of England: Statement and Appeal with Remedy* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co. and Leicester: J. & T. Spencer, 1871); a more complete copy of this wood engraving in the first part of a series, titled “Brickyard Children” and published after the pamphlet by Smith in *The Graphic*, 27 May (pp. 492-493), 3 June (pp. 516-517) and 10 June 1871 (pp. 533-534).

*Illustration above right*

Woman, carrying on her head wet, tempered clay from the pug mill to her husband, engaged in moulding the bricks. This couple is part of some 150 Bihari moulders who work seasonally in one of the brickworks (“29”, formerly “C.B.”, a state-owned factory, let to a subcontractor) in Akra near Santoshpur railway station, South 24 Parganas District, situated south of Calcutta, India. Most of these Bihari come annually from Ranchi (400 kilometres travel) and some from Chaibasa (350 km) and Patna (600 km). A couple works in the season from October to May from 6 Am to 6 PM, less a break of one hour.

Photograph by Katrien Lucassen, 21 February 1997. Collection IISH. Cf. Jan Lucassen, “Brickmaking in Northern Europe and Northern India: an exercise in cross-temporal comparisons”, paper presented at the First Annual Conference of the Association of India Labour Historians (New Delhi, 16-18 March, 1998).

PROLEGOMENA FOR A  
GLOBAL LABOUR HISTORY

Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen

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 INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The crisis in labour history and its possible solutions has been a frequent topic of discussion and writing in recent years.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this trend are both scholarly and otherwise.

Two major external factors could be mentioned. First, the worldwide political constellation has undergone a metamorphosis that has caused the evanescence of the spirit of the 1960s, the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and some other parts of the world, and crises in many working-class parties elsewhere. Second, the economically advanced countries have experienced a long-term shift in standards and values. Work has “been objectively displaced from its status as a central and self-evident fact of life” and is consequently “also forfeiting its subjective role as the central motivating force in the activity of workers.”<sup>3</sup>

Central to the crisis is the realization that a cohesion of content is lacking. Severe fragmentization has accompanied the unprecedented number of studies generated by the surge of activity in this discipline since the 1970s. Now, the field of labour history overlaps into women’s history, urban history, agrarian history, cultural anthropology, folklore, social economics, the history of technology, historical government theories, industrial relations, the history of law, and the like.

1. We would like to thank all our colleagues in the Research & Publications Department at the IISH who commented upon earlier versions of this text. One of these versions was published in Russian as “Prolegomeny k globalnoi rabochei istorii”, *Social'naya istoriya*, 1 (1998), pp. 53-68.
2. For example, see J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris (eds), *Perspectives on American Labor History – The Problems of Synthesis* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989); Verity Burgmann, “The Strange Death of Labour History”, in *Bede Nairn and Labor History* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1991), pp. 69-81; Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *The End of Labour History?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Rae Frances and Bruce Scates, “Is Labour History Dead?”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 100 (April 1993), pp. 470-481; Thomas Welskopp, “Von der verhinderten Heldengeschichte des Proletariats zur vergleichenden Sozialgeschichte der Arbeiter”, 1999, 3 (1993), pp. 34-53; Terry Irving (ed.), *Challenges to Labour History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1994).
3. Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism: Contemporary Transformation of Work and Politics* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1985), pp. 147-148.

While this disciplinary expansion clearly embodies a wealth of intellectual opportunities, it also makes individual scholars feel lost in the crowd. In 1973 Edward Thompson wrote that “[t]he new social history is becoming a series of prints, snapshots, stasis upon stasis. As a gain is registered, in the new dimension of social history, at the same time whole territories of established economic and political history are evacuated. The central concern of history, as a relevant humane study – to generalize and integrate and to attain a comprehension of the full social and cultural process – becomes lost.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a central concern, or even the makings of one, has been painfully absent for some time.

The void is even more conspicuous and painful because older interpretative frameworks no longer suffice. The countless new insights and the embryonic breakthrough of labour historiography in the so-called “Third World” have shown the inadequacy of the classic Marxian and Weberian approaches. We agree with Thompson that a central concern of history is necessary, but, at the same time, we must acknowledge that the approaches hitherto available (including that of Thompson himself) are inadequate as the foundations of a comprehensive global labour history.

Marx’s analysis of working-class formation was based “particularly [on] England and specifically on Manchester between 1838 and 1867”<sup>5</sup> and was not really concerned about fuzzy and contradictory class locations (self-employment, indentured labour, etc.) or about conflicting and transnational identities (gender, ethnicity, etc.). Classical liberal labour historians, such as Lujo Brentano and Gerhard Schulze-Gävernitz, members of the Wisconsin School, and the Oxford institutionalists, moderate socialist authors, such as the Webbs, Eduard Bernstein, Max Quark, Edvard Bull, and others, shared these shortcomings. All these authors have applied very specific and restricted definitions of labour and the consequences of labour relationships and related organizations. Edward Thompson’s acclaimed and (in other respects) pathbreaking work *The Making of the English Working Class* (which was published almost forty years ago) also shows the same deficiencies.<sup>6</sup>

The limitations of the old syntheses become painfully visible when we shift our focus away from the industrializing parts of north-west

4. Edward P. Thompson, “Responses to Reality”, *New Society*, 4 October 1973.

5. Roland Mousnier, “Le concept de classe sociale et l’histoire”, *Revue d’histoire économique et sociale*, 47 (1970), pp. 449-459, 453.

6. Even feminist critiques of, for instance, E.P. Thompson’s work do not deal with the essential issues involved. See for instance Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), ch. 4.

Europe,<sup>7</sup> or when we examine earlier periods in labour history.<sup>8</sup> Dated and localized presumptions (e.g. regarding the logical connection between the rise of capitalism and free wage labour) are thus a very considerable hinderance to analysis.<sup>9</sup>

Our central question therefore is: how can we study the global development of labour throughout history without implicitly using (a particular interpretation of part of) European history as a model? The answer to this question probably necessitates a “theory of the middle range”, as described by Robert K. Merton.<sup>10</sup>

Formulating an alternative approach requires clarifying two issues. First, the object of labour history involves determining the elements that pertain to the field of research and those that lie outside. Sections 2 and 3 deal with this process. Next, we must find a worthwhile approach to studying this object. Sections 4 to 6 elaborate on this goal. Only then can we consider practical choices regarding medium- or long-range research agendas. Section 7 describes very briefly a first step in this direction. As is clear from the design of this essay, a heavy emphasis is placed on conditions for comparative labour history, rather than on actual comparisons.

7. See, for instance, the rather sterile discussion of “modes of production” in the 1970s and the debates about the Soviet Union’s class nature. Marcel van der Linden, *Von der Oktoberrevolution zur Perestroika. Der westliche Marxismus und die Sowjetunion*. Translated from the Dutch by Klaus Mellenthin (Frankfurt am Main: dipa-Verlag, 1992).
8. For a critique of source material on Marx’s view of merchant capitalism, see Piet Lourens and Jan Lucassen, “Marx als Historiker der niederländischen Republik”, in Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *Die Rezeption der Marxschen Theorie in den Niederlanden* (Trier: Karl-Marx-Haus, 1992), pp. 430-454. See also Marcel van der Linden, “Marx and Engels, Dutch Marxism, and the ‘Model Capitalist Nation of the Seventeenth Century’”, *Science and Society*, 61 (1997), pp. 161-192.
9. For a discussion of these “silences” in Marx’s analysis, see Robert Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly or Necessity?* (London and New York: Tavistock, 1987), ch. 2. Marx and Engels waged an interesting battle against the limitations of their own approach. In *The German Ideology*, written in 1845-1846, they presented a rigid classification of the development of forms of ownership (“tribal ownership”, “ancient communal and State ownership”, and “feudal or estate property”), only to relativize it a few pages later in a warning about the use of abstractions for “neatly trimming the epochs of history”: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964), pp. 33-35, 38.
10. “[Theories of the middle range] lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of behavior, organization and change to account for what is observed and to those orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalized at all” in Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 38; see also Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 1-11. We believe that this reasoning makes restrictions on place and time inevitable in the final analysis.



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WORK, LABOUR AND WAGE LABOUR

As Chris and Charles Tilly tell us:

*Work* includes any human effort adding use value to goods and services [...] To be sure, not all effort qualifies as work; purely destructive, expressive, or consumptive acts lie outside the bound: in so far as they reduce transferable use value, we might think of them as antiwork. [...] All work involves *labor processes*: allocations of various intensities and qualities of effort among different aspects of production within specific technical conditions.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, labour history is about labour. In Anglo-Saxon regions, this term refers to labour, wage labour and the labour movement, but in common academic practice not from the beginning of human history.

There are, writes anthropologist Erik Schwimmer, good reasons for thinking that the concept of work is a product of modern Europe:

Work as a concept is based on the assumption that, from a certain viewpoint, all economically useful activities are fully comparable by a yardstick transcending their diversity, in other words, that labour has become a commodity and that the technical and administrative direction of that labour has become part of the same kind of commodity.<sup>12</sup>

11. Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 22-23.

12. Erik Schwimmer, "The Self and the Product: Concepts of Work in Comparative Perspective", in Sandra Wallman (ed.), *The Social Anthropology of Work* (London: Academic Press, 1979), pp. 287-315, 287. For a different view, see Raymond Firth, "Work and Value: Reflections on Ideas of Karl Marx", in *ibid*, pp. 177-206.

Concerning the etymology of the French word *travail* and related notions, Maurice Godelier has noted that "the forging of our vocabulary and our thinking was spread over a number of different moments in history: in the 12th and 13th centuries, i.e., in the heyday of feudal society, when towns and crafts were starting to flourish; in the late 15th and 16th centuries, when international trade was burgeoning and the colonial system and manufacturing were finding their feet; and, lastly, in the 18th century, when the terms 'wage-earner', 'proletarian', 'capital', etc., came to acquire their present-day meanings." Maurice Godelier, "Aide-Mémoire for a Survey of Work and Its Representations", *Current Anthropology*, 21 (1980), pp. 831-835, 832. See also Lucien Febvre, "Travail: évolution d'un mot et d'une idée", *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique*, (January-March 1948), pp. 19-28; Werner Conze, "Arbeit" and "Arbeiter" in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. I (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1972), pp. 154-215 and 216-242.

While the abstract concept of work may be historically recent, maintaining and perpetuating human civilization without “human effort adding use value to goods and services” would be inconceivable.<sup>13</sup>

Organizational approaches to institutionalized labour relations have always varied widely. One obvious method for classifying the multitude of manifestations involves determining whether the labour takes place under autonomous (i.e. by the labourer’s household) or heteronomous (i.e. by someone outside the labourer’s household)<sup>14</sup> supervision and whether the performance of this labour (which may produce either goods or services) is remunerated. It must be stressed beforehand that our unit of analysis is the worker’s household: workers simply cannot be understood as individuals. This implies that *within* households autonomous and heteronomous, paid and unpaid labour relations, can also occur. We leave this important implication of our approach aside for the moment in order to elaborate first upon the labour relations between the household and its members on the one hand and the outside world on the other (see Figure 1).<sup>15</sup>

*Figure 1: Labour Process*

	Autonomous	Heteronomous
Unpaid	Includes household labour and other forms of subsistence labour	Includes feudal serfdom and chattel slavery
Paid	Includes forms of self-employment (e.g. small farmers, artisans, and shop owners), producer cooperatives and employers	Includes temporary forms of unfree labour, such as debt slavery and indentured labour, as well as free wage labour

13. For reviews of relevant anthropological literature, see Michael Burawoy, “The Anthropology of Work”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 8 (1979), pp. 231-266; Wallman, *The Social Anthropology of Work*; Carol S. Holzberg and Maureen J. Giovannini, “Anthropology and Industry: Reappraisals and New Directions”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 10 (1981), pp. 317-360.

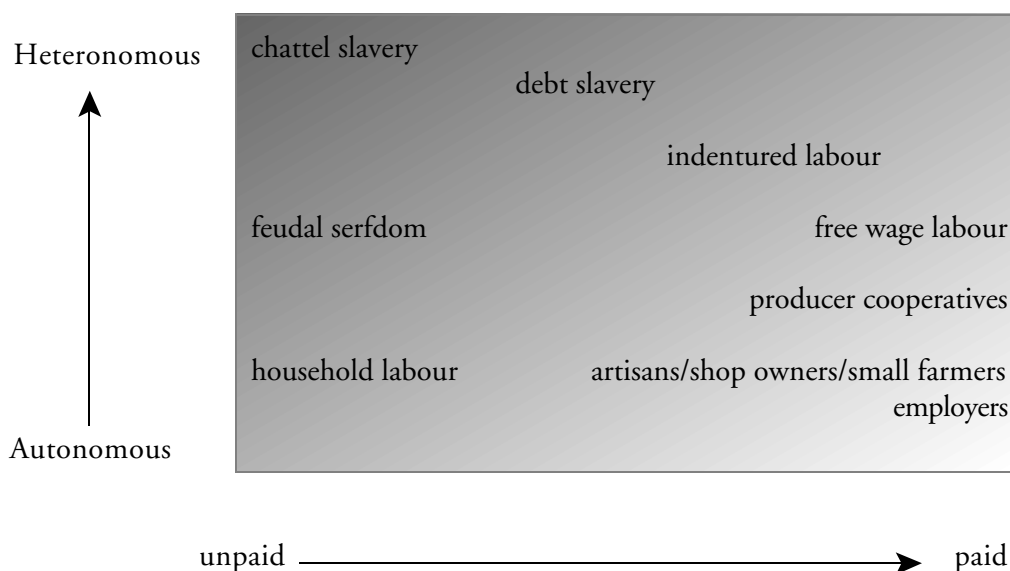
14. This distinction appears in Yvon Bourdet, “Les contradictions de l’hétérogestion”, *Autogestion*, 8 (June 1969), pp. 135-170.

15. This distinction has, of course, been thoroughly developed in feminist theory.

The analytical core of labour and working-class history is, traditionally, one variant of heteronomous paid labour, i.e. “free” wage labour. This existed sporadically during antiquity and the early Middle Ages, but became dominant in modern capitalist and “socialist” societies.<sup>16</sup>

The coercion inherent in heteronomous labour processes may be primarily extra-economic in nature (physical force, etc.) or economic (the existence of other means of survival). In Figure 2 we have added this distinction, which is in fact a sub-division of heteronomy. This distinction may be applied both to the relations outside (i.e. in the heteronomous category of figure 2) and within the household.

*Figure 2: Free and unfree labour processes*



*Legenda:* Degree of shading indicates degree of extra-economic coercion in labour processes

The nature of labour history’s problems has directed our focus to wage labour. In its very varied forms, “free” wage labour has become the second most common form of labour; unpaid subsistence labour remains the most common form. The overwhelming majority of households in economically highly advanced nations, as well as a rapidly rising percentage along the periphery, currently derives its income primarily from wage labour. This situation alone makes historical research on wage labour

16. See the analysis in Marcel van der Linden, “The Origins, Spread and Normalization of Free Wage Labour”, in Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues* (Berne [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 501-523.

crucial for understanding the modern world. The diminishing subjective importance of such labour in the most affluent countries as a result of the expansion of leisure time and the growth of opportunities for consumption does not diminish this need.<sup>17</sup>

In keeping with Marx's theory,<sup>18</sup> wage labour is usually considered a double freedom in that wage earners are both free of the means of production (i.e. they do not support themselves through autonomous production) and free to switch employers.<sup>19</sup> This double freedom is by no means ubiquitous in wage labour. First, because freedom of the means of production is often a very relative concept. For example, consider the extremely large groups of allegedly self-employed wage earners, cooperatively subcontracting labourers, proto-industrial producers, and the like.<sup>20</sup> Second, because freedom to switch employers is often less than the definition prescribes. Wage earners may be bound to their employers through debts (e.g. in a truck system), through pension plans, through the absence of alternatives on the labour market, and so on.

Basically, the core of double-free wage labour is surrounded by a ring of intermediary forms leading to other types of labour relationships. These intermediary forms are not necessarily remnants of pre-capitalist conditions, but are continually being reintroduced into modern life and are still expanding rapidly in some parts of the world. Analysing these forms of labour should be an integral aspect of studying double-free wage labour. There are also many intermediary varieties of labourers, and their lives may include shifts to and from wage dependence. Individuals can also undertake productive activities in various contexts simultaneously. Small farmers sometimes turn to seasonal migration during the summer, return as day labourers for large landowners, and do spinning and weaving independently and on commission in the winter.<sup>21</sup> Considering

17. At a later stage, a similar elaboration of the other forms of labour will be required for a comprehensive middle-range theory of labour history.
18. Compare Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, Trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 874: "[...] free workers, the sellers of their own labour-power, and therefore the sellers of labour. Free workers, in the double sense that they neither form part of the means of production themselves, as would be the case with slaves, serfs, etc., nor do they own the means of production, as would be the case with self-employed peasant proprietors."
19. Note that free wage labour is, strictly speaking, far from free according to the true meaning of the word. Rather, economic circumstances *compel* wage earners to perform wage labour. The essential difference from all other forms of heteronomous labour is merely that these other forms result from *non-economic* forces.
20. Because of the tradition in both economic history and labour history of emphasizing processes of industrialization, these groups have been severely neglected until recently.
21. André Gunder Frank referred to this phenomenon as the "fluidity in owner-worker relations." As an example, he described "a single worker who is simultaneously (i) owner of his own land

the activities of all the members of a family produces a complicated web within this “work cycle”.<sup>22</sup>

As we noted earlier, wage earners always belong to households with one or more individuals. Understanding household labour is therefore an additional requirement for analysing wage labour. Wage earners’ lives operate at two ends of a spectrum that contains the household (or family) at one extreme and the site of wage labour at the other extreme. Raising future wage earners and the daily recovery (both spiritual and physical) of the active wage earners are the primary duties of “household labourers”, without whom wage labour would not be possible.<sup>23</sup>

and house, (ii) sharecropper on another’s land (sometimes for a half, sometimes for a third), (iii) tenant on a third’s land, (iv) wage worker during harvest time on one of these lands, and (v) independent trader of his own home-produced commodities.” André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil*. Revised and enlarged edition (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), pp. 271-272.

22. Jan Lucassen, *Migrant Labour in Europe 1600-1900: The Drift to the North Sea* (London [etc.]: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 97-99.

23. Naturally, households should not be considered anthropomorphic entities through being designated as products of collective will. Members do not necessarily work for the common good of the household; on the contrary, they may be driven by selfish motives. Conflicts of interest are also possible, as well as oppression and resistance against oppression. See Judith Bruce, “Homes Divided”, *World Development*, 17 (1989), pp. 979-991; Diane L. Wolf, “Daughters, Decisions and Domination: An Empirical and Conceptual Critique of Household Strategies”, *Development and Change*, 21 (1990), pp. 43-74.

## PRIVATE AND PUBLIC PROJECTS

The primary and main objective of most people is a decent living, serving as valued members of the community and raising children. Wage earners are no exception, only some means to achieve these aims are different from those of their fellow human beings.<sup>24</sup> These objectives can be pursued by small-scale, limited, and, in a manner of speaking, *private strategies*. Many of these private strategies or projects are perfectly compatible with existing social relationships and even reproduce them. Co-existing alongside private strategies are *public* strategies, whereby in order to promote certain interests members of various households operate collectively with respect to third parties.<sup>25</sup> Public and private strategies can occur in all manner of combinations.

There are many ways of attempting to acquire, retain, or, whenever possible, improve one's social status (which is a rather abstract description of the preceding private projects). Acquiring and retaining social status involves appealing to relatives, kin, "personal communities", and patrons. Achieving sustained social improvement ("social mobility")<sup>26</sup> usually requires geographic or professional mobility. Private strategies, based on social relations, involve relatives and kinship, personal communities or patronage. A short digression concerning these strategies, involving help from outside sources, is in order.<sup>27</sup>

First, households may appeal to *relatives*. Many authors have indicated the value of kinship for household survival. Tamara Hareven wrote that to many American immigrants and urban workers kin were "the main, if not the only, source of assistance and survival. In the absence of public welfare agencies and social security kin were the exclusive source of social insurance. Kin assistance was crucial in handling personal and family crises (such as child-bearing, illness, and death), and in coping with the insecurities imposed by the industrial system (such as unemployment,

24. We will refrain here from working out the concomitant labour market aspects of our reasoning. For these aspects, see Tilly and Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism*.

25. Our notion of the "public" sphere is similar to the one used in Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*. Translated from the German by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Daniel and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

26. Burke, *History and Social Theory*, pp. 63-67.

27. From Marcel van der Linden, "Connecting Household History and Labour History", *International Review of Social History*, Supplement 1 (1993), pp. 163-173, 170-171.

accidents, and strikes).” Furthermore, “[s]trategies for kin assistance required both short-term and long-term investments over the life-course. Short-term investments entailed assistance in the workplace, in housing, in loaning money or tools, and trading skills, goods, or services. Among the long-term investments, the most pervasive exchange was that between parents and children, – old-age support in return for childrearing.”<sup>28</sup>

Kinship relations *outside* one’s immediate surroundings often proved especially important. An interesting method of distributing the risks involves mutual assistance between rural-agrarian and urban relatives. Heidi Rosenbaum described an example of this system when she mentioned the importance “of family support from relatives in the countryside” for workers in Linden (Germany) in the early twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Jean Peterson showed how the reverse currently holds true for Philippine peasantry by writing that “some families explicitly plan to establish some siblings [...] as wage-earners in the city” to generate revenue in case of crop failure or poor harvests.<sup>30</sup>

A second source of relief lies in *personal communities*. These communities consist of informal networks based on companionship, emotional aid, and small services in daily life. While the networks may be locally based (neighbourhoods), this restriction is not essential to their operation. Personal communities also include kinship networks and require the same investment as strategies for short-term kin assistance (relatively small and readily available skills and services).<sup>31</sup> Personal communities have always appeared gendered, although their focus varies depending on the time, the place, and the culture.<sup>32</sup> There is often a fluid line between blood

28. Tamara K. Hareven, “A Complex Relationship: Family Strategies and the Processes of Economic and Social Change”, in Roger Friedland and A.F. Robertson (eds), *Beyond the Marketplace: Rethinking Economy and Society* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 215-244.
29. Heidi Rosenbaum, *Proletarische Familien. Arbeiterfamilien und Arbeiterväter im frühen 20. Jahrhundert zwischen traditioneller, sozialdemokratischer und kleinbürgerlicher Orientierung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), p. 153.
30. Jean Trelloggen Peterson, “Interhousehold Exchange and the Public Economy in Three Highland Philippine Communities”, *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 11 (1989), pp. 123-142, 136.
31. Barry Wellman, Peter J. Carrington and Alan Hall, “Networks as Personal Communities”, in Barry Wellman and S.D. Berkowitz (eds), *Social Structures: A Network Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 130-184, 163.
32. Compare personal communities in London between 1870 and 1914 in Ellen Ross, “Survival Networks: Women’s Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I”, *History Workshop Journal*, 15 (Spring 1983), pp. 4-27, with those in Lebanon in the 1970s in Suad Joseph, “Working-Class Women’s Networks in a Sectarian State: A Political Paradox”, *American Ethnologist*, 10 (1983), pp. 1-22. See also Michael John, “‘Kultur der Armut’ in Wien 1890-1923. Zur Bedeutung von Solidarstrukturen, Nachbarschaft und Protest”, *Zeitgeschichte*,

relatives and personal communities, as proved by frequent transformations of friendships into fictitious kinship relations, such as with *compadrazgos* (fictitious parenthood usually involving the relationship between parents and godparents to a child) in Latin America<sup>33</sup> and the selection of *Taufpaten* (godparents) among the nineteenth-century German working class.<sup>34</sup>

Acceptance of *patronage* is a third strategy. Whereas the first two forms of social insurance are generally horizontal (the actors pertained to similar social classes) this approach is clearly vertical. As Y. Michal Bodemann wrote, it involves “a form of class rule and class struggle and at the same time its concealment.”<sup>35</sup> Weak subalterns seek protection from higher, more powerful individuals who help them in emergencies in return for material or other types of services. This relationship is not merely economic but sociocultural as well, as patrons receive their clients’ loyalty and esteem in return for their protection and help. Forms of patronage may vary from political clientelism to patriarchal enterprise.<sup>36</sup>

In sum, six different types of private projects may be distinguished (see Figure 3), both for households or for networks to which households belong, or even for individuals within households. As we have remarked already, autonomous and heteronomous, paid and unpaid relations can also be applied to individuals within a household. By the same token these individuals can, within the household to which they belong, have recourse to all the strategies depicted here, e.g. women against men and vice versa, younger members versus elder members and vice versa.

(1993), pp. 158-186, and Rosemary Brana-Shute, “Neighbourhood Networks and National Politics among Working-class Afro-Surinamese Women”, in Janet Momsen (ed.), *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective* (Kingston [etc.]: Ian Randle, 1993), pp. 132-147.

33. Sidney W. Mintz and Eric R. Wolf, “An Analysis of Ritual Co-Parenthood (Compadrazgo)”, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 6 (1950), pp. 341-368.

34. Hartmut Zwahr, *Zur Konstituierung des Proletariats als Klasse. Strukturuntersuchungen über das Leipziger Proletariat während der industriellen Revolution* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1978), pp. 163-189.

35. Y. Michal Bodemann, “Relations of Production and Class Rule: The Hidden Basis of Patron-Clientage”, in Wellman and Berkowitz, *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, pp. 198-220, 215.

36. For a comprehensive analysis of industrial paternalism, see Alvarez Sierra, *El obrero soñado. Ensayo sobre el paternalismo industrial (Asturias 1860-1917)* (Madrid: Siglo veintiuno, 1990), pp. 7-164. Important case studies are Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Victorian England* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980) and Mark W. Steinberg, *Moral Communities: The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry, 1867-1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).



Figure 3: Different types of private projects

	Kin	Personal communities	Patronage
Acquiring or improving social status			
Maintaining social status			

When such private projects are impeded, a *public* solution may be sought after under certain conditions. This distinction applies to all the heteronomous labour processes depicted in Figure 2.

When social relationships impede individual execution of such private projects (i.e. in an individual household or through networks to which this household belongs), a public solution *may* be possible under certain conditions. This distinction applies to all the heteronomous labour processes presented in Figure 1.

Using our selection to reemphasize the themes currently of interest to most labour historians, we shall focus on such public projects, especially those of free wage earners.<sup>37</sup> A proper understanding of public projects requires analysing private projects as well.<sup>38</sup> In this context, it is particularly significant that social mobility has become the exclusive domain of sociology (and social history) and is totally neglected by labour history. For this reason, the relationship between social mobility and social movement in no way reflects the conceptual identity of and linguistic affiliation between the words mobility and movement. A wide gulf separates these two concepts in our field. This situation is regrettable for several reasons. First, labouring individuals perceive each one as an extension of the other. Wherever social mobility is hindered, a breeding ground for social movements arises. Conversely, a career within a social movement can further one's own mobility, as demonstrated by countless officials in the labour and union movements.<sup>39</sup>

Public projects may be mutually exclusive. For example, the formation of collective identities like ethnicity, religion and caste may impede class solidarity; nation-building may impede transnational solidarities.

37. On public projects of slaves and indentured labourers, see Brass and van der Linden, *Free and Unfree Labour*.

38. For a similar formulation of the central research problem (the contrast between series and groups), see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. I (London: Verso, 1991).

39. For an analysis of the workers' movement as a means of individual "class elevation", see Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Translated from the German by Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: Dover Publ., 1959).

## LABOUR MOVEMENTS

Labour movements are public projects by wage earners. As John Commons wrote:

Labor movement is the term which is used to designate all of the organized activity of wage earners to better their own conditions either immediately or in the more or less distant future. In all countries it has run along three lines – political, economic and cooperative.<sup>40</sup>

This “organized activity of wage earners” includes: (i) groups of wage earners that attempt to realize certain (ii) wishes and demands through (iii) methods of action, possibly in (iv) a sustained<sup>41</sup> organizational framework – and who may use (v) a broader ideology to justify their actions. “Organized activity” can be satisfactorily understood only in the context of survival strategies of workers’ households (also as part of a community), labour relationships embedded in the social economic order, political relationships (government actions, etc.) and cultural relationships.

Viewed as an ensemble of collective projects, the labour movement can be approached from many angles. For example, the social basis (in our definition “groups of wage earners”) may raise questions about which social segments of the class of wage earners stimulate collective projects. Examining the wishes and demands can shed light on “ideologies they lived by” and the like. We have decided to concentrate on forms of action and organization (in our definition “methods of action, possibly in a sustained organizational framework”), though obviously without neglecting the other aspects.

40. John R. Commons, “Labor Movement”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 682-696, 682.

41. Especially for earlier periods and for less literate societies this term seems to be preferable to the dichotomy “formal-informal”.

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ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY:  
A DIFFERENT APPROACH ...

*Forms of action* includes all kinds of group activities, such as saving money, campaigning, striking, purchasing goods, and relaxing. *Forms of organization* are of particular interest when they cease to be informal and incidental and become increasingly formal and permanent. Examples from the past two centuries in European and North American history yield at least the following forms of formal organization within the labour movement:<sup>42</sup> (1) mutual aid associations; (2) consumer cooperatives; (3) production cooperatives; (4) trade unions; (5) political parties; (6) paramilitary groups; (7) cultural organizations.

The historiography of forms of action and organization is very well established. It played an important part in the old-style labour history with which Hobsbawm, Thompson, and many others have broken. Unlike many classical studies of actions and organizations, we are proposing a new style of historiography that considers the broader contexts described above (wage labour or household labour, collective or private projects, etc.) and also addresses relevant developments in social sciences.<sup>43</sup>

James Cronin eloquently explained that research on collective labourers' projects need *not* be equated with the traditional history of organizations:

42. Ascertaining whether this classification may be too restrictive will be a monumental task, especially in analysing other regions or earlier periods. The ideologies that coincide with these forms of organization span an equally broad range, especially in Europe (and North America): socialism, communism, anarchism, confessional or religious ideologies, corporatism, and fascism or national socialism.
43. It is not possible to provide a detailed description of the developments that we consider relevant. Selective examples include the resource mobilization theory, the rational choice theory, organization economics (with the concept of transaction costs in organizations), and organizational ecology. On this last approach, see Michael T. Hannan and John Freeman, *Organizational Ecology* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989) and the review essay by Marcel van der Linden, "Labour History and Organizational Ecology", *International Review of Social History*, 35 (1990), pp. 273-280. A survey of some new research methods is given in Larry J. Griffin and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *New Methods for Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

What would a concern for organization and resource mobilization mean? In a narrow sense, it would mean looking at the level and character of working-class organization as an important fact in and of itself. [...] It means asking how social and economic structures affect the capacity of working people to organize and act collectively, rather than asking, as has so often been done in the past, how social and economic structure produced or altered consciousness. [...] A history of labor sensitive to questions of organization and organizational resources need not glorify organizations or their leaders, or ignore the problematic relationship that seems always to obtain between leaders and the rank-and-file. And it does not mean ignoring the history of the unorganized – of women, the less skilled or migrant workers – for being concerned with organization means asking why some groups have been poorly organized as well as asking why and when other groups were able to organize. In short, research informed by an organizational perspective can make sense of a broader range of phenomena because it offers a common set of questions by which to relate them to one another.<sup>44</sup>

Since the 1970s, labour history, which had previously contained a strong empirical element, has received major theoretical stimuli from social-scientific and linguistic circles. The increased sophistication, however, has surfaced mainly in general working-class history and in analyses of certain strikes and other conflicts. History of organizations has derived little benefit from these innovations (with a few major exceptions).

A long-standing complaint alleges that the historiography of labour organizations is atheoretical. In 1948, John Dunlop observed a gulf between labour movement history and theory:

Under the heading of “theory of labor organization” are found “explanations” conjured out of inner consciousness with only occasional and convenient reference to the past. The “history” and “theory” of the labor movement can have little meaning in isolation. But it is particularly the failure of theoretical apparatus that accounts for the lack of greater understanding of the development of the labor movement and the paucity of significant research.<sup>45</sup>

44. James E. Cronin, “Neither Exceptional nor Peculiar: Towards the Comparative Study of Labor in Advanced Society”, *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), pp. 59-75, 72-74.

45. John T. Dunlop, “The Development of Labor Organization: A Theoretical Framework”, in Richard A. Lester and Joseph Shister (eds), *Insights into Labor Issues* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 163-193, 163.

As recently as 1994, Dave Lyddon noted: “There continues to be little attempt to marry theory with history.”<sup>46</sup>

What are the core questions raised by labour movement theories? In “The Development of Labor Organization” Dunlop listed four such considerations: “How is one to account for the origin or emergence of labor organizations?”; “What explains the pattern of growth and development of labor organizations?”; “What ideas and mentalities do labor movements have”; and “Why do individual workers join labor organizations?”<sup>47</sup> Labour organizations are one type of organization among many. Therefore, they have to be analysed as well within the theory of repertoires of action. Also “convergence” between repertoires between labour and other organizations will occur.

46. Dave Lyddon, “Industrial-Relations Theory and Labor History”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 46 (Fall 1994), pp. 122-141, 126. Like Dunlop, Lyddon is primarily referring to the study of trade unions.

47. Dunlop, “Development of Labor Organization”, pp. 164-165.

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... AND A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Comparisons between different countries or different sectors of the economy (e.g. mining) or different forms of contracting (e.g. subcontracting) as well as between different periods are essential for answering these questions. There are myriad approaches to such comparative research. The following varieties may serve as a theoretical guideline:

- i The Max Weber model, where a single scholar conducts a thorough examination of several cases and draws a comparison.
- ii The combination model, where various scholars study two cases each and subsequently combine these comparisons.
- iii The project model, where one scholar acts as a synthesizer by processing material supplied by specialists on various countries.
- iv The collective model, where scholars studying related themes in different countries draw a joint comparison.<sup>48</sup>

48. Charles Ragin, "New Directions in Comparative Research", in Melvin L. Kohn (ed.), *Cross-National Research in Sociology* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1981), pp. 57-76. See also Christiane Eisenberg, "Die Arbeiterbewegungen der Welt im Vergleich. Methodenkritische Bemerkungen zu einem Projekt des Internationalen Instituts für Sozialgeschichte in Amsterdam", *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 34 (1994), pp. 397-410.

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 CHOICES

In our opinion, the first requirement for the future development of a history of labour organizations and actions informed by social science involves addressing the voids in this field that result from the preceding considerations. This principle should generate a preference for studying developments traditionally overlooked by labour historians. Such an approach would lead to the following partially overlapping areas of research:

- Rewriting work on organizations previously studied from a different perspective;<sup>49</sup>
- Historiography of forms of organizations neglected by research thus far (mutual benefit societies, consumer cooperatives, etc.);
- Labour history of “Third World” forms of organizations and action;
- Labour history of pre-industrial forms of organizations and action.<sup>50</sup>

Once again, fruitful study of these fields requires relating organizational solutions in the form of collective projects to private projects and their possible failure, such as inadequately attempted geographic or professional mobility. Second, the relationship between free wage labour and other types of labour should be a consistent structural element in such research.

In both cases, politics and the history of mentalities will inevitably be of major importance. In selecting cases for comparison, as discussed in the preceding section, political and normative differences between social systems will be decisive. Besides, in this respect, as well as in juxtaposing collective projects against private ones, and free wage labour against other forms of labour, we must realize that both defining types of labour and determining inclusion in and exclusion from these various forms depend in part on the organizations to be studied themselves. A

49. Obviously, such organizations include trade unions in the first place and labour parties in the second.

50. We must realize that studying labour history outside the “First World” or the industrial era offers a wealth of opportunities, provided we follow the reasoning of historians who link widespread coin minting to the prevalence of wage labour. See Frank Perlin, “Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia”, *Past and Present*, 98 (1983), pp. 30-95. See too Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen and Hugo Soly, *Before the Unions: Wage Earners and Collective Action in Europe, 1300-1850* [*International Review of Social History*, Supplement 2 (1994)].

current example might be modern trade unions in the West, which determine not only access to the labour market (as one would expect), but sometimes also whether labour is paid or unpaid.

Implementing this proposal is clearly among the subsequent steps. Then we will reach the stage of actual comparisons, while this essay is mainly aimed at establishing conditions for fruitful comparisons: first things first. In the spirit of Weber and Durkheim, observation, description and classification precede generalization.<sup>51</sup>

Actual comparisons and generalizations will also clarify the limitations of labour history along the lines proposed before or the limitations of labour history as such. In concluding this essay it might be useful to stress that the primary and main objective of wage earners is not labour. Labour is but a means to reach goals like a good living, social esteem and eternity, i.e. children. This fact, that labour is but a means – however important and however changing in appearance through time – and not a goal, does not diminish the value of labour history. On the contrary, it gives it its proper and important place in general history and in the social sciences.

51. For an alternative proposal for a theoretical framework for analysing work, see Tilly and Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism*.