3.4. Trade, Transport, and Services

The movement of people and goods sits at the core of global history, shaping the rise and fall of empires, trading systems, and cultural exchange in various forms over at least the last several thousand years. Among scholars of world history, these historical realities have fueled long-running debates over what C.A. Bayly calls “the birth of the modern world”. The labourers who facilitated this long history of movement and exchange, operating at the crossroads of trade networks and state power, also sit at the intersection of these scholarly debates about world history and labour history. Their histories are an integral part of global labour history, as both workers in their own right and vital connections between different regimes of labour on local and global scales.

While labour for trade, transport, and services dates back to the earliest systems of economic exchange and labour diversification, these forms of work were concentrated and organized in new and unprecedented ways in the context of the growth of global capitalism, beginning in the 16th century. Workers in trade, transport, and services participated directly in the growth of this global economic system, transporting goods and people around the world, as part of the infrastructure of what scholars like Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, and Janet Abu-Lughod term a “world system”. These workers also facilitated the participation of others in that system—as producers, traders, and consumers. And yet, trade, transport, and services also provided opportunities for work that challenged the implicit power structures within that emerging global capitalist order.

Labourers in the fields of trade, transport, and services, then, belonged to what John Urry calls a “mobility-system”: the comprehensive system of infrastructures, technologies, policies, cultures, sociabilities, movements, economies, and institutions through which people interact and goods are exchanged. Labourers in these industries are “mobile workers” through both the physical movement implicit in their labour as individuals, as well as the ways in which they facilitate the movements of others through participation in broader systems of transportation and trade. As such, these mobile workers often mediated between binary categories—local and global, formal and informal, traditional and modern, stable and precarious—which too often shape histories of labour and capitalism. Operating across and in between these boundaries, mobile workers shaped the global system even as they embraced very local economic cultures.¹

The expansion and contraction of industrial economies in the 19th and 20th century exposed the inequalities inherent in the structures and practices of global capitalism. The centrality of mobile work to industrial growth meant that these workers


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were always in demand. However, the constantly shifting technology of industrial economies also meant that their work was inherently precarious. Some mobile workers seized the possibilities and risks of precarity in order to maximize profits and seize control of sectors within local economies. Some successful workers established prosperous and stable lives through their manipulation of risk or created the freedom to pursue non-economic interests by strategically pursuing precarious work. Others sought stability in the formal sector, organizing themselves into labour unions and workers associations, which set standards for working conditions and pay. Still others moved between these two spheres of work in response to changing economic conditions.

By highlighting the mobility of labourers in trade, transport, and services, then, we decentre Western narratives that privilege formal-sector wage labour. Instead we argue that a full understanding of mobile labour requires a truly global perspective, which acknowledges the inherent precarities of the global capitalist system, from its earliest times to the present, as part of an ongoing negotiation about the nature of work and the movement of people and goods. Fortunately, research in labour and working-class history has become less Eurocentric and more global in recent years. Nevertheless, it is impossible to thoroughly explore the historiography of these multiple, interlocking industries, around the world, from approximately 1500 to the present, so this essay will highlight some key texts and themes interwoven among the trade, transport, and service industries. In particular, trade-related labour is woven throughout discussions of the transport and service industry. By doing a global survey, we can discover many similarities across countries and societies. Recently, moreover, the growing influence of neoliberal policies have resulted in increasing commonalities among countries across the world, in the Global North and South, in advanced industrial and less developed economies.

Transport

A globalized world resting upon trade and labour has existed for many centuries and those working in transportation stood at its centre. Transportation is all about interconnections and interconnectedness, be it on oceans, roads, rails, canals, or rivers. In no small part thanks to maritime labour history, a growing trend in History and other academic disciplines is to see the world as deeply interconnected—centuries prior to contemporary globalization—with oceans and other waterborne routes as highways rather than dividing lines; however, as Kären Wigen writes:

“...seascapes loom large in the public imagination. Yet on the mental maps of most scholars, oceans are oddly occluded. Geographically marginal to the grids of academic inquiry, the watery world seems to fall between our conceptual cracks as well. When not ignored altogether, maritime topics are routinely relegated to subfields on shipping or migration, pirates or fisheries. That ocean basins are sliced in half on our classroom maps only reinforces their academic invisibility.”

More precisely, those who work in maritime transport, including those engaged in the most menial of tasks, contributed fundamentally to an increasingly globalized world, starting with the European age of exploration in the late 15th century. Workers aboard ships and in ports exchanged information and ideas while also moving an exponentially increasing amount of commodities and people. This reality continues to present day. As Allan Sekula and Noël Burch declare in their film Forgotten Space, “the sea remains the crucial space of globalization. Nowhere else is the disorientation, violence, and alienation of contemporary capitalism more manifest, but this truth is not self-evident, and must be approached as a puzzle, or mystery, a problem to be solved”. Even in the 21st century, 90% of goods are moved, for at least part of their journeys, by ship.

Many workers aboard ships and in ports possessed long histories of radicalism, often forsaking their national, religious, and racial identities for more cosmopolitan, militant, and even revolutionary ones. Even when committed to their national identities, sailors and dockworkers often acted against those in power, acting through systems of colonialism, racism, and capitalism. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker remain perhaps the most widely known proponents of this view. As they argue in The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic, from the 15th through 18th century Atlantic world, sailors, slaves, pirates, labourers, market women, and indentured servants embraced radical ideals of freedom and acted accordingly. In their book the so-called dispossessed—they would say the world’s first proletariat—stand at the centre of the making of the modern world. They convincingly argue that many of the most important ideas about political and human rights were not developed by European philosophers but, rather, by slaves and servants, pirates, and labourers, men and women. Linebaugh and Rediker, of course, are just two of many other scholars of (maritime) labour involved in the growing trends among historians and other scholars to cross national boundaries in their studies, i.e. thinking beyond nation-states or transnationally.

So, too, in the 19th and 20th centuries sailors and dockers played vital roles in history. For instance, Gopalan Balachandran studies South Asian seafarers, themselves a diverse lot with varied interests, who sought to break negative stereotypes that restricted their employment inside the British maritime system during the era of high imperialism. Risa L. Faussette describes the radicalism of West Indian longshoremen in the same era, who experienced an explosion of global trade and imperialism in the wake of industrialization. Similarly, Alan Gregor Cobley argues Caribbean seamen profoundly influenced both labour and black political organizing, from the 18th century into the 20th. The British demand for maritime labourers drew in these former slaves from the Caribbean who, in turn, helped shape various social movements, including maritime unions and Pan-Africanism throughout the Atlantic world, much like what Linebaugh and Rediker discuss. Across the world, in China, dockworkers and sailors organized into proto-unions, participated in the Communist Party, and contributed to growing militancy prior to the 1949 revolution. Earlier, in the West African colony of the Gold Coast, canoe men used their boats to ferry goods like cocoa from the beaches of trading towns like Accra to ships waiting in the deeper waters along the coast. Canoe men, who viewed their transport work as a temporary break from their regular work as fishermen, organized informal associations and used their position as casual labourers to control the conditions of their work, even as European trading interests increasingly sought to control commerce along the coast in the 18th and 19th centuries. Boatmen in early colonial eastern India worked under similar contracts along the Ganga River, building on practices that dated back to the Mughal Empire but reinterpreted through Indian interaction with the English East India Company. The British colonial government introduced regulations for the contract system, driven by the complaints of passengers and the demands of labour mobilization. The pressure to standardize and regulate labour associated with transport and trade in other ports like Mombasa, Kenya, led colonial officials to use their increasing political, juridical, and economic power to transform the casual labour of African dockworkers into a new class of wage labourers, defined by the regularity and “respectability” of their work.⁶

While sailors were important, those who loaded and unloaded ships—called dockers, dockworkers, longshoremen, or stevedores—provided essential links, cul-

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turally, materially, and politically between sea and land. The most important survey
remains the two-volume Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative La-
bour History, 1790 – 1970 that includes about forty essays on different ports and
themes. In their introduction, Sam Davies and Klaus Weinhauer contend “this im-
portant occupational group” must be “considered in a comparative fashion on an in-
ternational scale”. Yet despite such logic and that anthology’s vital contributions, his-
torian Jordi Ibarz’s quite extensive, very recent survey of two hundred historical
studies on dockers—written in English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish—reveals
many gaps including: (1) almost all histories of dockers focus on a single port,
(2) very few studies of African ports exist, (3) very few comparative studies exist,
(4) no comparison of North-South ports exist, (5) very few studies examine both
the casual and decasual eras of a port, (6) almost no port or dock labour studies
combine the traditional and container eras, and (7) very few studies examine
dockworkers in the container era, period, despite the fact that this technology revo-
lutionized all modes of transportation thereby making the explosion of trade in re-
cent decades possible.⁷

As more historians embrace a “maritime turn”, the appreciation for the impor-
tance of the maritime world upon cultural, economic, political, and social relations
within and between societies will only increase. Even today, though, a disappointing
omission has been studies exploring the truly revolutionary impacts of containeriza-
tion on labour; indeed, the editors of Dock Workers consciously ended their project
with the advent of containerization. For that matter, the history of seafarers remains
something of a “black hole”, neither well integrated into the labour histories of spe-
cific nations nor receiving the sort of desperately needed, global, comparative treat-
ment that characterizes the scholarship on dockers.

An investigation of dock labour also points to additional categories of transport
labourers, whose work is often obscured by a focus on industrialized and mecha-
nized labour in the 19th and 20th centuries. The trade routes across the Sahara
and around the Indian Ocean, documented as early as the 1st century, were domina-
ted by head carriers or caravan porters in Africa and India, for example, who trans-
ported goods in caravans, connecting producers to domestic and long-distance trade
routes. Particularly in areas where diseases like the tsetse fly made it impossible to
use draft animals, carriers served as the primary means of long distance transport.
Similar flag post relay mail runners carried mail for the British colonial administra-
tion in colonies like British Southern Cameroon through the mid-20th century. Some
of these forms of transport labour persisted into the 21st century, often operating
alongside new forms of industrialized labour and transgressing boundaries of

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trade, transport, and services. Rickshaws, hammocks, and cask rolling represented variations on the carrier model, and these technologies often circulated through the networks of 19th century European empire. Carriers often were drawn from both free/waged and unfree labour into the 19th century, and they were deployed across a wide array of private, state, and military sectors. In India these labourers were identified as part of an underclass of “coolies”. As African historian Stephen Rockel notes, however, carrier labour in some regions of East Africa developed into a highly organized form of wage labour, defined by both the mobility and stability of their work.⁸

In the global south, rickshaw pullers were particularly notable. Jim Warren argues that “rickshaw coolies” played a crucial role in the development of Singapore in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries for they transported the palm oil, rubber, tin, and tobacco grown and processed across Malaysia through the British port of Singapore. As this port hub grew, tens of thousands of poor men arrived in the booming seaport from overcrowded southeast China to take up the backbreaking but essential trade of rickshaw pullers. Similarly, Tim Wright writes of rickshaw pullers in early 20th century Shanghai. As in Singapore and throughout Asia, these workers occupied a crucial node of transport in densely packed industrial and trading centers, moving both cargo and people. Given the seemingly unlimited supply of labour from rural China, Shanghai’s rickshaw pullers faced incredible downward pressure on their low wages; they also suffered at the hands of rickshaw owners who con-

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trolled the licenses as well as the equipment thereby further squeezing these workers.⁹

Similarly, railroads proved absolutely vital to the economic development of countries within and outside of the networks of imperialism, industrialization, and global capitalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and railway workers possess long histories of organizing and militancy. Indeed, railroads proved essential for expanding global capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries as railroad workers emerged as among the most visible, well organized, and powerful workforces in many countries. In his global survey of railroad labour, Shelton Stromquist argues that despite railroading’s technological uniformity, the historical development of railroads followed certain distinctive patterns in what he categorized as metropolitan (Western Europe), colonies (in Asia, Africa, and Latin America), and settler colonies (including the USA and Canada, Australasia, and parts of Latin America). Stromquist further contends that railroad employment was both segmented (many distinct trades) and stratified (skilled and unskilled). Interestingly, while railways often served the imperialist agenda of European and US powers, railroad workers repeatedly challenged such authority in both settler societies and colonial ones. In the United States in the late 19th century, railroad workers led mammoth strikes including America’s first national strike, nicknamed the Great Upheaval of 1877; in 1894, perhaps the US’ largest strike erupted when hundreds of thousands of railroad workers, led by American Railway Union and future Socialist Party leader, Eugene V. Debs. This latter strike originated among workers who built Pullman rail cars then joined by hundreds of thousands of other railroad workers who boycotted, in solidarity with Pullman workers, all Pullman cars around the nation. The Pullman boycott drastically impaired the national economy for several weeks until the president dispatched soldiers to break it, confirming the power of organized railway workers and centrality of railroads to industrial economies.¹⁰

Railway workers in African colonies also demonstrated their potential to disrupt. In African colonies, railways were almost exclusively associated with resource extraction, transported valuable agricultural and mineral products from interior production zones to coastal ports, provided revenue for colonial coffers, and funneled primary commodities to the West as essential components of industrial manufacturing. When African railway workers like those in colonial French West Africa engaged in massive strikes in 1947–48, the economic pressure of the strike forced important concessions from colonial officials who controlled the railways in the region, but also


served as the foundation for much broader demands for independence within French West Africa and across the continent. African historian Frederick Cooper argues that the economic power of railway workers at this nexus of transport and trade inspired a new language of decolonization rooted in the experiences of mobile labour and a critique of colonialism and global capitalism. This connection between leftist politics and labour mobilization among railway workers was also evident in early twentieth century strikes in independent countries like Brazil.¹¹

As potentially powerful as they were, railroad workers and unions sometimes were forces of conservatism, more interested in preserving what wealth and status they possessed than promoting radical change. Eric Arnesen demonstrates how white American railroaders occasionally organized across racial divides in mixed race organizations but, far more commonly, tried their utmost to deny black workers equal access to jobs and unions. Accordingly, black workers organized their own unions, most famously the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), though they also fought (against unions and employers while appealing to the government) for equal access. Pullman porters, overwhelmingly black, actually straddled the transport and service worker divide, labouring aboard railroads while serving the needs and whims of white passengers. Of course, ethnic-based patterns hardly were unique to US railroad employment; Ottoman railroads hired European and Ottoman Christians for white-collar jobs and Ottoman Muslims for most blue-collar tasks. Yet the BSCP might be best known for collaborating with the broader civil rights movement for racial equality—similar to African railway workers whose actions contributed to anti-colonial struggles in French West Africa or dockers in Guinea-Bissau’s leading port, Pidiguiti, whose 1959 strike contributed to the formation of a militant liberation movement in Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands with links to Angola, as well.¹²

The conservative inclination to preserve existing status and roles also manifested itself in debates over the gendering of work. In Nigeria, Lisa Lindsay details the ways in which colonial officials transformed wage labour into a male domain through a study of African railway workers. By reframing the conditions of work for African railway employees within the framework of the nuclear family, colonial officials empowered the “male breadwinner” as the target of wage labour. This system both de-


nigrated women’s work and relied on the continued involvement of women as providers and earners in the “informal economy”, often providing necessarily labour in local and long-distance markets as carriers or traders. While more interested in Japanese passengers using modern transport technologies, Alisa Freedman examines how (male) consumers perceived female transportation workers, like bus drivers, in early 20th century Tokyo. What these workers shared with other transportation and service industry workers in the modern era was being overworked and underpaid employees of large, powerful corporations. Thus, like many other transportation workers, they might work in mobility but their lives were anything but upwardly mobile. In fact, the choice by Japanese transportation operators to hire female workers was not uncommon. Margaret Walsh notes, “the global search for cheap labour is another factor that has propelled women into the fields of international and local travel, tourism, and transportation”.¹³ As women found their way into occupations traditionally seen as male, it forced reexaminations by male workers and historians alike. For instance, dockwork—along with workers aboard ships—were historically associated with masculinity. Not surprisingly, then, these workforces often incorporated notions of manliness into occupational identities. Dockers—from Liverpool to Turku, Finland, to Portland, Oregon (USA)—supposedly were manly because they worked in physically demanding and dangerous occupations. Hence, men resisted the hiring of women on the docks because they supposedly were not strong or brave enough to handle the work but also because women doing “men’s work” undermined dockers’ identity.¹⁴

Transport workers in cities also played important roles in labour, urban, and political history. Anton Rosenthal writes of streetcar (trolley or tram) workers in Montevideo who engaged in public strike actions that improved their own lots as well as promoted radical, democratic visions that challenged the ruling elite and their notions of “progress”. If less radical, Philadelphia streetcar workers’ strikes and unionism also greatly impacted the lives of residents and economic trajectory of one of America’s great industrial cities, as James Wolfinger demonstrates. Transportation

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¹³ Lisa Lindsay, Working with Gender. Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwest Nigeria (Portsmouth, NH, 2003); Claire Robertson, Sharing the Same Bowl. A Socioeconomic History of Women and Class in Accra, Ghana (Bloomington, IN, 1984); Gracia Clark, Onions Are My Husband. Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women (Chicago, 1995); Alisa Freedman, Tokyo in Transit. Japanese Culture on the Rails and Road (Stanford, CA, 2011), p. 244 and ch. 4; Margaret Walsh, “Gender and the History of Transportation Services: A Historiographical Perspective”, Business History Review, 81, 3 (2007), pp. 545 – 562, at 545.

workers and their unions frequently were attacked for being a “special interest” and interfering with residents’ commutes and employers’ profits though, really, what they posited was an alternate vision of urban life. Workers labouring in the public’s view and sphere frequently asserted their power and vision.¹⁵ In colonial cities across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, transport workers often settled near infrastructure hubs, disrupting European plans to limit access to urban areas. Far from mere labour, these transport workers—along with their counterparts in the trade and services sectors—established vibrant cultural economies around markets and ports and created new forms of sociability and identification that redefined urban life.¹⁶

Motor transport workers faced similar challenges and pressures within communities of circulation and exchange. The introduction of usable and reliable motor vehicles in the early part of the 20th century provided an alternative form of public transport technology, which proved more mobile and adaptable. Motor transport workers in places as diverse as Ghana, South Africa, India, Mexico, and the United States used this new technology to create a diverse array of transport systems, from bus and taxi services to long-haul trucking. As part of a broader system of public transportation and public infrastructure, motor transport workers often found themselves heavily regulated. Companies or the state, which provided necessary technology, training, and wages, employed some of these workers. However, motor transport technology also freed many workers from the centralized infrastructure of the railway, taking advantage of the relatively low-cost of vehicles to create their own businesses. In Ghana and Nigeria, many people worked as owner-operators within a loosely organized transport system. These entrepreneurial systems echoed the bus and taxi companies closely associated with public transportation in the United States and Europe, even as they often rejected their model of centralized company ownership and wage labour.¹⁷

The global spread of motor transport technologies often reconfigured the technological and cultural relationships between producers and consumers, rooted in the particularities of local mobility cultures and values. In the United States, for instance, Cotten Seiler argues that motor transportation became closely associated with narratives of individualism and the “freedom of the road”, spawning a new sort of road-oriented cultural economy. Drive-in movie theaters and restaurants, roadside motels, and suburban sprawl reshaped an American society rooted in an

¹⁷ Jennifer Hart, Ghana on the Go. African Mobility in the Age of Motor Transportation (Bloomington, IN, 2016).
assumed ubiquity of private car ownership. This assumption meant that those without vehicles—and those who served them—were associated with poverty. Outside of major urban centres, where population density made private car ownership impractical, public transportation deteriorated throughout much of the United States in the 20th century. Public transit workers, likewise, experienced decreased wages, job security, and status, i.e. growing precariousness due to systematic disinvestment encouraged by corporations in the motor transport industry (auto and truck manufacturers, oil producers, tire companies, etc.).

In Great Britain and across Europe, motor transportation was less appealing as a form of public transportation, as the dense settlements of more compact European cities and extensive railway infrastructure made motor vehicles not only unnecessary but, in many cases, impractical. However, workers in European colonies and many other places quickly grasped the potential of motor transport technology. Drivers used motor vehicles to fill in the gaps left by limited, export-oriented railway infrastructure, connecting rural and urban areas in comprehensive public transportation systems that carried both goods and passengers. In facilitating the circulation and exchange of people, ideas, and products, drivers embodied a new form of working class cosmopolitanism that often differed from the privilege and status of Western-educated elites. Drivers also created cosmopolitan cultures among the communities along their routes. As in the United States, motor transport technologies created new social, economic, and cultural possibilities. In Ghana, Gracia Clark argues that female market traders established special relationships with drivers, capitalizing on the speed and convenience of motor transport to engage in new forms of long-distance trade while still maintaining their domestic responsibilities. Polly Hill argues that Ghanaian cocoa farmers reinvested their profits in motor vehicles, using them to transport their produce to coastal ports and bypassing the colonial railways. In Tanzania, garages emerged along roadsides and in neighborhoods, catering to the technological needs of vehicle owners but also creating imaginative spaces where “tinkers” could build unique vehicles using customized and spare parts. Across Latin America, Asia, and Africa, drivers decorated their vehicles, using colorful designs and popular slogans to express their own aspirations and that of their passengers.

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Particularly in industrialized economies, long-haul trucking emerged as a distinct category of motor transport labour as early as the 1930s. In the United States, Shane Hamilton explores cartelization in trucking industry from the 1930s into the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of the powerful Teamsters Union that represented most drivers in trucking, and the subsequent efforts that resulted in “independent contractors” remaking the industry and nation’s economy, thereby facilitating the rise of Wal-Mart, America’s most powerful corporation, and more broadly today’s low-price, low-wage economy. However, the distinctiveness of U.S. long-haul trucking assumed a distinction between passenger and goods transport that certainly was shared across most Western and industrialized economies, but which was considerably more blurred in colonial and postcolonial economies, where production and circulation was often controlled by small-scale farmers and traders who traveled with their goods. European colonial governments often sought to reinforce, legislate, and police these distinctions. In places like colonial Ghana, where Africans controlled the profitable cocoa and palm oil industries, drivers frequently carried both goods and passengers in an effort to respond to the needs of their clients and to maximize their own profits. They also moved freely between different categories of driving work—long-haul trucking, passenger transport, and taxis; formal sector wage employment and self-employed, entrepreneurial work—creating a complex, adaptable, and fiercely independent motor transport system that continues to inform postcolonial economic development.²¹

In recent decades, aviation has taken off, mostly to move people but also some cargo. Aviation sector workers, accordingly, have increased in numbers and influence over the last sixty years. As Geraint Harvey and Peter Turnbull write about the contemporary aviation industry, “The global economic impact of civil aviation is estimated to be around US$3.5 trillion, equivalent to 7.5 per cent of world GDP”. Strict divisions of labour exist between highly skilled and, often, well paid pilots and mechanics, and those who load and unload cargo and serve as flight crew. Like other transport sectors, civil aviation is well organized with some workers in craft unions and others in industry-wide ones. For instance, in the USA, pilots, flight attendants, mechanics, and baggage handlers all have unionized but in separate organizations though they maintain alliances to improve wages and working conditions. The most infamous moment in US aviation labour history occurred in 1981, when President Ronald Reagan fired unionized air traffic controllers engaged in an (illegal) strike; the high-pressure nature of their jobs and desire to remain in the middle class had been hindered by severe limits placed upon public sector workers includ-

ing controllers. Setbacks aside, the more than five million workers in civil aviation, globally, comprise a vital sector of the global economy.²²

Today, ships, railroads, and trucks constitute the field of “logistics” or what Anna Tsing calls “supply chain capitalism”. Among the most important works centreing labour in the recent history of global transportation is Edna Bonacich and Jake B. Wilson’s Getting the Goods, a study of the nation’s most important port, Los Angeles-Long Beach. This port serves as a window into the modern logistics industry, the gateway for goods shipped through an efficient, intermodal freight system in which containers move from factories in Asia to consumers in the United States. Since, clearly, the logistics industry has contributed mightily to the “global race to the bottom”, by supplying Wal-Mart and other big-box retailers, appreciating this subject is essential to a labour history of global trade and transport.²³

Trade and service

Wage labour regimes required new forms of service labour to cater to individuals who increasingly relied on institutions outside of the home to provide basic services. In many cases, the labour of service workers overlapped with the labour associated with transport and trade. Further blurring the lines between these industries, trade, service, and transportation often came together in port cities. These convergences not only applied to wage labourers but also employers and managers as Çağlar Keyder, Y. Eyüp Özveren and Donald Quataert write, “The merchant communities of the [Ottoman] port cities were well organized and well educated”, both helpful in protecting and asserting their class interests vis-à-vis their workers but also in relation to the state.²⁴

Paul E. Johnson’s classic Shopkeeper’s Millennium examines the rising bourgeois class of Rochester, New York in the first half of the 19th century, at the start of large-scale industrialism. As throughout pre-industrial societies, the people who hired other workers also were workers themselves, i.e. skilled craftsmen (generally men). Such artisans hired other workers (jourenymen and apprentices) but also sold their own finished goods to consumers. Industrialization resulted in a separa-


tion between production and retailing and, thereby, increased the number of traders as well as sharpening the divisions between employers and employees.  

In the same era, the dawn of industrial capitalism, Walter Johnson studies another preindustrial institution, the slave trading market, when human beings were commodified as chattel slaves, as property. In Soul by Soul, Johnson examines New Orleans, America’s largest slave market. He discusses the traders, buyers, and slaves who belonged to a single system, in which slave traders sold human beings as slaves to “masters” (employers), laying bare the brutal economics of this sort of trading and—as in many workplaces—the many interdependencies. More typical of labour histories are those studying employees.  

Susan Porter Benson explores an important service workplace born of industrialization, the modern department store. In Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940 Benson connects class and gender to write a social history of women sales clerks. Wage-earning female salesclerks, their all-male managers, and upper-class women who viewed such stores as places of “recreation and sociability” belonged to an interlocking network not entirely different from the slave market described by Johnson. Benson’s work remains a standard for those interested in the labour history of workers in sales.  

Of course, retail labour varied widely in different countries. In 20th century South Africa, for instance, the state created a segmented and bifurcated market based upon gender, skill, and race. The legal system privileged white and male workers yet that did not stop female workers from attempting to improve their conditions, both through greater government protection as well as unionism. For workers such as these, and indeed across the global South, where access to wage labour was limited and where salaries were often quite low, precarity has always existed. Even wage labourers in countries like South Africa or Ghana sought to supplement their meager wages with entrepreneurial work like farming, trade, or other small business ownership, which they pursued outside of their formal sector jobs, often with the help of additional family labour. Retail workers in industrialized societies, who have increasingly been forced into more casual and precarious labour, e.g. hired through labour brokers, irregular and limited working hours, now more closely resemble conditions in South Africa.  

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27 Susan Porter Benson, Counter Cultures. Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940 (Urbana, IL, 1986).
Perhaps more than other wage labour sectors, service industries often drew heavily on the labour of women, who transferred domestic skills expertise in caretaking—work that today is still associated with women, but which was firmly rooted in 19th century conceptions of gendered divisions of labour and the morality of the private sphere—into the workplace. In many cases, the presence of women in the workplace created conflicts along the lines of gender and labour, as Dorothy Sue Cobble explores in *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century*, which discusses how American women simultaneously fought against their fellow (male) workers for inclusion in male-dominated unions and (male) employers in order to improve their economic conditions. When able to unionize, waitresses drastically improved their wages and conditions though their battles against sexist, male workers, in and out of unions, hindered their efforts to challenge their male employers. Cobble positions waitresses at the centre of the rise of a service-oriented economy in which the feminization of the workforce also occurred; of course, this process continues to this day. Similarly, Marianne Debouzy studies the approximately 25,000 McDonald’s workers in France. Just as Eric Schlosser demonstrated for U.S. fast food workers in his popular history *Fast Food Nation*, McDonald’s Corporation strives to keep its French workers—generally quite young—out of unions despite the French tradition of heavily unionized, working-class militancy. McDonald’s, like Wal-Mart, depends on a low-wage workforce to maintain profitability with a business model based upon low profit margins.

As with the world’s most famous fast food corporation, Wal-Mart arose as the largest and most powerful retailer and, accordingly, has drawn the attention of a growing number of labour historians. In *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business*, Nelson Lichtenstein argues that Wal-Mart created its own corporate subculture rooted in its birthplace, the Ozark region of Arkansas, one of the whitest, most homogeneous parts of the USA. Founder Sam Walton frequently claimed “his” workers were “a family”, and Lichtenstein describes how the company created a corporate culture built upon a particular ideological take on family and religion that—concurrently—was built upon a largely-female workforce that suffered low wages, job insecurity, and pervasive corporate control. In contrast to Henry Ford’s motor company, Wal-Mart operates upon the premise that it is cheaper to hire and train new workers than pay existing “associates” good wages and develop career-long workers. Similarly, Bethany Moreton’s book *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* focuses upon the mostly female, married,
white workers who embodied the transition in America (and other industrial societies) to two-income households and an economy dominated by services, not manufacturing. Moreton contends Wal-Mart workers embraced a “reproducerism” that celebrated traditional feminine traits of caring and service though men controlled nearly all of the managerial positions.³⁰

Wal-Mart’s success was not solely based on its “associates” but also a highly sophisticated, global system that manufactured cheap goods, especially in China, and pioneered bar-code-based, computerized shipping. In an earlier, edited collection, Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism (2006), Nelson Lichtenstein echoes Peter Drucker that every era has a dominant business the shapes society in its own image. In recent decades Wal-Mart typifies giant retail corporations dominate and dictate global supply chains and, hence, global capitalism. Thomas Adams’ essay explains how Wal-Mart’s authoritarian management, fierce anti-unionism, and low-wage model became prevalent; by contrast, department stores used to be much more heavily unionized. Ellen Rosen’s contribution highlights managerial speedups, systematic understaffing, and “wage theft” (i.e. when workers continue working beyond their assigned shift, off the clock and without pay). Along with pro-corporate, neoliberal policies, ever more workers toil in low-wage, import dependent, retail sales. Companies like Wal-Mart have supplanted the manufacturing firms of the Fordist era as the mobility of retail capital dominate labour(ers) far less mobile.

As mammoth retail corporations like Tesco and Wal-Mart expand into new markets, workers and their organizations respond differently. In India, for instance, many millions of family-run shops and street vendors historically dominated local trade—and still do to some extent. However, as multinational corporations entered urban India, it being much more integrated into global capitalism, the greatly expanding retail workforce unionized and, simultaneously, collaborated with international labour networks and federations. Interestingly, these transnational alliances promote retail workers’ rights but also allied with traditional traders, themselves resisting encroachment and competition. Events in India, in terms of transnational networks of retail workers and unions, parallel other nations in the Global South. Yet, as in other industries, corporations generally have far more power and ability to shift production and distribution networks; meanwhile, human labourers remain far more place-bound for socio-cultural, economic, and political reasons. Despite this uphill struggle, workers in retail increasingly attempt to form transnational alliances—following the lead of maritime workers who created the International Transport Workers Federation as early as 1896.³¹

As a subsection of trade, retail workers typify work in contemporary times. Bridget Kenny, an expert on South African retail, insightfully notes that studies on precariousness “has come to describe the subjective experience of the [current] time, a zeitgeist of sorts”. Workers in sales, she highlights, are an especially apt workforce to examine if one truly is interested with precariousness: “Retail is used as a case because it has become a powerful symbol of contingent employment globally, for its reliance on part-time, low-wage, and insecure employment now and as a sign of erosion of hard-fought gains by the labour movement”. However, Kenny punctures this balloon by observing, “When one examines precariousness from the perspective of the Global South where insecurity for many has always been a core feature of labour markets and economies, less readily does this presumption fit”.

In the Global South, the instability and weakness of the wage labour market—a weakness that was inscribed in many ways in the global inequalities produced through the very economic structures and relationships of capitalism and colonialism that grew in the 18th and 19th centuries—inspired the growth of a large informal economy. Some associate the informal economy with the illegality and immorality of a “black market” or shadow economy. However, as Brian Larkin argues, in much of the global South the informal economy constitutes a large and vibrant sector of legitimate economic enterprise that often fills the gaps left by a weak formal sector. The informal sector flourishes particularly across the fields of trade, transport, and services. Market women, food sellers, drivers, hawkers, and many others operate small businesses, ensuring that desired goods and services reach consumers. In their search for economic security, individuals working in the informal sector often engage in multiple sorts of work simultaneously, blurring the boundaries between formal and informal, local and global. In countries like Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and India, these informal economic activities often build on precapitalist systems of exchange adapted to reflect the new opportunities and insecurities of capitalism. In industrial economies, however, many look to emerging service and transport industries like Uber as an expansion of the informal economy in response to more recent precarization.

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3.4. Trade, Transport, and Services

Conclusions

We welcome the ongoing embrace of comparative, transnational, and global methods by historians and other scholars that, most likely, will continue. In particular, those who study workers, labouring culture, and worker organizations stand to gain a great deal from changing their lenses and gazing at the past in new ways. As we suggest, there are myriad opportunities to reframe old orthodoxies previously bound by nation-states by engaging in transnational and comparative studies of the labour of trade, transport, and services. Considerations of these forms of mobile labour push us to reconsider the emphasis placed on formal sector wage labour. In the process, these histories highlight a shared history of precarity lying at the centre of global capitalism.
Suggested reading


