

Marcel van der Linden

The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History¹

We, the workers of the fully industrialized, “civilized” countries of the West, can no longer “isolate” ourselves from the remainder of the world. Our movements are no longer (and our “theories” should not remain either) the comparatively independent expressions of certain *nationally* restricted processes. We are part and parcel of a veritable *one-world revolution*.

Karl Korsch, letter to Irving B. Canter dated December 6, 1950

A long road

The idea that the histories of different regions in the world are interconnected is not particularly novel; it already existed several centuries ago. Thus, for example, when the German historian and playwright Friedrich Schiller was granted a chair at the University of Jena in 1789, he declared in his inaugural address that “the most remote regions of the world contribute to our luxury.” After all, he continued, “The clothes we wear, the spices in our food, and the price for which we buy them, many of our strongest medicines, and also many new tools of our destruction – do they not presuppose a Columbus who discovered America, a Vasco da Gama who circumnavigated the tip of Africa”?² Nevertheless it took quite some time before professional historians began to consider these global connections seriously in their research. Colonial and “imperial” historians led the way. They were joined by economic historians. Labor historians became interested in inter-continental perspectives only more recently; until the 1970s, they typically locked themselves into the framework of individual nation-states. Even great innovators

¹ This article was first published under the same title in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (Fall 2012), pp. 57–76 doi:10.1017/S0147547912000270 © The International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission. I am grateful to my colleagues Ulbe Bosma, Karin Hofmeester, Jan Lucassen, Christine Moll-Murata, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk for their comments on two earlier drafts, and to Jurriaan Bendien for translating this text from Dutch. For my earlier essays on this topic, with different angles, see especially Marcel van der Linden, “The ‘Globalization’ of Labor and Working Class History and Its Consequences,” *ILWCH*, 65 (2004): 136–156; van der Linden, “Labor History: The Old, the New and the Global,” *African Studies*, 66 (2007): 1–12; van der Linden, “Labour History Beyond Borders,” in *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, and John McIlroy, *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (London, 2010), 353–383.

² Friedrich Schiller, “What Is, and to What End do We Study, Universal History,” in *Poet of Freedom*, vol. II., trans. Caroline Stephan and Robert Trout (New York, 1988).

in the discipline, such as E. P. Thompson, thought mostly in terms of “national” working classes.

A significant turning point was reached in 1971. At a meeting of the American Historical Association, a study group was founded under the inspiring leadership of Bob Wheeler, which began publishing the *Newsletter, European Labor and Working Class History*. This event prefigured changes to come, in two ways: First, the *Newsletter* broke through the relative isolation of the various country specialists on both sides of the Atlantic; and second, the constraint of an exclusively “European” focus quite quickly lost its appeal. Within just a few years, the *Newsletter* also began to publish articles about the Mexican Revolution, modern and contemporary China, and so on. The alteration of the newsletter’s title in 1976, from *European* to *International Labor and Working Class History*, reflected this trend.

Other developments in the same direction around that time were the founding in 1964 of the *Internationale Tagung der Historiker der Arbeiterbewegung* (ITH) in Austria – an annual Conference of labor historians from “socialist” and capitalist countries – and the founding in 1970 of the International Association of Labour History Institutions (IALHI), a collaborative organization for archives around the world but concentrated in the rich countries (which, unfortunately, remains the case).³

Substantively, the new trend first became visible in comparative studies of different countries. Comparative work had, of course, already appeared previously, but in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, the number of such studies rose quickly. The countries investigated were usually relatively “large” ones, and primarily in the North Atlantic region. They included, above all, the United States and Britain (which had the added advantage that they could be compared, even if the researcher spoke only English), France, Germany, Italy, and Russia. The number of cases studied was almost always very small (two or three), because the research projects were normally carried out by individual researchers.⁴ Later, from the late 1980s onward, some larger-scale projects followed, which were usually conceived at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, and in which some twenty or more countries were often compared.⁵

³ Nowadays the ITH is called “International Conference of Labour and Social History.” See www.ith.or.at (accessed October 15, 2012). The activities of the IALHI can be followed via www.ialhi.org (accessed October 15, 2012)

⁴ I have tried to give an overview in “A Bibliography of Comparative Labour History,” in *Australian Labour and Regional Change. Essays in Honour of R.A. Gollan*, ed. Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells (Rushcutters Bay, NSW [Australia], 1998), 117–145.

⁵ In the first projects, the comparisons were still mainly contrasting, that is, highlighting similarities and differences between instances, without trying to *explain* these similarities and differ-

Separately from this trend, however, other developments also occurred. From the 1940s, labor and working-class histories began to appear in the Global South, partly encouraged by the independence struggles in African and Asian colonies, but also stimulated by the Cuban Revolution of 1953–1959.⁶ Many works were institutional analyses, such as J. Norman Parmer’s *Colonial Labor Policy and Administration* (1960) on the Malaysian rubber plantation industry, or Charles Gamba’s *The Origins of Trade Unions in Malaya* (1962). But already early on attention was given to the perspective “from below,” as illustrated by Jean Chesneaux’s classic *Le mouvement ouvrier en Chine de 1919 à 1927* (1962), and Guillermo Lora’s *Historia del movimiento obrero boliviana* (1967–1970). Other stimulating influences were the rise of Pan-Africanism; the discovery of border cultures and transnational identities in historical migration research; and of transnational cycles of protests and strikes.

When, from the early 1990s, scholarly interest in “world history” (and, a little later, “global history”) also began to increase – probably in good part due to the collapse of “really existing socialism” in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union – the need for a reorientation of labor and working-class history was felt more and more, including within the North Atlantic region. Against this background, my colleague Jan Lucassen and I published our *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History* in 1999, a short pamphlet in which the concept of Global Labor History (GLH) was introduced. The *Prolegomena* stressed the geographical, temporal, and thematic limitations of traditional labor history. It argued that a new approach was required, generating “a preference for studying developments traditionally overlooked by labor historians.”

ences. In later studies, much more systematic attention was given to explanations. See, for important examples: Sam Davies, et al., (eds), *Dock Workers 1790–1970. International Explorations in Comparative Labour History*, 2 volumes (Aldershot, 2000); and Lex Heerma van Voss, eds., *The Ashgate Companion to the History of Textile Workers, 1650–2000* (Aldershot, 2010). Outside the IISH comparisons were organized as well, often for between six and twelve countries. See, for example, Dick Geary, ed., *Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe before 1914* (Oxford, 1989); Stefan Berger and David Broughton, eds., *The Force of Labour: The Western European Labour Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford and Washington, 1995); Ulla Wikander et al., eds., *Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1880–1920* (Urbana, IL, 1995); and Patrick Pasture and Johan Verberckmoes, eds., *Working-Class Internationalism and the Appeal of National Identity: Historical Debates and Current Perspectives* (Oxford and New York, 1998).

⁶ Already prior to the Second World War, a few important contributions to labor history in the Global South were published. Rajani Kanta Das, an employee of the International Labor Organization in Geneva, published three studies in one year: *Factory Labor in India* (Berlin, 1923); *Factory Legislation in India* (Berlin, 1923); and *Labor Movement in India* (Berlin, 1923). US historian Marjorie Ruth Clark wrote a pioneering work on *Organized Labor in Mexico* (New York, 1973 [originally 1934]).

More in particular, the *Prolegomena* stressed the need of transcontinental and diachronic comparisons, and suggested four partially overlapping areas of research: the rewriting of organizational histories (histories of trade unions, etc.) from a different perspective; the study of organizational forms neglected by research so far (mutual benefit societies, consumer cooperatives, etc.); the history of the working classes in the global south; and the history of preindustrial workers.

Now, thirteen years later, our *Prolegomena* has become obsolete in several respects. The demand for GLH has meanwhile increased strongly, as is proved also by the choice of topic for this *ILWCH jubileum* issue. At many conferences and in many publications, the concept is mentioned; it nowadays inspires a modest but increasing number of research projects worldwide. A few examples may illustrate the increasing interest:

- Already in 2005, the Association of Indian Labour Historians organized an international conference, “Towards Global Labour History: New Comparisons.” A selection of the papers presented there was published in 2009.⁷
- In September 2006, the General Assembly of the ITH (International Conference of Labour and Social History) accepted a policy paper saying, “The ITH will focus on *Global Labour History*, the global history of all wage earners, slaves, sharecroppers, etc., including their organizations and associated social movements.”⁸
- In June 2008, the University of Toronto (New College) organized an international Summer School on Global Labor History for graduate students.
- Also in 2008, the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, organized a conference on “Labour Crossings: World, Work and History,” which brought together labor historians from Brazil, Africa, and India.
- The electronic journal of the Brazilian labor history network *Revista Mundos do Trabalho* opened its first issue (2009) with the article “Labour History: The Old, the New and the Global,” emphasizing the importance of the GLH perspective.⁹
- The Humboldt University in Berlin in 2009 opened its international research center, Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History, which annually brings together senior and junior fellows from different disciplines concerned with GLH.

⁷ Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra, eds., *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories* (New Delhi, 2009).

⁸ See http://www.ith.or.at/ith_e/vorschlaege_ZuKO_e.htm (accessed October 15, 2012).

⁹ Marcel van der Linden, “*História do Trabalho: o velho, o novo e o global*,” *Revista Mundos do Trabalho*, 1 (2009), 11–26. See <http://www.periodicos.ufsc.br/index.php/mundosdotrabalho/issue/view/1130> (accessed October 15, 2012).

- The *Arbeitskreis Moderne Sozialgeschichte*, a half-yearly meeting of German-language professors of social history, organized discussions about GLH in 2010 and 2011.
- In early 2011, Lisbon's New University organized a big conference on "Strikes and Social Conflicts in the Twentieth Century," leading to the founding of a new association for the global historical study of social conflicts and a new electronic peer-reviewed journal, to be published at Campinas, Brazil.
- The Italian journal *Passato e Presente* recently published an enthusiastic survey article on GLH activities and their international resonance.¹⁰ An Italian collection of essays on GLH came out this year.¹¹
- The French journal *Le Mouvement Social* will in late 2012 publish an issue focusing on GLH.

These developments, of course, have not gone unnoticed in the United States, the country that proportionally still has more professional historians than all other countries. The US approach is often inter-American, though a further step toward global history is then not far off anymore. From 2002, the journal *Labor History* opened its pages for contributions to labor history from all world regions. The new journal *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, which emerged out of a dispute around *Labor History* in 2004, featured the appointment of coeditors for Canada and Latin America. The circles around the journal *Labor* organized the international conference "Workers, the Nation-State, and Beyond" with the theme "Labor History across the Americas" (Chicago, September 2008). Much attention was given by participants to methodological and theoretical questions, but important extensions of the research field also occurred. Among other topics, there were contributions dealing with military labor, indigenous and caring labor; transnational labor recruitment and immigration control, and cross-border solidarity, for example, with fugitive slaves and among sailors.¹²

¹⁰ Christian de Vito, "La proposta della *Global labour history* nell'era della 'globalizzazione'," *Passato e Presente*, no. 85 (January–April 2012), 177–188.

¹¹ Christian de Vito (ed.), *Global Labour History. La storia del lavoro al tempo della globalizzazione*, Verona, 2012.

¹² A number of papers are now available in Leon Fink, ed., *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York, 2011).

What is global labor history?

The growing popularity of GLH has, until now, not been accompanied by a growing clarity about the concept itself. Jan Lucassen and myself originally neglected to provide a very clear and persuasive definition, and others working in this area of research did not – to my knowledge – do so either, though this omission was practically inevitable. After all, a poetess does not write an aesthetics before she begins to write poetry, and a dancer doesn't first sing a song before he begins his movement.¹³ Now that the *practice* of GLH has really begun to develop, it seems wise to attempt a more exact definition of the object of study, as well as of the methods of the new approach.

I would emphasize one point straightaway: I consider GLH to be a distinctive field of research, just like art history or linguistics. Within that research area, different theories can be constructed and tested, whether inspired by Karl Marx, Max Weber, John Commons, or other thinkers. By implication, GLH itself is *not* a “theory” in its own right, and therefore it is *not* an alternative for Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, or any other interpretations of the capitalist world order. That being said, the question suggests itself of how we should define the dimensions and boundaries of this area of inquiry.

When is history “global”?

During the last thirty or forty years historians have had cause to relativize the boundaries of the nation-state. The nation-state is probably no more than two centuries old, but the concept has deeply anchored itself in our thinking. Just like most other historians, labor historians assumed for a long time that the nation-state was the obvious frame of reference within which developments had to be analyzed. Labor historians referred without hesitation to the “American,” “Italian,” or “Russian” workers' movement, as if such movements were neatly placed within separate geographical/political containers. Of course, there have always been problematic cases, such as multiethnic states (the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, etc.) or movements of ethnic groups who did not possess their own state (Scots, Catalans, etc.). But these were supposedly the exceptions that proved the rule, examples of an uncompleted process of which the end result was more or less a foregone conclusion: Each nation has its own state.

¹³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Part II, Ch. 12 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1859).

Disquiet about this methodological nationalism expressed itself – especially from the 1970s onward – in comparative analyses that focused on the differences and common features among individual nation-states. These comparative studies nevertheless did not break with the nation-state paradigm because all the reconstructions revolved around the separate nation-states as independent and windowless “monads” (G.W. Leibniz). As methodological nationalism began to change its form, attempts were made to criticize this fixation implicitly. In the Global South, historians had already earlier reached the conclusion that it was impossible to write the labor history of a country as if it were a self-contained unit. How could the working-class history of, for example, Nigeria, Vietnam, or Indonesia be reconstructed without continually paying attention to the connections with their colonial motherlands Britain, France, and the Netherlands? Moreover, how could the history of wage earners in these countries be written without an eye for the history of other labor relations, like slavery (and the slave trade) or the exploitation of coolies? The Guyanese historian Walter Rodney, murdered for political reasons, was a pioneer in this area. The importance of his work can hardly be underestimated; his oeuvre discusses not only the influence of the slave trade on West Africa, but also the history of the Guyanese working people shaped by this trade. In this way, Rodney opened up a wholly new transcontinental perspective.¹⁴ In the Global North, especially supporters of world-systems theories, provided pioneering studies among other things by drawing attention to intercontinental connections between different modes of labor exploitation.¹⁵

The more that the “monadology” was disputed, the more the terminological debate about alternatives intensified. Thus, for example, in France the concept of *histoire croisée* (crossed history) was invented, focusing on the reciprocal transfers between nations, civilizations, regions, etc., as well as emphasizing mutual influences and reception mechanisms.¹⁶ In the English-speaking world, the concept of the *entangled history* has been introduced, which likewise gives attention to such interconnections. More frequently mentioned than these two terms, is the concept of *transnational history*. However, this concept takes the nation-state as the self-evident point of departure that needs to be transcended and is also often used for an international comparative historiography that does not pay atten-

¹⁴ Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast* (City, 1970); Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881–1905* (Baltimore, 1981).

¹⁵ For more details, see chapter thirteen of my book *Workers of the World* (Leiden, 2008), 287–318.

¹⁶ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, eds., *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée* (Paris, 2004); Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory*, 45 (2006): 30–50.

tion to entanglements.¹⁷ All of the three concepts are moreover usually (but not always) applied to the historiography of contiguous regions, even though very-long-distance connections can be involved. The concept of *world history* might offer a solution, except that much research published under this rubric (though certainly not all) is additive: At a certain point in time, *X* happened in Europe, *Y* in China, and *Z* in America. *Global history* overlaps significantly with world history but does not suffer from this limitation because the term refers to connections across the globe. Yet there is also a disadvantage of this concept: Global history creates the impression that only “big history” is included – the “great divergence” between China and Europe, for example, or the connection between world wars and hegemonies. Every term we might choose therefore has its drawbacks.

If we speak of global history, it is important to state clearly what we do and do not mean by it. In my view, global history is primarily concerned with *the description and explanation of the intensifying (or weakening) connections (interactions, influences, transfers) between different world regions, as well as of the economic, political, social, and cultural networks, institutions, and media that played a role in it*. This historiography is much more than the historiography of globalization alone unless we define globalization very broadly. Comparative studies, exploring the causes and consequences of combined and uneven differential developments, are an integral part of it.

Global history in this sense does not have to be large-scale only; it can include microhistory as well. It is quite feasible to write a global history of a small village, a work site, or a family. The important thing is that we should follow the traces of interest to us wherever they may lead: across political and geographic frontiers, time frames, territories, and disciplinary boundaries. Migration patterns, mass media, world markets and corporations, religious hierarchies, climate changes, wars, and so on can all be bridges to a wider world. Sometimes we will not travel far to discover the interconnections and explanations, and sometimes we will have to.

Obviously there have also been groups of people who lived in a relatively isolated way and were, at most, connected with others via sporadic long-distance trade. Though global history is not a “history of everything,” these groups, too, belong to the field of inquiry, in as much as the interactions and transfers that did *not* eventuate are also of interest. To identify the big picture in small details (and vice versa, to discover microrealities in macroprocesses) – that is what it is all about! Global history is therefore in the first instance a question of mentality. Researchers should be bold in their inquiry and dare to venture outside their own familiar terrain.

17 That is how I did it myself in *Transnational Labour History. Explorations* (Aldershot, 2003).

What is the time frame?

If we want to write the history of labor on a world scale, we could take two sorts of approaches. One approach aspires to a “universal history of work,” documenting the labor relations in different parts of the world as comprehensively as possible. Another approach aims for “a history of globalized work,” that looks at labor relations and labor movements from the topical perspective of the “globalized” economy. Both approaches need not be mutually exclusive, however. Willem van Schendel proposed that the first approach could become “a dynamic and crucial field of inquiry,” in which “the histories and identities of working people are compared and analyzed from different theoretical vantage points that attempt to see beyond the looking-glass of the North.” The second approach (“histories of labor seen as studies of capitalism through its labor aspect”) could be interpreted as “a special interest within this larger field, and it, too, could be approached from various theoretical angles.”¹⁸ I would endorse such a view, except that I favor prioritizing the second (more narrowly focused) approach in the meantime. My reasons are practical and political.

The practical reason is that both old and new labor historians have always centrally focused on labor in capitalist societies; it is obvious that GLH dovetails with that interest. The political reason is that the second approach directly contributes to understanding the world in which we live now – providing better insight into the tendencies that have brought us to where we are today.¹⁹ The first-mentioned approach obviously does not lose any of its importance because of this priority. If GLH would in time extend its horizons beyond capitalist civilization, it would deepen our understanding of the specificity (or nonspecificity) of capitalist developments.²⁰

18 Willem van Schendel, “Stretching Labour Historiography,” *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006): 260–261.

19 Bruce Mazlish correctly argues that “all history is contemporary history in the sense that the perspective brought to bear on past events is necessarily rooted in the present. In this light, global history may simply be more conscious of its perspective and interested in focusing it more directly on contemporary happenings, as well as on the past. Serious problems of selectivity or documentation then remain, as they do with any history.” Mazlish, “Introduction to Global History,” in Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens, eds., *Conceptualizing Global History* (Boulder, 1993), 3.

20 I regard the Soviet Union, the Chinese People’s Republic, and other “socialist” societies as elements of capitalist civilization, broadly speaking. They were, in my view, not “capitalist,” but their rise or decline can only be understood in a world capitalist context. I provide a definition of capitalism in *Workers of the World* (Leiden, 2008), chapter sixteen. My interpretation of Soviet-type societies can be found in *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union* (Leiden, 2007).

What do we mean by “labor”?

Labor and working-class history were for a long time understood as “the history of wage earners” – workers who, as free individuals, can dispose of their labor power as their own commodity and who have no other commodity for sale.²¹ Attention was focused especially on miners, industrial and transport workers, and, less frequently, on agricultural laborers. This narrow conceptualization is called in question by the “globalization” of the research terrain.

On the one hand, the experience of the *contemporary* Global South tells us that the distinctions between “classical” wage earners and some other subordinate groups are vague indeed. “Pure” wage workers have been a minority in the labor force of many countries in the Global South; there, a process of class formation often did not develop until the very end. Most of these wage earners do not freely dispose of their own labor power – for example, because these workers are tied down by debts – or they do not have any formal (legally recognized) contractual relationship with their employers. In addition, wage labor in the South is carried out by households and families whose survival very often remains partly dependent on subsistence labor as well, performed, especially but not exclusively by women, and on independent production of commodities for the market. The economic roles that different family members take on are often not fixed and permanent but instead signify a transient social relationship – one that can be replaced rather quickly by other sources of income. That is one reason why the dividing line between workers and so-called lumpenproletarians (people who survive by means of begging, crime, prostitution, and so on) is not always easy to draw.²² Next to that, there are all kinds of forms of hidden wage labor, such as sharecropping, in which a peasant family supplies labor and the landowner supplies the land and means of production while the revenues are shared between them, according to some formula. Another form of “hidden” wage labor includes *self-employed workers*, who are formally employers without staff but in reality are often dependent on one specific client who is therefore their de facto employer.

On the other hand, *historical* studies reveal that in the past, the dividing line between chattel slaves, serfs, and other unfree subalterns taken together and

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I (Harmondsworth, 1976), 272.

²² Referring to Africa, Vic Allen concluded some forty years ago that “[in] societies in which bare subsistence is the norm for a high proportion of all the working class, and where men, women, and children are compelled to seek alternative means of subsistence, as distinct from their traditional ones, the *lumpenproletariat* is barely distinguishable from much of the rest of the working class.” V.L. Allen, “The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10 (1972): 169–189, at 188.

“free” wage earners was rather vague at best. On the African east coast around 1900, for example, there lived quite a number of slaves who

... worked as self-employed artisans or skilled workers, some of whom had previously worked as day labourers but had learnt a more lucrative trade. They worked as sea captains, fishermen, hunters, sailors, boatmen, rope makers, halva makers, tailors, shoemakers, potters, mat makers, wood carvers, weavers, palm wine tappers, carpenters, boat builders, metalworkers, bricklayers, lime burners, stone masons and even as silversmiths. Others joined caravans as porters, petty traders, and itinerant artisans, some even as caravan leaders and guides. Finally, there were those who worked as professional mercenary soldiers. ... These self-employed slaves ... were respected for their knowledge and thus commanded exceedingly high prices in the market, but they were rarely for sale. With almost the same status as freed slaves, a number of them actually owned small garden plots, and occasionally even slaves.²³

Brazilian historians especially have pointed to the fluid dividing line between “free” wage labor and chattel slavery, as in the case of the *ganhadores* (slaves for hire) who earned their own wage, part of which they had to hand over to their owners.²⁴ In South Asia other ambivalences occur, as in the case of indentured laborers (*coolies*) who were employed in South Asia itself, but also in the Caribbean, Malaya, Natal, Fiji, and elsewhere. Their situation is sometimes described as a “new form of slavery,” but at other times as “nearly free” wage labor.²⁵ In Australia, after lengthy hesitations, labor historians have no difficulty anymore to describe the numerous convict laborers originally settling in the country as “working class” in the broad sense of the word, even though these workers performed forced labor.²⁶ And for Europe, the new research reveals that many so-called “free” workers were really *bonded* laborers, far into the nineteenth century. Master-and-servant laws, apprenticeship arrangements, and so forth, ensured that workers were tied to their employers and had significantly fewer

²³ Jan-Georg Deutsch, *Emancipation without Abolition in German East Africa c.1884–1914* (Oxford, 2006), 71–72.

²⁴ Groundbreaking was the article by Sílvia Hunold Lara, “Escravidão, cidadania e história do trabalho no Brasil,” *Projeto História*, 16 (1998): 25–38; See also the important case study by João José Reis, “‘The Revolution of the *Ganhadores*’: Urban Labour, Ethnicity and the African Strike of 1857 in Bahia, Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29 (1997): 355–393.

²⁵ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of India Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London, 1974).

²⁶ An excellent overview is provided by David Andrew Roberts, “The ‘Knotted Hands that Set Us High’: Labour History and the Study of Convict Australia,” *Labour History* [Sydney], 100 (2011): 33–50.

legal rights than the literature previously suggested. In this context, there has indeed been mention of “industrial serfdom.”²⁷

An additional difficulty is that the old conceptualizations have proved inadequate, because they exclude all occupational groups who supposedly “do not work.” Such an interpretation is reached with criteria which are rarely explained, and which most often have a moral background. The term *lumpenproletariat*, for example, is usually applied to characterize people in very precarious circumstances who earn their keep with activities like rag-picking, prostitution, and begging. These activities are not considered to be “work,” but that interpretation contains a moralistic bias. On closer inspection, ragmen, prostitutes, and beggars often turn out to be de facto wage workers, indentured laborers, or chattel slaves.²⁸

Another controversy concerns people who execute repression and violence on behalf of the state, like policemen and soldiers. Labor historians have long ignored their history, even though – in most cases by far – they are workers. The Latin word *mercenarius* originally meant nothing more than someone who is paid for his work (in Latin, *merx* = commodity). The work of policemen is just as regimented and Taylorized as that of other wage earners.²⁹ It is therefore high time that we abandon moralistic judgements and include all these “dangerous classes” in their different meanings as a legitimate field of inquiry. That is quite feasible if we opt for a more neutral definition of work. For example, we might state that work is *the purposive production of useful objects or services*.³⁰ Two elements

27 See, for example, Alan McKinlay, “From Industrial Serf to Wage-Labourer: The 1937 Apprentice Revolt in Britain,” *International Review of Social History*, 31 (1986): 1–18. Comparative perspectives are offered in Robert J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor: The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350–1870* (Chapel Hill, 1991); Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, eds., *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955* (Chapel Hill, 2004), and in Alessandro Stanziani, (ed.), *Le travail contraint en Asie et en Europe: XVII–XXe siècles* (Paris, 2010).

28 See, for example, J. Mark Ramseyer, “Indentured Prostitution in Imperial Japan: Credible Commitments in the Commercial Sex Industry,” *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*, 7 (1991): 89–116; Alain Faure, “Sordid Class, Dangerous Class? Observations on Parisian Ragpickers and Their Cites During the Nineteenth Century,” in Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *‘Peripheral’ Labour? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization* (Cambridge, 1996), 157–176.

29 Clive Emsley, “The Policeman as Worker: A Comparative Survey, c. 1800–1940,” *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000): 89–110.

30 This definition is essentially the same as that of Charles and Chris Tilly: “Work includes any human effort adding use value to goods and services.” Charles Tilly and Chris Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder, CO, 1998), 22. I prefer not to use the Marxian concept “use value” in this context since use values always exist in conjunction with exchange values (prices), and thus that definition is really only applicable to commodified labor.

are emphasized in such a definition: Work is both a *purposive* activity, and work creates objects or services that are *useful* to the people for whom the work is done. Usefulness is, of course, subjective: Some people may find extremely unuseful what others consider to be very useful. Warfare, for example, is – however else we may define it – also a kind of labor process, but this is not seen as a “useful activity” by many people.

These enlargements of the research terrain have far-reaching implications. To realize their broader approach, contacts between different subgroups of researchers should, I think, be significantly intensified. First, there should be more contact between labor historians in different regions. Second, a closer cooperation is desirable between the historians of wage labor and the historians of slavery, indenture, and peasantry. Initiatives in this direction are visible in parts of the Global South (India, Brazil, Southern Africa), but much more is feasible and desirable. Third, there is a significant overlap with economic, family, women’s, and legal history, and area studies, which could be utilized better. And fourth, we should strive for more cooperation with social scientists (anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, geographers, etc.). In the terrain of traditional labor history, such cooperation already occurs, but it could be intensified. Anthropologists, for example, can make an important contribution to our insight into the incorporation of noncapitalist societies in the capitalist world economy.

Bridging these gaps presents great challenges. Historians concerned with slavery, for example, form a separate, rather extensive community, with their own periodicals (such as the excellent *Slavery and Abolition*) that are normally not read by labor historians. But, inversely, the historians of slavery do not usually concern themselves with the history of wage labor, and only seldomly read *ILWCH* or the *International Review of Social History*. Initiatives aiming at cooperation between the historians of slave labor and wage labor originate mainly from Africa and Brazil; in recent times, they are finding cautious approval elsewhere as well.³¹ To make GLH a success, much more of this kind of interaction will be necessary.

31 Dick Geary, professor of history at the University of Nottingham (UK) has organized a so-called Leverhulme Research Interchange from 2002, with the topic “Labour in Slave and Non-Slave Societies: Brazil and Europe in the 18th and 19th Centuries.” The aim was to establish a transcontinental dialogue between labor historians and historians of slavery. One resulting study was Douglas Cole Libby and Júnia Ferreira Furtado, eds., *Trabalho livre, trabalho escravo: Brasil e Europa, séculos XVII e XIX* (São Paulo, 2006).

What has already been done, and what could be done next?

It should be obvious that GLH is a huge field for research, which could be addressed with innumerable different research questions. It is likewise obvious that there can be no “objective” methodology for establishing the scientific priorities that all labor historians ought to have. In what follows, I can therefore share my own thoughts about the direction of research only with a proviso – I acknowledge in advance that other historians may find very different topics more urgent or significant to investigate. That need not cause any strife between us, I think; to the contrary, we might well complement each other’s work.

Reconceptualizing the working class

The new global networks among researchers and the new discussions they enable suggest that we need to reconceptualize the working class – on the basis of inclusion rather than exclusion. This theoretical challenge has been taken up especially by Marxian historians. Marx himself regarded chattel slavery as an “anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself,” which was “possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production,” but “only because it does not exist at other points.”³² However, recently Marxian historians have mooted two possible reconceptualizations.

One proposal, advanced by Jairus Banaji and Rakesh Bhandari, is to do away with Marx’s idea of “anomalies” and consider *all* forms of labor under capitalism (including unfree labor) as variations of “capital-positing” labor. This approach implies that the differences between chattel slaves, sharecroppers, and wage-earners are only a matter of degree, rather than being qualitative differences, since all of them work for capital and since all of them labor under economic and/or noneconomic compulsion:

Finding the essence of wage-labour in capital-positing activity not only allows a change in the extension of the concept and thereby a challenge to the apologetic Eurocentric occlusion of slavery and colonialism in the writing of the history of capitalism, it also allows us to throw into relief the way in which wage-labour in whatever form is enslaved.³³

³² Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973), 464.

³³ Rakesh Bhandari, “The Disguises of Wage-Labour: Juridical Illusions, Unfree Conditions and Novel Extensions,” *Historical Materialism*, 16 (2008): 71–99, at 96. See also Rakesh Bhandari,

A slightly different proposal involves broadening the concept of the working class to include all *commodified* labor. From this perspective, the working class consists of all carriers of labor power whose labor power is sold or hired out to employers (who could be individuals, corporations, or institutions), whether under economic or noneconomic compulsion, regardless of whether these carriers of labor power are themselves selling or hiring out their labor power and also regardless of whether these carriers themselves own means of production.³⁴ This conceptual demarcation aims to indicate the common class-basis of all subaltern workers: he the *coerced* commodification of their labor power.

According to both approaches, what all members of this redefined working class have in common is their economic exploitation by employers and the commodification of their labor power. Therefore, they share a common class interest in transcending capitalism. Recent historical research has, for instance, revealed concrete cases of struggles conducted jointly by slaves and “free” wage earners.³⁵ At the same time, the short- and medium-term interests of particular segments in this “new broad-spectrum proletariat” can obviously diverge strongly.

Reconstructing the changing class composition

The analysis of the long-term development of the world working class in the broadest sense obviously presents an enormous challenge. As yet we lack any quantitative estimates for the evolution of the world working class in the broader sense. Even the size of the segment of wage earners *within* this extended working class can only be roughly estimated.³⁶ And, while there is – relatively speaking – a large amount of data available for the nineteenth and twentieth century, constructing comparative data sets for earlier periods is often very difficult.

“Slavery and Wage Labor in History,” *Rethinking Marxism*, 19 (2007): 396–408; Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden and Boston, 2010).

34 Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, chapter two. Those whose labor power is not commodified, while they possess no other means of livelihood than labor power (all jobless in the broad sense), are regarded as part of the subaltern working class, as well as family members of subaltern workers who perform subsistence labor, or who, because of age or state of health, cannot work.

35 For example, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*.

36 Preliminary attempts in Paul Bairoch and J.-M. Limbor, “Changes in the Industrial Distribution of the World Labour Force, by Region, 1880–1960,” *International Labour Review*, 98 (1968): 311–336; Paul Bairoch, “Structure de la population active mondiale de 1700 à 1970,” *Annales E.S.C.*, 26 (1971): 960–976; Deon Filmer, *Estimating the World at Work*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 1488 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1995).

Much can nevertheless be discovered about the broad outlines of the process of class formation, as the activities of the “Global Collaboratory on the History of Labor Relations” have proven. Since 2007, this team of scholars from six continents works at a reconstruction of labor relations across the globe in five sample years: 1500, 1650, 1800, 1900, and 2000. The coordination of the project is provided by the International Institute of Social History, in Amsterdam. On the basis of pilot projects, the Collaboratory developed a taxonomy of eighteen varieties of labor relations, distinguishing different types of labor defined as “reciprocal,” “tributary,” and “commodified,” plus the “nonworking.” Although there are still many gaps in the data set, the provisional hypothesis suggests itself, that the range of *types* of labor (and combinations of labor relations) grew more complex until the early nineteenth century. A simplification in labor structures then followed, as “ordinary” wage labor became more prominent. In the next years, it will be possible to test this hypothesis further, with more elaborations and refinements of the data.³⁷ Building on these results, it should be possible to find explanations for the incidence of divergent modes of labor control in different regions and historical periods.³⁸

Understanding differential class formation

In order to truly “dig deeper” as researchers, we require not only better data sets, but also problem-oriented case studies and international comparative research. In this regard, the new developments give cause for hope. The scholarly literature about diverse world regions is growing impetuously. The number of internationally comparative studies that do not restrict themselves to the rich countries has increased quickly in recent years. After attention had already been given to coal miners early on, large-scale studies have followed recently of longshoremen and textile workers, while similar projects for the history of shipbuilders, brickmakers, soldiers, and prostitutes are in the making.³⁹

37 <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourrelations>. The project recalls an idea by Jan Lucassen. It is coordinated by Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata and financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) as well as the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany).

38 A pioneering attempt was made by Immanuel Wallerstein in his *Modern World System*, vols. I and II (New York, 1974 and 1980). For an appraisal with respect to the concerns of labor historians, see van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, chapter thirteen.

39 Gerald D. Feldman and Klaus Tenfelde, eds., *Workers, Owners and Politics in Coal Mining: An International Comparison of Industrial Relations* (New York, 1990); Sam Davies et al., eds., *Dock Workers*; Heerma van Voss et al., eds., *Ashgate Companion to Textile Workers*. The projects on shipbuilding (coordinator: Raquel Varela), brickmaking (coordinator: Jan Lucassen), soldiers

I think it is especially important to verify, informed by such studies, how the development of the working class in different continents was interconnected – and yet resulted in significant intraclass inequalities. Several different methodological approaches are possible here. One of them is the reconstruction of commodity chains. A commodity is normally the product of human labor, that is, the result of efforts by people who produce products with means of production that are subsequently sold or hired out by themselves or by others. But those means of production (raw materials, machines, energy, etc.) are themselves also the result of human labor. So a kind of “product chain” exists, which takes the form of “a tree-like sequence of production processes and exchanges by which a product for final consumption is produced. These linkages of raw materials, labor, the sustenance of labor, intermediate processing, final processing, transport, and final consumption materially connect most of the people within the contemporary world-system.”⁴⁰ Thus, this concept identifies the reality that, even if the final consumer is blissfully unaware of it, each commodity has its own individual history, and if we trace out the histories of products, this can tell us a lot about global interconnections, or what I have elsewhere referred to as *teleconnections*.⁴¹

The literature about commodity chains has increased enormously since the 1990s, but a recent study nevertheless rightly concludes that “the framework has encountered major difficulties in incorporating into its analysis labour in particular, and class relations more generally.”⁴² Especially radical geographers have begun to change this situation. The analysis of commodity chains and global production networks can also help us to understand the material possibilities and limitations of solidarity between workers in different positions in the chains. After all, their short-term interests can diverge: The more “expensive” the workers at the beginning of the chain are, the more employers will try to exert downward pressure on the living standard of workers at the end of the chain.

A second way to analyze teleconnections relates to an old controversy: How much do workers in the advanced capitalist countries profit from the extra exploitation of workers in less developed and colonial regions? One answer was first formulated by Engels and Lenin, and subsequently elaborated in different

(coordinator: Erik-Jan Zürcher), and prostitution (coordinators: Lex Heerma van Voss and Magaly Rodríguez García) are initiatives of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

⁴⁰ Christopher Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation: Structures of the World Economy* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1989), 346.

⁴¹ Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World* (Leiden, 2008), 372–377.

⁴² Ben Selwyn, “Beyond Firm-Centrism: Re-integrating Labour and Capitalism into Global Commodity Chain Analysis,” *Journal of Economic Geography*, 12 (2012), 205–226, at 205.

variants by Fritz Sternberg (1926) and Arghiri Emmanuel (1969).⁴³ It is a well-established fact that from the nineteenth century a growing disparity in wealth emerged between workers in developed and underdeveloped capitalism. And it is also quite certain that this trend restricted the possibilities for real international solidarity. But the big question remains of in what measure metropolitan “super-wages” have been a *direct consequence* of unequal exchange between rich and poor countries. To a significant extent, the salaries of strata of metropolitan workers may have been the result of their higher average productivity, skill level, and organizing ability – and of the endogenous economic growth which that made possible. This remains, I think, an important empirical issue in need of further critical scientific study.⁴⁴

Understanding interconnections

Closely related to the study of international inequalities within the broad working class is the identification of *transfer mechanisms* between different parts of the world. Transfers emerge in various ways. One of them is migration, but even though much research has been done in this area, there often is a Eurocentric bias. It has become clear that the nineteenth-century trans-Atlantic migration circuit was in truth not larger than the contemporaneous migration circuits in south and northeast Asia.⁴⁵ A second *trait d’union* between world regions are the transport workers, in particular the seamen who so often formed multinational crews and sailed from one continent to another. It is not surprising that they have received a relatively large amount of scholarly attention in recent years.⁴⁶

⁴³ Fritz Sternberg, *Der Imperialismus* (Berlin, 1926); Arghiri Emmanuel, *L'échange inégal. Essais sur les antagonismes dans les rapports économiques internationaux* (Paris, 1969).

⁴⁴ At least in part, one could agree with the “split labor market theory” of Edna Bonacich and others. See the clear overview in Edna Bonacich, “The Past, Present, and Future of Split Labor Market Theory,” *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*, 1 (1979): 17–64.

⁴⁵ The groundbreaking article on this topic is Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846–1940,” *Journal of World History*, 15 (2004): 155–189. A good overview of the earlier global migration history is provided in Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham, NC, 2002). Since 2005 there is a “Global Migration History” project, which strives “to include the full migration experience of the non-Western world.” See <http://www.iisg.nl/research/gmhp.php> (accessed October 15, 2012).

⁴⁶ Recent contributions include Gopalan Balachandran, “Circulation through Seafaring: Indian Seamen, 1890–1945,” in Claude Markovits et al., eds., *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (New Delhi, 2003), 89–130; Jan Lucassen, “A Multinational and its Labor Force: The Dutch East India Company, 1595–1795,” *ILWCH*, 66 (2004): 12–39; Michael H. Fisher, “Working Across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in

But other than people (migrants, sailors) who moved across the globe, there are also institutions, ideas, and objects that exerted influence across large distances. A clear example is the British state, which from 1807 tried to abolish the slave trade – a lengthy campaign that greatly influenced labor relations from the Americas and Africa to south and southeast Asia. In a certain sense, the International Labor Organization, founded in 1919, continued this campaign into the twentieth century by propagating a broad range of international labor standards – without, however, being able to enforce their implementation.⁴⁷ On the other side, it has become clear (1) that important labor-management techniques were invented outside the North Atlantic region (especially in the colonies) in the attempt to control *unfree* workers; (2) that some of these innovations date from long *before* the Industrial Revolution; and (3) that knowledge about such innovations traveled across all parts of the globe.⁴⁸ Such international connections are often hardly explored but promise to provide fascinating new insights.

Understanding class cultures

Cultural differences among workers in Europe can be great; this has been demonstrated beyond any doubt by labor historians. Richard Biernacki, for example, has shown, that from the sixteenth-century wage laborers in Germany and

Between, 1600–1857,” and Ravi Ahuja, “Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c.1900–1960,” both in Rana Behal and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *India’s Labouring Poor: Historical Studies c. 1600–c.2000* (New Delhi, 2007), 21–45, and 111–141; Matthias van Rossum et al., “National and International Labour Markets for Sailors in European, Atlantic and Asian Waters, 1600–1850,” *Research in Maritime History*, 43 (2010): 47–72; Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World’s First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011). About the history of railway builders and workers there are many country studies. It would be interesting to use this literature as the basis for an integrated global reconstruction.

⁴⁷ Jasmien Van Daele et al., eds., *ILO Histories: Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World During the Twentieth Century* (Berne, 2010); Isabelle Lespinet-Moret and Vincent Viet, eds., *L’Organisation internationale du travail. Origine, développement, avenir* (Rennes, 2011); Sandrine Kott and Joëlle Droux, eds., *Globalizing Social Rights: The ILO and Beyond* (London, 2012); Marcel van der Linden, ed., *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations. The Long-term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Leiden and Boston, 2011).

⁴⁸ Bill Cooke, “The Denial of Slavery in Management Studies,” *Journal of Management Studies*, 40 (2003): 1895–1918; Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger, “One Symptom of Originality: Race and the Management of Labour in the History of the United States,” *Historical Materialism*, 17 (2009): 3–43; Marcel van der Linden, “Re-constructing the Origins of Modern Labor Management,” *Labor History*, 51 (2010): 509–522.

Britain developed different understandings of the conveyance of labor-power as a commodity, and that these diverging understandings “were reproduced among managers and workers through the execution of work rather than through the reception of a discourse.”⁴⁹ By extension, we could hypothesize that the differences between working-class cultures on a world scale are even greater. But for now that remains pure speculation. To understand how working-class cultures emerge, adapt, and change, we obviously have to gain insight also into the socialization processes occurring in families, social networks, and in formal and informal education. Such an intercultural historiography of socialization processes is, however, still in an embryonic phase. Collaboration among ethnographers, historians, and social psychologists in this area would no doubt be fruitful.

Another issue concerns global awareness. Perhaps an example can clarify what I mean here. The mechanization of the British textile industry at the end of the eighteenth century for the most part destroyed manual weaving in Britain, while at the same time it increased the demand for cotton produced by North American slaves. When the trans-Atlantic trade stagnated during the American Civil War of 1861–1865, the resulting Lancashire “cotton famine” not only pauperized the British workers, but also caused a migration of workers to Australia and increased cotton production in, for example, Egypt and India. There, many farmers were robbed of their means of subsistence by commercialization, causing, among other things, more famines.⁵⁰ This causal chain – very briefly summarized – spanned some five countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Egypt, British India, and Australia. Consequently, at least five collective memories also originated, the records of which remain largely disconnected from each other. Thus, the Australian memory of the immigration of the 1860s is quite unrelated to the Egyptian memory of agricultural change at roughly the same time, and unrelated to the American memory of civil war.

The question is raised: Under which conditions does consciousness of global connections emerge, and under which conditions does it remain absent? Why, for example, did transnational waves of enthusiasm emerge among workers and peasants after 1905 (the Japanese victory over Russia) and after 1917 (the October Revolution) that expressed themselves respectively in support to social movements in Indonesia, Iran, and Turkey – and in worldwide sympathy for Bolshe-

⁴⁹ Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914* (Berkeley, 1995), 471.

⁵⁰ I borrow this example from Rosa Luxemburg, “Einführung in die Nationalökonomie,” in Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5 (Berlin, 1985), 524–778, at 557–560. An English translation is available in section IV of Rosa Luxemburg, *What is Economics?* Translated by T. Edwards (New York, 1954); reprinted New York, 1968, 39–44.

vism? Has the global awareness of parts of the broad working class increased in the course of time? Are there important differences in this regard between peripheral and metropolitan parts of the world? And what do we make of events that are remembered in contrary ways by workers with different national, ethnic, and gender backgrounds?

One possible source for the study of workers' subjectivity, still hardly investigated, is the analysis of "global biographies," that is, the life histories of individuals who crossed large distances, sailed the oceans, or crossed political, cultural, and religious boundaries.⁵¹ Such biographies exist for influential labor leaders and radical intellectuals but hardly for "ordinary" members of the broad working class. The important autobiography of Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–1797) springs to mind, but it looks more like an exception that proves the rule.⁵² Global labor historians have nevertheless started to become active on this terrain as well. Quite recently, for example, a scientific edition was published of the memoirs of Munshi Rahman Khan (1874–1972), an Indian coolie who migrated to Surinam at the age of twenty-four. For more than forty years, he kept notes of his experiences, which provide us with rich insights into the life and work of Indian indentured laborers in the Caribbean.⁵³

Understanding self-organization and resistance

Forms of self-organization and resistance are increasingly being studied at the hand of international comparisons. Attention is being paid not just to spectacular forms of public protest such as strikes or mutinies, but also to inconspicuous activities such as the building of rotating savings and credit associations, mutual aid funds, and consumer cooperatives.⁵⁴ In this area (also known as *mutualism*)

51 This description is taken from the introduction to Bernd Hausberger, ed., *Globale Lebensläufe. Menschen als Akteure im weltgeschichtlichen Geschehen* (Vienna, 2006).

52 *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (New York, 1791).

53 Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff et al., eds., *Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Labourer: Munshi Rahman Khan (1874–1972)* (New Delhi, 2005). Ravi Ahuja (University of Gottingen) is currently preparing a publication based on the memoirs of Amir Haider Khan (c. 1901–1989), a *lascar* (sailor) from British India.

54 Sjaak van der Velden et al., eds., *Strikes Around the World, 1968–2005* (Amsterdam, 2007); Marcel van der Linden, ed., *Social Security Mutualism: The Comparative History of Mutual Benefit Societies* (Berne, 1996); Abram de Swaan and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *Mutualist Microfinance: Informal Savings Funds from the Global Periphery to the Core?* (Amsterdam, 2006). A conference about the global history of mutinies was staged at the IISH in June 2011 (coordinators: Marcus Rediker, Niklas Frykman, and Lex Heerma van Voss); a large-scale project about consum-

much remains to be done. Not only have mutualist organizations remained a “stepchild” of traditional labor history – probably because of their unheroic character – but forms of mutualism among unfree laborers have hardly been studied. There are, for example, indications that rotating savings funds existed amongst slaves, but little is known about it so far.

We know much more about the forms of overt protest, like the *marronage* of slaves in Africa and the Americas, strikes, and other forms of protest by “free” laborers. But here, too, a global approach can provide new insights. A traditional approach would suggest, for example, that strikes are a form of collective action associated especially with free wage laborers. But if we now examine the ways in which protest is expressed and pressure is exerted by the different groups of workers (including slaves, the self-employed, the *lumpenproletarians*, and the “free” wage laborers), these appear to overlap considerably. Slaves and coolies also went on strike, for example. At the same time, the inclusion of slaves and indentured laborers in the analysis demonstrates that the strike is a very important, but also a very specific, form of the collective refusal to work. So-called unfree workers have used many other forms of collective refusal that deserve to be integrated in our analysis – such as the downing of tools without any demands being made, or a collective exodus (e.g., the coolies at the tea plantations in Chargola Valley, Assam, in 1921).⁵⁵ Seen against this background, the strikes of so-called free wage earners constitute just *one* form of collective resistance against the exploitation of commodified labor. And we should also acknowledge that, conversely, *free* wage laborers have often used methods of struggle that are normally associated with *unfree* workers, such as lynching, rioting, arson, and bombing.

A global approach can also make a contribution to the historiography of wage laborers in the traditional sense. Despite some methodological weaknesses, the global strike data compiled from 1980 by the Research Working Group on World Labor of the Braudel Center (Binghamton) have provided a treasure trove of information about trends since the late nineteenth century, and particularly about the differences between the “core” and the “periphery” of the world system. The best-known study is, of course, Beverly Silver’s *Forces of Labor*, published in 2003. Using the examples of the textile and car industries, Silver showed that the interrelationship between labor movements and capital has a certain logic. Depending on all kinds of factors (including product life cycles and interstate conflicts) and driven by recurrent workers’ resistance, capital develops at least

er cooperatives is coordinated by the Swedish Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv och Bibliotek (Mary Hilson and Silke Neunsinger).

55 On the Chargola exodus, see Nitin Varma’s forthcoming monograph.

four strategies in its attempt to maintain profitability: (1) the “spatial fix,” that is, the geographical relocation to regions with cheaper and more docile workers; (2) the “technological/organizational fix,” that is, the transformation of labor processes; (3) the “product fix,” that is, the shift of capital to new industries and product lines; and (4) the “financial fix,” that is, the shift of capital from production and trade to money lending and speculation. All these answers to labor protest “undermined established customs and livelihoods,” but simultaneously “created and strengthened new working classes with strategic bargaining power in the expanding and profitable segments of the global economy.”⁵⁶ Our broader concept of the working class allows us to add another variant, which we could call the “labor modes fix”: Employers can, if they see their position threatened in one way or another, substitute one form of labor commodification for another, for example, by replacing “free” wage labor with debt bondage or self-employment.

The last issue I want to mention in this context concerns workers’ political organizations. Labor, social democratic and communist parties are generally considered to be political representatives of the working class. Yet such parties emerged mainly in one specific historical period, namely between the 1880s and the 1930s. As Eric Hobsbawm explained thirty years ago,

These parties, or their lineal successors, are still in being and often influential, but where they did not already exist, or the influence of socialists/communists was significant in labor movements before World War II, hardly any such parties have emerged out of the working classes since then, notably in the so-called “Third World.”⁵⁷

The most important exception to this rule was the founding of the Workers’ Party in Brazil in 1980, which grew very large; for the rest, Hobsbawm’s assessment appears to be right. What causal factors can explain this empirical observation? The new working classes in the Global South seem to articulate their discontent especially through radical religions. Is the growing influence of evangelical/charismatic and Islamic currents in poor countries an expression of class formation?

Spots on the horizon

Twenty-four centuries ago Plato, the Greek philosopher, suspected that the countries around the Mediterranean seaboard represented only a small part of a

⁵⁶ Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 131–132.

⁵⁷ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1984), 60.

much larger world. Their inhabitants were, he wrote, “like ants and frogs about a marsh,” quite unaware “that there are other inhabitants of many other like places.”⁵⁸ In the same way, we as labor and working-class historians are now realizing that our discipline encompasses a much larger intellectual territory than we were previously taught. It will take quite some time yet before we can trace out all the far-flung corners of this “new world” on our mental maps. When we begin to succeed in this, we will also be able to renew our understanding of the original terrain of labor and working-class history in Europe and North America. Just as the history of the Global South can hardly be written without giving attention to the Global North, the history of the Global North cannot be understood without their linkages in the Global South. Much progress has already been made, but empirically and analytically we stand – for the most part – still only at the beginning.

58 *Phaedo*, 109b. Trans. Benjamin Jowitt.