

Kott, Sandrine; Droux, Joëlle (Hrsg.): *Globalizing Social Rights. The International Labour Organization and Beyond*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013. ISBN: 978-0-230-34365-8; 346 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Eileen Boris, Department of Feminist Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

We now write within the transnational turn. Economic, social, cultural, and political historians regularly have engaged in comparative research into welfare states, colonialism, intellectual paradigms, and social movements. Processes of globalization themselves have become central to analysis. We have transnational histories of migration and labor, financialization and manufacturing, and subaltern resistance. Where once diplomatic history and international relations dominated research on international organizations, focus on the movement of people, ideas, and objects across borders has transformed investigation of the interaction between and among nation states. Institutions of global governance have gained renewed attention, their significance assessed in relation to both one another and non-governmental organizations, in light of social and cultural contexts, and in terms of aspirations as well as achievements.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) provides a robust arena for writing the transnational history of global governance. It encompasses the national, being composed of member states, and the transnational, drawing upon networks of experts and addressing gendered and globalizing constructions of work. It is international in its organization, consisting of a bureaucracy of civil servants from many nations (the Office) run by an elected Director-General, an elected Governing Body, and an annual International Labour Conference (ILC). Founded in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles to stabilize the male industrial working-class in the global North and to rationalize economic competition through global labor standards, the ILO was connected to but separate from the League of Nations. It subsequently became a specialized agency under the United Nations.

To understand ILO history requires pro-

bing its unique tripartite structure. The ILO gave representation to workers and employer groups as well as governments within each national delegation and within most committees. At the yearly ILC, nations forged treaty-like conventions and non-binding recommendations that were gendered, racialized, and geographically-bound on subjects like wages, occupational health and safety, maternity leave, equal remuneration, non-discrimination, social security, forced labor, economic development, and freedom of association. The Office collected statistics and researched laws and existing practices, generating the very knowledge that commentators subsequently have relied upon. It also advised nations on a range of issues, like establishment of labor inspection and setting up vocational education. The ILO became a terrain upon which economic and political blocks fought the Cold War, decolonization, and self-determination. Today it stands as a promoter of fair globalization and decent work under intensified regimes of precarity, though market fundamentalism, privatization, and renewed nationalism challenge its very mission. With the formation of the Century Project, the ILO has encouraged independent historians, including this reviewer, to use its archives, which are rich with correspondence, unpublished reports, internal memorandum, and other documents.<sup>1</sup>

Based on a 2009 conference, *Globalizing Social Rights* represents an opening effort to interrogate the history of the ILO in anticipation of its centennial. Editors Kott and Droux ask, „What can we learn about globalization if we approach it from the point of view of social rights and the ILO?“ (p. 2) Much, we discover: the functioning of transnational networks of experts, policymakers, and activists as shapers of social knowledge; the translation of such understandings into global standards through ILO deliberations and negotiations; the continuing significance of the na-

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization: The International Labour Organization, 1940-70*, Houndmills 2012; Jill M. Jensen / Nelson Lichtenstein (eds.), *The ILO From Geneva to The Pacific Rim: West Meets East*, Houndmills 2016; Eileen Boris / Dorothea Hohtker / Susan Zimmermann (eds.), *Women's ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards, and Gender Equity*, forthcoming.

tion state as a producer and implementer of social rights for local, national, international, and transnational realms; and the shifting terrain of international organizations in which the ILO sought to define—and maintain—its portfolio and relevance despite the eclipse of the social democratic assumptions that defined its birth.

The eighteen essays here collected particularly illuminate the growth of „epistemic communities“ (p. 5) and „an international technocratic class“ (p. 4). They explore child welfare, food policy, colonial forced labor, and Andean development. They chart the influence of Italian fascists, the US New Deal and the Nordic Model, along with Belgian, British, and German welfare practices. Through case studies on accident insurance, social security, unemployment payments, and cooperatives, authors trace ways that officials and experts connected to the Office translated social reform into social science as a basis for social action. But not all experts were equal. The „members“ of the Correspondence Committee on Women’s Work, according to the chapter herein, were not „to act as experts but to fill the gaps in the ILO’s information on women’s conditions of employment in various countries“ (p. 59). However, research by François Thébaud, the biographer of Marguerite Thibert who was the first head of the Section on Women and Young Workers, presents a more nuanced portrait: Thibert not only navigated conflicting feminist visions of equality but she forged a network out of the Correspondence Committee that supported its members against Nazism.<sup>2</sup>

Though grounded in the civilizing discourse of its Western founders, the ILO focused much of its activity first on so-called non-metropolitan regions (colonies) and then on the Third World. Chapters show how complicated that legacy. British representatives at the founding of the ILO, we learn, wielded a „social imperialism“ (p. 26) to protect their own interests; Indian delegates during the interwar years deployed the ILO as „a political instrument, useful for presenting India as an already decolonized sovereign state“ (p. 149). Indeed, as one chapter emphasizes, ILO research did much to fuel anti-colonial movements by exposing „the misery“ (p. 94) of Em-

pire. As Susan Zimmermann argues elsewhere, to capture ILO influence, we must study the North and South together in terms of global power relations.<sup>3</sup>

The last section underscores how neoliberal globalization and the power of rival institutions with competing policy frameworks and more robust funding, like the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, have diminished the impact of the ILO. The final essays on privatization are among the strongest in the collection. They explain how financial stress and ascendant market ideology countered public social security regimes identified with ILO interventions. In these cases, as with most of their wide-ranging and deftly researched histories, Kott, Droux, and collaborators demonstrate the continuing power of knowledge to shape the transnational.

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<sup>2</sup> François Thébaud, *Les Femmes au BIT: Exemple de Marguerite Thibert*, in: J.M. Delaunay / Y. Denechere (eds.), *Femmes et Relations Internationales au XXe Siècle*, Paris 2006, pp. 177-187; idem, *Difficult Inroads, Unexpected Results: The Correspondence Committee on Women’s Work in the 1930s*, in: Eileen Boris / Dorothea Hoetker / Susan Zimmermann (eds.), *Women’s ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards, and Gender Equity*, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Zimmermann, *Special Circumstances in Geneva: the ILO and the World of Non-Metropolitan Labour in the Inter-war Years*, in: J. Van Daele et al. (eds.), *ILO Histories: Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World during the Twentieth Century*, Bern 2010, pp. 221-250.