

Working Lives in Global History

Veranstalter: International Research Center „Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History“, Humboldt University of Berlin; V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Noida, India; Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Goettingen University; Association of Indian Labour Historians

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How could one define the word „global“ in „global labor history“ – and what is its analytical value? These questions guided the presentations and discussions of over 40 participants from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin and North America working in different disciplines at the Summer Academy „Working Lives in Global History“. The conference held in Delhi from October 3rd to 8th, 2011, was organized by the International Research Center „Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History“, Humboldt University of Berlin; the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Noida, India; the Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Goettingen University; and the Association of Indian Labour Historians. The organizers' goal in bringing together senior fellows and PhD students for lectures and workshops in Delhi – a place where labor relations and conditions of work are in a permanent state of transformation – was to show that labor history is not a nostalgic enterprise. The vibrant atmosphere in Delhi contributed to the summer school's intense discussions on conceptual and methodological questions as well as on concrete research projects, only a selection of which can be introduced in this report.¹

Within the framework of his opening remarks, RAVI AHUJA (Goettingen) emphasized that the impulse for such an endeavor lay in the impetus to „render the familiar unfamiliar“, thus inspiring new thoughts on seemingly old topics in the realm of labor history. ANDREAS ECKERT (Berlin) argued that work and labor are a particularly suited topic for global history, but that context and analytical clarity were most important to avoid end-

ing up discussing „everything, everywhere“. A crucial question for the summer academy was therefore how „work“ could retain its power as an analytical category in the process of its pluralization. In order to sharpen the discussion, the link between work and life course was chosen as the the summer academy's overarching topic.

An excellent example for the analytical gain through writing labor history beyond nation-state narratives was FRED COOPER's (New York City) lecture on the role of labor relations and labor movements for Africans' struggles to free themselves from the colonial powers in West Africa. Cooper showed how conflicts over labor shaped social and political relations in the French colonies from the 1940s on. Focusing on Senegal, he criticized narratives of inevitability, pointing out the contingencies of modes of production and labor relations during the period of decolonization. Rejecting stories of hidden collectives revealing their power in quasi-automatically unfolding events, Fred Cooper reconstructed how these collectives themselves were constructed through social relations and political struggles. In addition to that, he pointed out how the experience of pre-colonial and colonial labor relations characterized the history of decolonization – a history coined by the dynamic engagement of antagonistic forces that were also connected.

JACOB EYFERTH's (Chicago) intriguing talk on the history of weaving in 20th-century China revealed how the Socialist state in China acted as the agent of the commodification of work while rural production and gender structures were assaulted in a massive effort to recruit labor both for intensified, more productive agricultural work and for Shanghai's textile factories. The pressure on women to work outside their homes as well as their important role within the household economy resulted in decades of double burdens for women. Jacob Eyferth pointed out that production always consists in the co-production of artifacts, of human beings and of social relations.

SIDNEY CHALHOUB (Campinas) gave an insightful overview of labor historiography in

¹ I would like to thank Julia Seibert and Maité Kersaint for their very valuable contributions to this report.

Brazil, summarizing the changing paradigms of interpretation from the 1940s until today. While labor and freedom strongly resonated with each other, historians of slavery and of labor traditionally went separate ways. He then illustrated how the integration of perspectives on labor and on slavery in the 1970s helped to overcome the then-dominant abolitionist narrative that ignored slave agency. Pointing at ambiguities and complexities in the history of slavery, Sidney Chalhoub addressed the precariousness of freedom in 19th-century Brazil and suggested the study of varieties of forced labor, struggles for citizenship and the role of former slaves as slave-owners as fruitful topics for further research.

Moreover, issues of methodology came to the forefront in several sessions. PHIL BONNER's (Johannesburg) talk on migrant workers' culture as an expression of a collective memory sparked a vivid discussion on methodological problems with regards to life history interviews. While the latter can serve as an invaluable source in the absence of a paper trail, they only offer very limited insights due to conflicting memories, „supposed to“-stories shaped by feelings, collective memory gaps and later events, wishful thinking and fluid identities. The potential of life cycle analyses and generational histories for political, social and cultural aspects of the history of work and labor, however, was widely acknowledged. FRIEDRICH WILHELM GRAF's (Munich) attempt to evaluate the importance of structures of meaning such as religion as non-economic conditions for different economic systems spurred a controversial discussion on the value both of ideal-types and of categorizations of different religions along Max Weber's eurocentric lines.

PRABHU MOHAPATRA (Delhi) raised a conceptual question asking for the potential of micro-studies in a framework of global history that several research papers empirically dealt with. RUKMINI BARUA (Goettingen) introduced her research on 20th-century Ahmedabad. Her spatial analysis of this Indian city's social transformations since independence demonstrated the convergence of urban industrialization and Hindu nationalism, illuminating the social co-

production of religious, class, and political identities. PAULO CRUZ TERRA (Niterói-Rio de Janeiro) linked the process of citizenship formation to the making of an urban working-class in a compelling analysis of transport workers' strikes in Rio de Janeiro (1870-1906). DINA MAKRAM EBEID (London) presented her research on a state-owned steel factory in Egypt, exploring how workers' organization, property relations, strategies for families' economic future and the legal frameworks of work changed in the context of neoliberal policies. Connecting anthropological research in the factory and in workers' households, Dina Makram Ebeid integrated the division of labor into her presentation and crossed gendered research boundaries.

A whole range of presentations demonstrated the potential of focusing on specific industries to analyze changes in working conditions and working lives in a certain region. SHAHANA BHATTACHARYA (Delhi) tied together the production of caste and class through work relations and industrial training through the integration of the modern leather industry into global commodity chains. With a focus on Madras and Calcutta, Bhattacharya paid attention to leather industry workers' responses to working conditions, using both archival sources and oral history methods. SHUBHANKITA OJHA (Delhi) presented her PhD research on Bombay's port and dock workers, focusing on working lives rather than the port's importance for city development. ANNA SAILER (Goettingen) addressed labor conflicts in Bengal's jute industry from the 1920s to the 1950s. Reconstructing the growing number and militancy of strikes in this important industry, she emphasized the connections between the involvement of political forces such as the colonial state, trade unions, communist and national movements on the one hand, and the increasing salience of labor as a political category on the other.

The disciplining of work and workers was repeatedly brought up as an important topic for labor history and expanded on in rather diverse ways. NIKOLAY KAMENOV (Zurich) explored the relation between alcohol consumption, temperance movement and

work in the late 19th and early 20th century. He argued that despite numerous histories dealing with the relations between capitalist labor relations and temperance movements, it seemed difficult to neatly integrate the global history of temperance movements into conjectures of capitalism; the history of alcohol consumption and its regulation might therefore be better placed in a framework of discipline and subjugation. SABINE DONAUER (Berlin) pointed to the prominent place workers' emotions took in 19th- and 20th-century expert discussions on factory environments. The scientification of the social, she argued, included the constitution of emotional skill sets. The „science of work“ from the 1870s on affected the change of emotional styles in the industrialized workplace, thus also contributing to workers' disciplining.

While several participants implicitly addressed connections between labor, work and life cycle, few of them made this their focal point. CHRISTIAN UNGRUHE (Bayreuth) talked about youth rural-urban labor migration in Ghana. While discussing the gendered nature of this migration, he concluded that juvenile labor migration for men and women alike had become an important part of maturing that, rather than loosening, reinforced structures of social belonging and helped to reproduce the social fabric „at home“. STEFAN WELLGRAF (Berlin) presented the „social production of contempt“ within the tripartite German school system, by focusing on the transition from school into the labor market, or into unemployment, of a group of youth in Berlin. He argued that the identity formation of socially disadvantaged students was closely linked to shielding off society's contempt.

Furthermore, transnational economic structures, actors' networks and international norms were a recurrent theme. MEI LÓPEZ TRUEBA (Sussex) discussed issues of health and safety in the Bolivian mining industry. From an anthropological perspective, she questioned the education-oriented risk concept of „Occupational Health and Safety“ as put forward by international organizations and argued that power relations, problems of poverty as well as the workers' own strategies and conceptions of risk management had to

be included into a revised risk concept. ELISABETH FINK's (Frankfurt am Main) research on transnational advocacy networks focused on the anti-sweatshop movement. Presenting the case of Bangladesh, she used interviews with female union representatives in the textile sector as a starting point to investigate links between „local“ and „transnational“ forms of activism.

Besides, a panel discussion accompanied the project presentations. Hosted by the International Indian Center in Delhi, it was concerned with global labor history's conceptual aspects. SABYASACHI BHATTACHARYA (Delhi) opened the debate with a question about the term „global“, asking whether „global (labor) history“ could constitute a viable research agenda. Cautioning against deterministic assumptions of world systems or global unity, he argued that global history could still be more than a pure „add-on“ to national or regional histories, since it could serve as a starting point to identify historical similarities and „family resemblances“ in a Wittgensteinian sense. JÜRGEN KOCKA (Berlin) reminded the audience that the social history paradigm in European historiography tended to privilege local, regional and national perspectives by emphasizing experience, context and bottom-up approaches with regards to writing history. The cultural turn and political identifications along national lines reinforced this tendency. Talking from the perspective of a historian of European history, Kocka welcomed the still limited, but rising influence of global labor history and stressed four advantages of the „global turn“: it has helped to keep labor and working-class history alive despite its decline in Europe; it has opened up new topics, relating to transnational structures and agencies as well as different types of work; it has manifested a need for theory and conceptual thinking through a rising interest in large structures and a need to re-think concepts such as (working) class, „free“ versus „unfree“ labor etc; and it has highlighted the potential of systematic comparisons between regions and states. FRED COOPER made a strong argument for a history of connections and relationships that must focus on limits as much as on flows. Instead of presupposing the pervasiveness of

structures, ideas or connections, historians need to interrogate the scope of supposedly „global“ phenomena such as capitalism with a clean methodology. The transoceanic connections of „free“ and „slave“ labor in Africa served as his example for a tour de force of the Atlantic slave system, class formation in 19th century Europe, forms of colonial rule, imperial decline and other complex entanglements of intercontinental systems in modernity. His repudiation of the term „global“ as an analytic term triggered a lively discussion about the need to distinguish a connection-focused form of writing history from other, locally or nationally centered approaches. Shahid Amin (Delhi) provocatively asked whether global history could be interpreted as colonial history in disguise, rendering the history of India irrelevant unless it was related to much larger structures of „globalization“ such as global warming. How did the need to fit in research agendas emphasizing global phenomena modify the formulation of research endeavors and the writing of history?

The extensive as well as vibrant group and plenary discussions throughout the summer academy touched upon a large number of issues, of which only few can be summarized in this report. The contingency of work versus non-work in comparative perspective came up in various contexts: Since the production of these categories is socially contingent, there cannot be one definite definition of „work“ or „the worker“. Many participants agreed that from a global historical perspective, it was impossible to think labor history in terms of one major contradiction between labor and capital. It was equally contended that the integration of contingencies, social and political struggles, various power relations or cultural aspects of work should not result in a depoliticization of labor history. The question was raised whether global labor history was primarily the history of capitalism, a proposition that was mostly rejected with reference to actor networks such as missionaries. The disagreement about whether the history of capitalism was supposed to develop universally applicable laws and structures, or should rather analyze the locally specific roots and preconditions of capitalism reflected the variety of research agendas repre-

sented at the summer school.

Varieties of work, including the social or legal status of workers, proved to be another underlying current. Many writings on labor history emphasize the major dichotomy between „free/wage“ versus „un-free/slave/bonded“ labor. A number of conference contributions pointed out the historical contingency of this categorization, its inadequacy for many forms of labor, and the need to deconstruct it. The state’s role within a capitalist system and of law as an instrument of power often used in order to facilitate changes in social structures (relating to land, property, or mobility) were discussed; the history of legal forms and resulting changes in discourses were identified as an important topic for labor historians.

The introductory question whether „global history“ should be seen as a general perspective for researchers or rather as an empirically verifiable category proved to prompt continuous discussion. The need for labor historians to overcome engrained boundaries of research such as the nation-state was reaffirmed and global history as a perspective welcomed. However, the indirect relations between the trend of „global history“ and „globalization“ as a political project were pointed out in order to caution against the analytical usage of „native’s categories“ such as globalization. Global historians needed to avoid writing „winner’s history“ and telling reductionist tales of necessarily „globalized“ outcomes, the discussion’s outcome suggested. The screening of RAHUL ROY’s (Delhi) documentary film „The City Beautiful“ (2008), portraying three generations of workers in a neighborhood near Delhi and delineating the process of de-skilling manual labor was an impressive reminder arguing against tales of progress.

One last recurrent theme was the organization of historical research in different national research and university systems: (how) can individual researchers study global history? How can research be organized in teams when the individual achievement, in the end, is what makes or breaks a career? How can multi-archival and multi-lingual research be organized? The work of professional historians was that way integrated in the discussions

on varieties of work, reminding participants that histories of labor are irreducibly political.

The summer academy inspired numerous substantial questions and provided an opportunity to discuss perspectives as well as pitfalls of global history agendas not only in theory but also in practice by means of „research in progress“. The high quality of the debate allowed participants to indeed „render the familiar unfamiliar“ and investigate their research projects' foundations and assumptions. These aspects underline the summer academy's value with regards to international exchanges of (young) researchers. Similar events will hopefully be held in the future to fortify international ties. The persistent strength of national and regional historiographical traditions Jürgen Kocka had pointed out was confirmed not least by the fact that some of the most fruitful discussions during the summer academy resulted from the comparison of different (national) historiographies of work and labor.

Conference Overview:

Welcome Address

V.P. Yajurvedi (National Labour Institute)
Andreas Eckert
Sabhyasachi Bhattacharya
Ravi Ahuja

Senior Lectures

Jacob Eyferth: Change and Continuity in the Working Lives of Chinese Rural Women under Socialism
Sidney Chalhoub: The Precariousness of Freedom in a Slave Society (Brazil in the 19th century)
Philip Bonner: Life Course and Life Cycle in South African Labour History
Friedrich Wilhelm Graf: Religion and Labour History

Another Turn – New Global Perspectives on Labour History. Panel Discussion

Chair: Madhavan Palat
Discussants: Sabhyasachi Bhattacharya, Fred Cooper, Jürgen Kocka

Project Presentations

Group 1

Shubhasree Bhattacharyya: Work Songs in the Contemporary Urban Space

Stefan Wellgraf: „Hauptschüler“: The Social Production of Contempt and the Transition from School into the Labor Market in Germany

Ishita Dey: Caste, Skill and Crafting of Sweets in Bengal

Sabine Donauer: Emotions at Work – Working on Emotions, Germany 1870-1970

Nikolay Kamenov: Global Issues and Local Particularities – Towards a Global History of Temperance, Drink and Work

Christian Ungruhe: Kaygirls and Truckpushboys: Labour, Youth, and Achieving Adulthood among Northern Ghanaian Migrants in the Southern Cities

Nirmala Manne: Economics and Ideology of Labour: A Study of „Extras“ in the Indian Cinema Industry

Carlos Moura Barbosa: Policemen and Crime in a Northeastern Brazilian City: The Administrative and Technical-Scientific Work of the Judicial Police in the City of Fortaleza (1889-1920)

Karuna Dietrich Wielenga: Weaving Histories: Glimpses of the Handloom Industry in South India in Transition during the Nineteenth Century

Group 2

Madhavi: Indentured Emigration Experience: Modern Science and Medicine in Colonial Mauritius and Natal, 1834-1920

Santosh Kumar Rai: Shifts in Conditions and Strategies of Survival: Silk Weaving in Eastern United Provinces, 1880s-1930s

Anna Sailer: Naukar, Coolie and Mazdoor – The Negotiations of Labour in the Colonial Jute Industry of Bengal, ca. 1920-1950

Elisabeth Fink: (Neo-)Orientalism, Work and Gender. Local Activism, Transnational Social Movements and the Sweatshop Discourse
William Stafford: Labour and its Bare Minimum

Rukmini Barua: Production of Social Space in the Working Class Neighborhoods of post-Independence Ahmedabad

Zachary Kagan Guthrie: Ties That Bind, Ties That Divide: Geographies of Labor and Migration in Central Mozambique, 1942-1961

Shahana Bhattacharya: Untouchable Leather: Labour, Caste and Class in the Leather Industry. A Study with a Focus on Madras and Calcutta, circa 1900-1950

Mei López Trueba: Understanding Health and Safety: Livelihoods, Risks and Well-Living in the Cerro Rico of Potosí (Bolivia)
Oleg Kulagin: The History of Labour Relations in the Timber Industry of Northwestern Russia during the Soviet Period (1917-1990)

Group 3

Anirban Bhattacharya: Labour in the Tea Gardens of the Duars: Plantation Labour Regime & Workers Movement (1872-1948)

Sandip Chatterjee: A Study in Industrial Hygiene: Coal Mines of Eastern India (c. 1901-1973)

Maya John: Indian Labour Law, 1918-1960: Development of the Law, its Repercussions on the Labour Process and Trade Union Movement

Dina Makram Ebeid: Steel Lives Under Reforms: Everyday Politics of Labour in Helwan, Egypt

Will Riddell: Race, Labour, and Imperial Identities: California and the Emergence of America's Pacific Empire

Suparna Sengupta: Convict Colonization of Adamans, c. 1850-1920

Paulo Terra: Citizenship and Work: the Streetcar Workers in Rio de Janeiro (1870-1906)

Shubhankita Ojha: Labouring Lives between Land and Sea: A Social History of the Bombay Port and its Workers, c. 1860-1960s

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