

Six years of re:work. A conference in Berlin

Veranstalter: IGK „Arbeit und Lebenslauf in globalgeschichtlicher Perspektive“ (re:work) an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

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In 2009 the International Research Centre „Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History“ („re:work“), funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research, was founded at Humboldt-University of Berlin. To mark the end of the first funding period, „re:work“ organized a conference that gave an overview over topics, themes and research areas the centre has dealt with so far.

In his introduction ANDREAS ECKERT (Berlin), director of the centre, described the development of „re:work“. In the last six years about ninety fellows from different disciplines were invited. Most of the fellows were academically trained in Europe and North America, but there were also fellows from the Pacific region, South and East Asia, Africa and Latin America. The centre profited from a new interest in labour history in recent years which results in a widening of perspectives beyond European regions and beyond narrow definitions of work as wage labour. The specific feature of „re:work“ is the combination of life course perspectives with question of work and labour. Eckert outlined the future programme of „re:work“: the centre will look at the divide of informal and formal work, continue the discussions about free and unfree labour and ask what „normal labour relations“ mean in different spatial and historical contexts.

JÜRGEN KOCKA (Berlin), permanent fellow at the centre, elaborated on the tension that, while most researchers are specialists in selected regional fields, „re:work“ claims to strengthen a global perspective. Kocka argued that this justified claim has to be upheld because it furthers comparative perspectives

and enriches discussions oriented at broader questions and a de-provincialization of historical study. Kocka emphasized that with the reconstruction of different forms of work beyond physical labour one should not forget the harshness as companion of work. While questioning wage labour as a „normalcy“ in 19th century Europe, he also reflected on the affinities between the capitalist system and wage work.

These remarks were a kind of transition to the first session entitled „What is work/labour?“. GADI ALGAZI (Tel Aviv) went back to the world before the scientific revolution and described scholarly work in the 14th and 15th century. Scholars' work was characterized by its invisibility for observers and for the scholars themselves. Scholars saw themselves in a permanent working process and the term „workaholic“ was invented. Algazi hinted at parallels to today's creative work.

GERD SPITTLER (Bayreuth) asked how work is organized in the households of herder and gatherer societies in Africa and especially looked at the interrelation between work and play in a family in Mali. Children were integrated in work processes early on. The children saw no difference between work and play, but still knew the difference between a workplace and a playground. Spittler argued that „work“ as a performance can only be understood through participant observation.

YAVUZ AYKAN's (Paris) research on the „slave mother“ in Ottoman society led him to more or less the opposite result. The „slave mother“ was always perceived and interpreted between property and personhood. „Labour“ seemed like nothing more than a legal construction in this context.

In the discussion, opened with a comment on the three papers by Jürgen Kocka, the question of recognition of work was raised: Who decides what is seen as work and what as non-work? What forms of work are appreciated, honoured or valued? It was seen as a necessity to combine different methodological approaches to describe practices and give definitions of work and labour. Finally, the tension between work as exploitation and limited to the aspect of making one's living, on the one side, and the 'surplus' of work in esteem and

satisfaction, on the other side, was discussed.

In the evening lecture GARETH AUSTIN (Geneva) sketched the revival of labour history especially in relation to its connection to global history. Austin stressed the meaning of global reciprocal comparisons (but in the discussion was criticized for returning to the comparison of 'containers' instead of using entanglements) to overcome Western perspectives. He saw the advantage of global history in building new hypotheses, new narratives and syntheses that reject teleology. With the return of the interest on capitalism, labour not only as a factor of production, but also as an actor and force of change returned into global labour history.

In the panel „Work and Life Phases“, BABACAR FALL (Dakar) shared his findings from research with the personal files of African colonial employees in the Senegal National Archives. Fall argued that the „intermediaries“ of colonial rule deserved more attention, since their contribution to French colonial rule in West Africa in the form of intelligence, expertise, and support was critical to the functioning of colonial bureaucracies. They also brought continuity between colonial and post-colonial states. Fall highlighted migration, ruptures and continuities in colonial employees' life courses and careers.

HANS BERTRAM (Berlin) presented his research on child poverty and deprivation in Europe. Bertram argued that the analysis of the effects the financial crisis in 2008 had on child poverty in various European countries revealed that the existing categories for analyzing poverty were inadequate for comparisons. He suggested using the concept of „deprivation“ instead. Also, the national level seems too inaccurate to give a realistic image of deprivation; areas or cities seem to be a more adequate level of analysis.

SIGRID WADAUER (Vienna) discussed the concept of „life course“ as it relates to the production of work in 19th century and early 20th century Austria. „Work“ was produced in conflict and in consensus between involved parties. State administrations became increasingly involved in people's livelihood with a wide range of instruments regulating wage labour. Life course shapes the way people reflect their lives, life stories differ for formal-

ized versus agricultural labour. Wadauer suggested juxtaposing these tales with administrative records to contrast the ambiguities inherent in each source category.

Discussant JOSEF EHMER (Vienna) noted that the research undertaken at „re:work“ seemingly emphasized the category of work much more than that of the life course. It seemed that the life course inspires very different types of research. The ensuing discussion problematized conceptions of labour that relate to capitalist modernity, intersecting temporalities in individual life courses, and how class positions in a society are related to life course narratives.

The next panel on „Free and Unfree Labour“ offered a discussion on how to use these two concepts. MICHELLE MOYD (Bloomington) spoke about „violence work“ and those who perform it. Free and unfree labour, when analyzed from the perspective of (colonial) soldiers in Africa, were presented as two ends of a spectrum rather than two oppositions. To understand the types of freedom and unfreedom soldiers experienced, Moyd looked at the reasons for serving in a military; the type of labour soldiers performed; and different types of military. Moyd argued for a gender analysis of violence. Soldiers as agents of empire and agents of capitalism should be analyzed as an integral part of work and labour history.

ERIC ALLINA (Ottawa) presented on Moccasin migrant workers in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and focused on one particular life story in order to look at the limits of state surveillance and control with regard to migrant workers. Factories served as workplaces and institutions of social integration. Disciplinary conflicts were numerous. Allina analyzed agency and negotiations between different participants and saw the categories of free and unfree labour as a useful simplification to look at „what people do with what is being done to them“.

RAVI AHUJA (Göttingen) talked about freedom and unfreedom in South Asia and made a plea for analyzing these concepts not as something external to labour relations, but as their integral part. While the topic is of high relevance for South Asian (social, political and legal) history, the terminologies used

to explore labour relations and social positions need to be evaluated. Ahuja suggested thinking of time as a measure of freedom, looking at aspects such as the (in)finiteness of the labour relation or the restriction of the working day.

NITIN SINHA (York) summarized that historians need to go beyond the binary of freedom and unfreedom without giving up the historical idea of freedom. The ensuing discussion emphasized, among other points, the gender dimension of the topic.

The session „Labour on the Move“ looked at the intersection of labour and migration history. LEO LUCASSEN (Amsterdam) gave an overview of the historiography and raised the question of the influence of cross-cultural migration on social change. Lucassen suggested systematic comparisons on the macro-, meso- and micro-level; including migrants' capital in our analysis of social, cultural, and economic capital; and analyzing the membership regimes of societies that structure the options migrants have. Lucassen explained that high-skilled migrant labour is often understudied and deserves more attention.

MAHUA SARKAR (Binghampton) described the Bangladeshi contract labour migration to Singapore as a form of circular migration which showed more overlapping with indentured labour than with guest worker systems. Especially institutional mechanisms such as high fees the workers had to pay to the agents who brought them to Singapore created structures of unfreedom.

DMITRI VAN DEN BERSSELAAR (Liverpool) opened his presentation by stating that labour is always on the move: people move to where the work is. Social as well as spatial mobility comes into play. In his case study about the United Africa Company in West Africa, a subsidiary of Unilever, van den Bersselaar combined research on career and regional mobility in the enterprise. While one could find common patterns, the variety of individual careers was predominant.

PRABHU MOHAPATRA (New Delhi) with his comment on the three papers opened the discussion by asking how it is possible to bring the macro-level (Lucassen), meso-level (Sarkar) and micro-level (van den Bersselaar) together. In the discussion comparisons be-

tween different guest worker and labour migration systems were made. Also the ability to protest and organisation, the question of exit and voice was raised.

„Who cares?“ was the eponymous question of the next session. HEIKE DROTBOHM (Freiburg) demonstrated the expansion of the concept of „care“ in her talk. Care cannot only be seen in the traditional perspective of a reproductive sphere. Care institutions, on the one hand, substitute family ties, while on the other hand they constitute emotional belonging. Care also helps with its life-phase-specific tasks to understand life courses better.

DAVID WARREN SABEAN (Los Angeles) showed how household and care work in the 19th century was female work. Kinship needed labour and investment. In middle class households education and training of the children was female work. Women acted as „gatekeepers“ and decided who could enter the family. In peasant and working class families the combination of work outside and within the house strained women and led to tensions between spouses. It was the family that made classes and milieus.

NITIN VARMA (Berlin) presented his new project on domestic work in India. While in the European context a lot of research on domestic work as a „bridging occupation“ between stages in the life course has been done, this perspective is still missing in South Asian history. In the 19th century domestic work was still a male occupation, in contrast to the prevalent picture of this work as female in Europe.

CHRISTOPH CONRAD (Geneva) in his comment pointed to the difficulties to organise care and household work and asked what makes care work different from other work. In the discussion it was suggested to look at care institutions beyond family and household structures, like urban neighbourhoods or rural communities.

The panel on „Labour and Capitalism“ began with LEON FINK's (Chicago) paper about West German post-war social formation and the making of the „European Model“ of labour relations in the 1950s. He argued that the institutionalization of „Mitbestimmung“ in Germany cannot be explained solely in recourse to the German government and the oc-

cupying powers. Transnational cooperation between German, British and American trade unionists had considerable influence on the „German Model“ as it was built after World War II.

FRED COOPER (New York) argued that Karl Marx's concept of „primitive accumulation“ is useful for an interpretation of the history of capitalism because it allows us to interpret labour as a complex social relation, instead of presenting a unified and linear story of „proletarianization“ or „globalization“. Rather than assuming that capitalism produces a unified or homogenous pattern of social relations, historians should develop a set of questions centered on the control of resources, on labour relations and struggles, and on social exclusion. The task is to analyze the patterns of social relations that are inherently connected to capitalist relations, but are much more fragmented than a linear model of the development of global capitalism would allow us to see.

ANUPAMA RAO (New York) talked about social theory in its relation to social history, about norms of universality and the (unconventional) articulations of political identity of marginalized social groups. She urged historians to re-historicize the South Asian concept of „caste“. Its meaning as a political identifier and social marker was interlinked with the history of capitalism – with race, class, migration, dispossession and dependency. What are the conditions for rendering „caste“ political – a concept predominantly seen as religious or referring to the disenfranchised, Rao asked.

MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN (Amsterdam) commented that the origins of wage labour were the unifier of all papers presented in this session. The following discussion centered on definitions of exploitation and on the question how social structures are incorporated into capitalist logics – or not.

The „Roundtable: Work, Life course, Global: Insights, Promises and Pitfalls“ was moderated by Andreas Eckert and began with NICOLE MAYER-AHUJA's (Göttingen) statement. She cautioned against trying to define „the essence of work“ and instead focus more on work and politics, on actual control over the labour process and the prod-

uct. This would also imply focusing on state policies and social actors. Mayer-Ahuja urged to go beyond comparisons and look at the connections as well as transnational organizations such as trade unions. SIDNEY CHALHOUB (Campinas) looked at the relation between free and unfree labour and illustrated his remarks with the history of slave emancipation in Brazil. He suggested paying more attention to the Southern hemisphere when analyzing labour as a political category and its implications. He asked whether the use of social categories was useful for societies from which they did not originate – what constituted a life course in a slave society? PAUL-ANDRÉ ROSENTHAL (Paris) talked about care being at the intersection of work and survival strategies, especially before industrialization. The historicity of life course construction needs to be taken into account. ALESSANDRO STANZIANI (Paris) talked about ways to bring together micro-history and global history and emphasized topics in gender history as part of the history of labour and capitalism. Stanziani also urged historians to write a „real“ reciprocal comparison of the history of Europe instead of retaining it as the continent that others are compared to.

„Re:work“, Andreas Eckert reminded the conference participants, is an institute of advanced study to investigate labour history in relation to global history; it is about having a dialogue across continents and disciplines. The conference that marked the end of the first funding period was an example of how vivid discussions at this research centre are, and what an inspiring atmosphere it provides for historians of labour and global history.

Conference Overview:

Opening and Introduction

Andreas Eckert (Berlin)

Jürgen Kocka (Berlin)

What is Work Labour?

Chair: Mamadou Diawara (Frankfurt am Main)

Gadi Algazi (Tel Aviv)

Gerd Spittler (Bayreuth)

Yavuz Aykan (Paris)

Comment: Jürgen Kocka (Berlin)

Lecture

in: H-Soz-Kult 26.09.2015.

Gareth Austin (Geneva)

Why all the Fuzz about Global Labour History?

Work and Life Phases

Chair: Charlotte Bruckermann (Berlin)

Babacar Fall (Dakar)

Hans Bertram (Berlin)

Sigrid Wadauer (Wien)

Comment: Josef Ehmer (Wien)

Free and Unfree Labour

Chair: Stephen Rockel (Toronto)

Michelle Moyd (Bloomington)

Eric Allina (Ottawa)

Ravi Ahuja (Göttingen)

Comment: Nitin Sinha (York)

Labour on the Move

Chair: Vincent Houben (Berlin)

Leo Lucassen (Amsterdam)

Mahua Sarkar (Binghampton)

Dmitri van den Bersselaar (Liverpool)

Comment: Prabhu Mohapatra (New Delhi)

Who Cares? Work, Care, Household, and Family

Chair: Milena Kremakova (Warwick)

Heike Drotbohm (Freiburg)

David Warren Sabean (Los Angeles)

Nitin Varma (Berlin)

Comment: Christoph Conrad (Geneva)

Labour and Capitalism

Chair: Eric Vanhaute (Gent)

Leon Fink (Chicago)

Frederick Cooper (New York)

Anupama Rao (New York)

Comment: Marcel van der Linden (Amsterdam)

Roundtable: Work, Life Course, Global: Insights, Promises and Pitfalls

Chair: Andreas Eckert (Berlin)

Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (Göttingen)

Sidney Chalhoub (Campinas)

Paul-André Rosental (Paris)

Alessandro Stanziani (Paris)

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