

Work, Workers, and the Heroization of Everyday Life in Global Perspective

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This workshop brought together an international group of scholars to begin a trans-regional discussion on labor heroes and the heroization of work – topics that are too often limited to specific geographic regions. What did it mean to be an ordinary worker who was deemed a hero? What position and role did work play in the everyday life of the laborer? And to what extent did the guiding ideas behind the processes of heroization transfer between states and political systems? As the nine thought-provoking presentations made apparent, there was a clear distinction between the ways in which socialist and non-socialist states dealt with and conceptualized work and workers in the twentieth-century. Moreover, the two systems were also characterized by fundamentally different ways of understanding and instrumentalizing the heroization of labor: either as a necessary element of state-planned economy or as something existing only in addition to a capital-driven workplace. The following summary proceeds along this division as well: the first three presentations focused on Great Britain and the USA and the remaining six dealt with China, socialist Romania, and the Soviet Union.

MICHAEL GOODRUM (Christ Church Canterbury University) innovatively retraced the origins of two pillars of the American superhero genre, Superman and Batman, to present how class relations were essential to their respective storylines. While the rural background of Clark Kent/Superman made him the natural defender of the people, the exceptionally wealthy background of Bruce Wayne/Batman facilitated his defense of property. Hence, inasmuch as Superman was trying to right the wrongs of

the exploitative system in accordance with the mainstream politics of the ‘Progressive Era’, Batman was directly profiting from the existence of such system, Goodrum convincingly argued. Yet, at the same time, both superheroes represented the notion that only direct intervention by strong men from beyond the limits of law could bring lasting solutions to existing problems. Both Superman and Batman were also equally indifferent to questions of race as they both fought for (and against) white people. Goodrum thus concluded that the many aspects of class innate to the superhero genre need to be taken into consideration when analyzing these literary heroes.

In his engaging presentation SIMON WENDT (Goethe University Frankfurt) retraced the history and development of ‘everyday heroes’ in mid-20th century USA. Defining them as „ordinary people who are honored for actual or imagined feats that are considered heroic by their contemporaries“, Wendt showed how the recognition of one’s merits rather than of the work they did was typical for a society in which work was seen as innate to the social life of every individual. Wendt then argued that honoring uncommonly heroic behavior of ordinary citizens also became a remedy to social anxieties brought forth by the escalations of the Cold War. Above all, such acts were considered heroic because they created a sense of community and a set of moral examples that were not entirely challenging to the capitalist status quo. Instead, Wendt’s presentation concluded, the conscious worker was propagated as the one with most value for the emerging middle class.

JOHN PRICE (Goldsmiths, University of London) focused on the ways in which British labor unions chose to recognize workers’ heroism in the early 1920s – it was through The Daily Herald Order of Industrial Heroism, the only labor-financed medal recognizing labor heroism until then. Price intriguingly interpreted the order as a symbolic replacement of the Victorian ideal of romantic heroism: after the tragedy of World War I, everyday heroes were to take up the mantle of wartime heroes. According to Price, this shift was foremost motivated by a newly dominating notion of nobility and dignity of labor.

This belief made it so difficult to award work itself, even the most dangerous and heroic one. Instead, Price concluded, what was to be championed was the bravery of toilers who had risked or given away their own life to save someone else's.

The abovementioned presentations stood in unison in their assessments of how risky and uncommon acts of bravery conducted by ordinary people (or some disguised as such) were deemed heroic only when they occurred outside what was defined as their actual work. They also noted the tendency in capitalist countries to conflate wartime heroism and labor heroism. The following six presentations, on the other hand, analyzed the nature of work in socialist countries – where work was seen as intrinsically heroic, the ethos of labor heroism was imbedded into the system and encouraged by the polity.

NICOLA SPAKOWSKI (University of Freiburg) convincingly analyzed the cases of two woman model workers in the communist-controlled Shaan-Gang-Ning border region in northern China in the early 1940s. Each of them was an illustration of how close women's liberation and women's participation in production was at the time. Spakowski showed that through detailed newspaper reportages the most direct propagation of the idea of liberation through labor was achieved in which women appeared as the driving force. Spakowski then countered the established view that the Chinese Communist Party merely instrumentalized women laborers for the party's own political gains when gradually transforming from a guerilla organization into the *de facto* party in power. Instead, the presentation accurately showed: the party recognized the role of woman labor heroes as important actors in a long-term social change: when work became the basis of new social relations, women's active participation in it made them solid sources of transformation.

IRINA TIBILOVA (University of Freiburg) examined *Bright Path/Tanya*, a musical comedy produced in the Soviet Union in 1940, to illustrate how the propaganda system actively depicted women's manual labor as something truly heroic in itself. Tibilova closely analyzed the innovative and metic-

ulously shot dream-sequences to show how the film created an idealistic image of a poor weaver – a laborer who is inspired by the Stakhanovite movement and then manages to get awarded highest state and social recognition for her hard work. As Tibilova convincingly argued, the popular film was thus intended by the Soviet state to create an image of a woman labor hero that a whole generation was set to follow.

DIETMAR NEUTATZ (University of Freiburg) then analyzed a very different Soviet film. The banned 1979 documentary *Our Mama, A Hero* exemplified how wide the discrepancies between the public depiction of labor heroes and their private experiences actually were. A subversive critique of official propaganda, the film tells the story of the daily struggle of a woman labor hero: she tries in vain to fulfill the high requirements coming with being heroized while also attempting to live up to the demands of her husband and family at the same time. Neutatz convincingly juxtaposed the film's message with the declining social recognition of two widespread early-1970s Soviet labor distinctions to illustrate how in the late socialist state the concepts and practices around labor awards would eventually change to more directly pragmatic responses to the needs of the slowing economy. Neutatz finished his presentation by showing how after the fall of the Soviet Union the distinction of labor heroes was gradually replaced by a social recognition of merits.

CONSTANTIN I. IORDACHI (Central European University) showed in his presentation what happened to labor heroes after the transition from socialism to capitalism in Romania. Demonstrating how state-orchestrated upheaval of some was inevitably followed by the stigmatization of others, Iordachi rightly assessed that heroization of labor was interrelated with class struggle in socialist Romania. The epicenter of this struggle was between Romanian Stakhanovites, the labor models everybody was meant to follow, and Chiaburii, the adopted version of the Soviet Kulak. Iordachi presented how, similar to what had happened in the Soviet Union, Chiaburii became vilified, dehumanized, and made responsible for all evils by the propa-

ganda system, while the labor heroes were celebrated and enjoyed material advantages. It was only after the fall of Ceaușescu in 1989 that the roles would much too simply be reversed: the heroes of the past are today's pariahs, as Iordachi pointedly concluded.

ALEXANDER SCHRÖDER (University of Freiburg) presented how labor heroes played a key role in the transformation of labor politics of the Chinese Communist Party in the northwestern Shaan-Gan-Ning border region during the 1930s and 1940s. These changes were pushed by the concept of 'new labor' aiming at integrating workers in the new revolutionary labor structure. As Schröder demonstrated, a 'new worker' was to be highly disciplined and eagerly outperforming the personal production plans, producing only products of the highest quality, and actively developing new work techniques. Restraining from strikes and loafing, and having an active engagement in voluntary work to aid the war efforts were also expected. While many workers opposed these strict demands, others welcomed them warmly. Based on these observations, Schröder concluded that the Chinese revolution in the northwestern border region was to a large extent a fight over the nature of labor, fought via the proxies of labor heroes.

HAIYAN ZHOU (Nanjing University / University of Freiburg) analyzed in great detail the importance of newspapers in the propaganda of labor in the early People's Republic of China. Focusing on the processes of the construction of meaning, Zhou examined the role of newspaper reading groups – special meetings organized with the goal of disseminating a 'correct knowledge' among the masses in the early 1950s – to see how the concept of labor heroes was spread among the people. As Zhou showed, workers learned in these sessions how to imitate labor heroes through performance and discussion: participants would actively engage in collective self-criticisms in order to re-imagine their own future modelled on labor heroes reported on in the given newspaper. By doing so, the new political order was brought closer to the masses at the grassroots who, in turn, were to strive for achieving best results at their work units and thus advance the socialist state,

Zhou convincingly concluded.

The ambitious promise of the workshop was fulfilled since it offered several new insights into the histories of labor heroism and the heroization of workers. First, the presentations underlined the dichotomy between the heroism of work and the heroism of everyday life: these two modes of heroism, though significantly different, also oftentimes coexisted. A second point raised for future research was questioning the extent to which heroization of labor was in the service of the state or the state depending on it for its own survival. As several of the presentations illustrated (and especially those on socialist countries), labor heroes were simultaneously models demonstrating how people were to embrace the present for becoming better citizens as well as actors needed to build a lasting sense of community. This is linked to the perhaps most outstanding feature of the workshop, namely its fulfillment of a quest to locate the relationship between everyday life and heroism. Through this, the differences between work heroism in socialist versus capitalist states became starkly evident.

The workshop also clearly demonstrated that the study of heroisms is a study in the creation of meanings: each of the nine presentations exemplified in its own way how the socio-political context directly impacts the making of such definitions. In conclusion, if the audience was to take home one final thought it was that heroism – as a concept, as a process, and as a term – is a highly multilayered idea; an idea that should not and cannot be narrowed down to only one country or period. Neither can it be narrowed down to only one social group: concepts such as nationality, gender, class, sexuality, or race should all be taken into close consideration in future research as well. Furthermore, looking at the twentieth-century through the lens of the history of labor heroes enables the researcher to discover crucial and often overlooked aspects of this fascinating time; adding to this a focus at the heroization of labor and its relation to everyday life promises to complete the image.

Conference Overview:

Panel 1: The Heroization of Workers in the Soviet Union and the United States, 1946-2000

Dietmar Neutatz (University of Freiburg):
Heroes of Labor in the Late Soviet Union
and its Successor States: Changing Patterns of
Heroization

roization of Everyday Life in Global Perspective.
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in: H-Soz-Kult 06.12.2018.

Simon Wendt (University of Frankfurt / Uni-
versity of Freiburg): Work, Workers, and the
Heroization of Everyday Life in Cold War
America

*Panel 2: Print Media, Propaganda, and Labor
Heroes in China, 1950-1960*

Alexander Schröder (University of Freiburg):
Revolutionizing Chinese Workers: From
„New Labor“ of the 1930s to the Zhao
Zhankui Movement in the Shaan-Gan-Ning
Border Region of the 1940s

Haiyan Zhou (Nanjing University / Uni-
versity of Freiburg): Labor Hero Propaganda as
Ritual: A Case Study of the Newspaper Read-
ing Groups

*Panel 3: Romanian and American Interpreta-
tions of Heroism and Class before and after
1945*

Michael Goodrum (Christ Church Canterbury
University): The World As It Is And Could Be:
Class and the Creation of Superheroes

Constantin I. Iordachi (Central European
University, Budapest): Heroes and Villains:
Stakhanovites, Social Transformation, and the
Fight against Class Enemies in Communist
Romania

*Panel 4: Labor Heroism and Gender in China
and the Soviet Union during World War II*

Nicola Spakowski (University of Freiburg):
Women Labor Models in Yan'an and the Birth
of the „Women of New China“

Irina Tibilova (University of Freiburg): The
Glorification of a Weaver in the Soviet Film
Svetly Put (The Bright Path) by Grigory Alek-
sandrov

Final Panel and Concluding Discussion

John Price (Goldsmiths, University of Lon-
don): Heraldng Industrial Heroism: The
Recognition of Workplace Bravery in Britain
after 1918

Tagungsbericht *Work, Workers, and the He-*