

### **Sammelrez: A. Chomsky: Linked Labor Histories**

Chomsky, Aviva: *Linked Labor Histories. New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2008. ISBN: 978-0-8223-4173-4; 416 S.

Lipman, Jana K.: *Guantánamo. A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2008. ISBN: 978-0-52025-540-1; 344 S.

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Historians treated the modern history of labor in the United States and Latin America quite separately for a long time. Recent developments like the founding of the journal „Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas“<sup>1</sup> and a number of new studies on transnational labor history in the Americas<sup>2</sup> indicate that historians are beginning to take up the challenge of transnational history and to bring research on both regions closer together. This reorientation can be seen as part of a larger movement within historiography toward the conceptualization of a labor history in global and transnational perspective. At the core of this debate stands the critique of Eurocentrism as well as the thematic and methodological deficits of the existing historiography of labor and the call to re-conceptualize existing narratives and categories.<sup>3</sup> Especially the need to use other spatial frameworks beyond the nation-state has become one of the urgent questions of a global labor history. The two works under review here show impressively the possibilities of a transnational perspective on labor history and they add what is most needed in the current debate: research based on empirical material. However, both studies show in structure, style and setting very different approaches to the transnational labor history in the Americas.

Aviva Chomsky's book is designed as a big contest with the „conventional wisdom“ (p. 1) about the nature of globalization and the inequalities that characterize the contemporary world. The author laments that in today's public discourse (and especially among

her own university students) prevail firstly, an interpretation which regards globalization as „something new, something inevitable, and something generally positive for all concerned“ (p. 2) which will help to overcome global inequalities by deepening global integration, and secondly, a protectionist and xenophobic view according to which globalization and especially immigration flows undermine the national economy of the United States. Chomsky wants to open a new perspective on these issues by offering a different, historically grounded interpretation. This is a laudable project; but it is vexing that she creates the impression to be the first historian undertaking this task and she hardly mentions the recent historiography on the history of globalization processes. One reason might be that her book is directed towards her students and colleagues and less towards professional debates.

Chomsky argues that „labor history is at the heart of understanding globalization“ and in this perspective „globalization has less to do with countries, cultural contact, and speed and more to do with capital's search for cheap labor“ (p. 4) Questioning neo-liberal views, the author states that „economic integration among regions is in fact the cause of the regional inequalities that characterize the world today.“ (p. 3) The central argument of „Linked Labor Histories“ is that „[f]rom its inception, the factory system has depended on, and re-created, regional inequalities in order to strengthen its control over labor. Producers have used two basic methods to do this: bringing workers from poor regions to the site of production, and moving the site of production to where poorer workers are available. That is, immigration and capital flight.“ (p. 3) Both threats did not only serve to discipline workers but also to „relieve employers for the reproduction of their workforce. (...) Like the plantation owner who found it cheaper

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dukeupress.edu/labor/>

<sup>2</sup> Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton. Work and community in the Nuevo New South*, Chapel Hill, NC 2003; Jefferson Cowie, *Capital moves. RCA's seventy-year quest for cheap labor*, Ithaca N.Y. 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the world. Essays toward a global labor history*, Leiden 2008; Jan Lucassen (Hrsg.), *Global labour history. A state of the art*, Bern 2006.

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to purchase a new slave of prime working age rather than to encourage reproduction can be encumbered with the costs associated with raising a child, a factory owner can use immigration and capital flight to benefit from a seemingly endless supply of workers, with little or no social investment". (p. 3-4).

On the basis of several, interrelated case studies Chomsky examines how these phenomena worked out in different historical settings. What follows is a rather complex story which connects different places in the United States and Latin America and spans a large time frame from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. The first part of the book looks at the history of the textile industry and the struggles of textile workers in New England during the entire 20th century and touches issues like immigration, nationalist and protectionist rhetoric, management-worker-collaboration and the relocation of production sites to the U.S. South. The author's argument here is that against popular opinion union militancy did not play a large role in capital flight, since „the history of the textile industry, in fact, shows that unions have more often made huge concessions, often futile, to keep industries in place" (p. 100). Chomsky reveals many connections of the history of New England's textile industry to related processes in Puerto Rico, Central America, Colombia and other places, highlighting the role of the U.S. government and the U.S. military in the global restructuring of the textile economy. She reaches the remarkable conclusion that governments in general do not play a diminished but a key role in current globalization processes. „They create tax structures and legislative apparatus, they serve as the major market for many products, and they provide the physical force necessary to enforce the regional inequalities that are at the heart of the system." (p. 138)

These themes are further developed in the second part of the book, which deals with the struggles of labor unions and indigenous peoples in a banana producing region and a large coal mine in Colombia. Massive paramilitary violence, but also the inglorious influence of the U.S. government, companies and labor unions (AFL-CIO) created a neo-liberal paradise for investors during the last decades

where the local population was disenfranchised, labor unions „domesticated", the environment destroyed etc. The book closes with the question „What's a union to do?" and argues that workers and labor unions throughout the Americas should realize how their fates are connected and should therefore abandon xenophobic policies and deepen their efforts to unite their struggles. Nevertheless, one of Aviva Chomsky's aims, to describe the „making of a global working class", looks more like a wish than a reality which can be found in the book.

To summarize: Chomsky reveals the entanglement of very diverse processes of capital flight, labor struggles and economic restructuring in different parts of the Americas. Her Marxist perspective which focuses on economic categories is a welcomed variety in the widespread literature on „culture" and „discourses" and useful to reveal real power structures. Chomsky shows impressively the historicity of globalization processes as well as the forces and actors which structure our contemporary world. Nevertheless, the victim of such complexity is the clarity of the authors' narrative and argument. One would have wished to learn more about the many places and actors which are touched only shortly in the book. Finally, the alarmist and engaged tone of the author, although not unusual among U.S. labor historians, might seem strange to many readers, but can be well-understood in the light of the burning issues described in the book.

Less extensive in time and space, but more coherent and in the end more convincing is Jana Lipman's study of the labor history of the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba. The author has unearthed an odd story which only the Cold War could bring about. She follows the fate of those thousands of Cuban workers which were employed at the base as technicians, construction workers, barkeepers or nannies from the beginning of the U.S. occupation in 1898 until 1964. The workers, who came mostly from the neighboring Cuban city of Guantánamo, had to cross the border between the naval base and Cuban territory everyday. They were actors in a highly fragile environment, which created a space for intensive contacts between Cubans and U.S.

Americans but also for many legal, political, economic and cultural conflicts. The author's main argument is that „Neocolonialism always defined the parameters, but base workers' agency, struggles, and compromises demonstrated that the U.S. military could not ignore the local community or its Cuban environment. (...) Between the tumults of empire and revolution, the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo Bay has always been in Guantánamo, Cuba.“ (p. 10)<sup>4</sup> While the study's chronological focus ranges from the end of World War II until the mid-1960s, the author also touches the following decades. At that time the employment of locals ended after growing tensions with the Cuban revolutionary government. The base became a point rather isolated from Cuban territory and the U.S. navy relied increasingly on a non-local, transnational workforce.

Lipman's book is a valuable contribution to three debates: Firstly, it offers an alternative chronology to the history of the Cold War and U.S. imperialism in Latin America. Bridging the time between the era of the „Good Neighbor Policy“ after 1933 and the Cuban Revolution, the book shows on the one hand how „[t]hrough geography and political discourse, Guantánamo tested the U.S. commitment to and definition of neighborliness“. On the other hand „it backdates the importance of the Cold War in Cuban history“ by describing a wide range of conflicts in the decade before 1959 and reaches the conclusion: „By taking a local perspective, Cuba's Cold War history no longer appears bipolar or defined only by Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution“ (p. 7). Secondly, Lipman's study intervenes in current historiography on empire in general and on U.S. imperialism in particular. It is informed by the scholarly work on culture, gender, race etc., but it successfully goes beyond the analysis of colonial elites and representations of empire toward a social historical perspective that reveals the everyday experiences of empire for the working people. Thirdly, the book is of course an important contribution to the history of labor in the Americas and in a global or transnational perspective. Lipman has combined a wide range of written and oral sources to produce a well-written study, which looks at the history of la-

bor and work in Guantánamo from a broad social and cultural historical perspective. One minor critique is that the reader learns a lot about race and gender relations, labor struggles, etc. but very few about the actual occupations and working conditions at the naval base. Probably the most important aspect of Lipman's analysis from a global historical view is her argument that the labor structure at Guantánamo Bay, which was the first U.S. overseas base on foreign territory, became a model for all other U.S. bases spreading over the entire world today, but are often kept isolated from the surrounding territory and the local people. After the US-Americans laid off almost all local Cuban workers in the mid-1960s, they started to use workers from Jamaica, the Philippines and other parts of the world which were employed by private contractors. The use of these so-called „Third Country Nationals“ as a cheap and really transnational workforce by the U.S. military has intensified since 9/11 and the „War on Terror“, but has not yet become object of scientific scrutiny.

Finally, apart from the focus on labor history, Lipman's book makes an argument on transnational history in general, which I think is worth to mention. On the one hand, the author acknowledges that „the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo Bay is a transnational space, a geographic locale that operated and operates outside traditional nation-state norms and borders.“ But on the other hand, Lipman rightly states that „the term international, the history between states, does not lose its value. If anything international relations were magnified in Guantánamo, a region where friction between Cuba and the U.S. military dominated the local landscape. Base workers had to navigate and travel between these two poles; there was nothing transcendent about it“ (p. 5).

Two main lessons can be drawn from the two reviewed works: Firstly, they show two different ways to practice transnational or global history and none of them has to do with theoretical speculation or the need to

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<sup>4</sup>While the author is right in stating that the situation in Guantánamo is indeed an asymmetrical power relationship, it is not clear why she introduces the term „neocolonial“ to describe it, since there is nothing „neo“ about it.

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look at the history of the whole world. While Chomsky reveals a wide range of entanglements in space and time (which does not go without problems, admittedly), Lipman is able to tell global history by looking at only one small place in Cuba. Both studies are grounded in area-expertise and empirical research. Secondly, both books exemplify the possibilities of a labor history approach in explaining past and contemporary globalization processes. They convincingly argue, that a labor history in global perspective which is understood as the history of all working people and which overcomes national boundaries, is not a mere academic fashion but can be a way to a better understanding of our modern world, its power relations and inequalities.

Torsten Loschke über Chomsky, Aviva: *Linked Labor Histories. New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class*. Durham, NC 2008, in: H-Soz-Kult 29.07.2011.

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