

REVIEW ESSAY

Whither Labour History? Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives

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Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives. Ed. by Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, and John McIlroy. Merlin, Pontypool 2010. 399 pp. £50.00.

Around 1960, labour history was on the rise internationally, as Eric Hobsbawm recalls in his preface to the collection of essays discussed here:

The change around 1960 was quite striking, though it had been anticipated by the launch of the Amsterdam Institute's *International Review of Social History* in 1956. The Feltrinelli Institute began to publish its *Annali* in 1958. In Austria, an association of labour historians, Verein für die Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung, was born in 1959. In France, *Le Mouvement Social* [...] began its current career under Jean Maitron in 1960. [...] The SSLH was founded in the same year as the journal *Labor History* in the USA, a year before the (social-democratic) Friedrich Ebert Foundation began its *Archiv fuer Sozialgeschichte* and two years before *Labor History* was launched in Australia.¹

The SSLH is the British Society for the Study of Labour History, and its fiftieth anniversary was the occasion for the publication of this collection of essays. The book details the development of labour history as a scholarly pursuit in Britain, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, India, and Japan. This offers the opportunity to compare developments, to see what they have in common, and to reflect on the current state of the discipline. Although these eight countries differ in many aspects, there are remarkable similarities in the narratives, showing how the development of

1. Eric Hobsbawm, "Preface: Looking Back Half a Century", pp. 1–5, 3.

the discipline of labour history has been subject to international currents, as Hobsbawm's remarks already suggest for the years around 1960.

Before the 1960 watershed, labour history had strong links to the labour movement. It produced mainly histories of the organizations (trade unions, political parties) of which the movement consisted, biographies of their leaders, and studies of their ideas. A more or less doctrinal form of Marxism often, but not always, formed the intellectual basis of the analysis, leading to the assumption that all countries, north and south, would go through the same stages of development. These interests and assumptions were found in countries with an established industrial labour force, such as Britain and Germany, former white-settler colonies like Australia and Canada, as well as in later developers, including Japan and India.² This "old" labour history was not necessarily written by historians. Often the authors were activists or retired activists, and the academic analysis of labour was often the work of economists and students of law, for instance in Ireland and Canada.

In the 1960s and 1970s, old labour history was succeeded by New Labour History, closely related intellectually to New Social History, which borrowed questions, methods, and research tools from the social sciences and which revamped social history. This change in approach to labour history took place internationally and with only a small time-lapse after its start in Britain.³ Hobsbawm evaluates the contribution of British labour historians as follows: "British labour history helped to widen the subject from the history of political events and organizations, via the study of actual working-class experience, theory and action, into a comprehensive history of the working classes in modern societies".⁴

Elizabeth Faue suggests that there were actually two developments: a rebirth of labour history as an academic field in the 1950s and the – larger – impact of New Social History.⁵ Central to these was the increasing importance attached to class. Class formation, which had often been taken for granted in old labour history, was now seen as a process that had to be described and explained.⁶ For the US, Faue sees three new approaches: class was seen as a cultural and social expression, located in physical

2. John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, and Joan Allen, "Introduction. Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives", pp. 7–25, 15; Greg Patmore, "Australia", pp. 231–261, 247; Klaus Tenfelde, "Germany", pp. 262–289, 262; Rana P. Behal, Chitra Joshi, and Prabhu P. Mohapatra, "India", pp. 290–314, 296; Takao Matsamura, John McIlroy, and Alan Campbell, "Japan", pp. 315–352, 316; Marcel van der Linden, "Labour History Beyond Borders", pp. 353–383, 356, 362.

3. Van der Linden, "Labour History Beyond Borders", p. 357.

4. Hobsbawm, "Preface", p. 5.

5. Elizabeth Faue, "USA", pp. 164–195, 174.

6. Bryan Palmer, "Canada", pp. 196–230, 199; Tenfelde, "Germany", p. 272; Matsamura, McIlroy, and Campbell, "Japan", p. 327.

communities and subcultures; the workplace, work culture, and formal and informal resistance received their due; and labour's role in clashes with the law and in the political process, in collective action, and in union negotiations was the subject of much debate.⁷ This tallied well with the development of New Social History, which was broader and not confined to labour. It posed questions about related subjects such as the class structure of society, social mobility, migration, neighbourhood life, and family forms.

The central research question in this period was that of the class structure of capitalist society. This fitted well with labour history's traditional focus on the industrial period and societies, where the industrial working class was the largest class. But New Labour History borrowed unevenly from what the social sciences had to offer. It did so from political studies and sociology, but usually not from the most quantitative forms of sociology. Unlike other parts of New Social History, it borrowed hardly at all from demography, and the relationship with economic history became weaker. Whereas "old" economic history was rather descriptive and interested in institutions similar to those that attracted the interest of labour history, New Economic History drew its methods and questions from quantitative economics. Economic and labour history thus sometimes developed quite distinct discourses about the same phenomena.⁸

An example of this can be found in the issue of working hours. The labour movement believed that shorter working hours were desirable so that workers could improve themselves, enjoy life, and contribute to the movement or to family activities. On the whole, labour historians have followed this lead and tend to ascribe to workers a preference for shorter working hours for their own sake, certainly if their working hours exceed eight hours a day and forty hours a week. They regard employers as striving to maximize the number of working hours, so that unions have to force them to accept a shorter working week. Economic historians look at economic theory and tend to explain a preference for leisure time in relation to the amount of money earned: the higher a worker's hourly earnings, the more likely he or she is to opt for leisure.

Economic historians understand working hours as the result of a worker's individual preference. The classic model developed by Lewis is described as follows: "The long-run labor supply of the individual is

7. Faue, "USA", pp. 169–170.

8. James Livingstone, in "The Social Analysis of Economic History and Theory: Conjectures on Late Nineteenth-Century American Development", *American Historical Review*, 92 (1987), pp. 69–95, 69–70, wrote that New Economic Historians had demonstrated that prices, profits, per capita output, and labour productivity in the US had fallen between 1870 and 1896, while New Labour Historians had demonstrated that workers were capable of winning battles against big business in this period. However, nobody had combined these observations to question whether major US business did indeed have as much clout during this period as most historians assumed.

assumed to be negatively sloped. As the economy develops demand shifts upward; equilibrium hours are traced along the supply curve.” Lewis himself wrote: “I submit that [...] employers’ preferences have played only a minor role in the long-run trend of hours of work.”⁹ It is hard to imagine a labour historian writing that sentence.

Or, to give another example, for much of the twentieth century Dutch female labour-force participation was well below the European average. In the 1980s it began to increase, and by 2008 Dutch women were second only to the Swedes in the percentage having jobs. Much of this increase took the form of part-time work. Economists and economic historians tend to see this as a form of inferior employment, which in some way does not really count. They seem to assume that Dutch women would prefer to work full-time if only full-time jobs were available.¹⁰ Labour historians tend to see the right to work part-time as something Dutch women have wanted, and won, against the initial opposition of employers, political parties, and even trade unions.¹¹ The latter position is closer to the experience of the women involved. However, it might well be true that Dutch women would prefer to work longer hours if child-care arrangements or the image of motherhood and femininity in the Netherlands were comparable to those in France or Sweden.

New Social History’s tendency to describe society from below also fitted in rather well with labour history, which had a movement from below as an important actor. New Social History was often specific about locality, focusing on the level of the neighbourhood, the factory, and the region. This too fitted in well with labour history: production and labour relations often differed from region to region. But New Social History’s interest in the everyday life of workers, in community studies or *Alltagsgeschichte*, moved the focus away from labour history’s traditional preference for militancy. One of the everyday aspects of everyday life was that it was not always militant.¹² Ordinary working-class males might not be radical, nor even belong to a union.¹³ In India, the shift in focus from

9. Michael Huberman and Chris Minns, “‘The Times They Are Not Changing’: Days and Hours of Work in Old and New Worlds, 1870–2000”, *Explorations in Economic History*, 44 (2007), pp. 538–567, 550, quoting H.G. Lewis, “Hours of Work and Hours of Leisure”, *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association* (1957), pp. 196–206, 198–199. This is not to say that labour historians deny that workers include pay in their calculation of the number of hours they want to work, nor that economic historians think that working hours are decided by individual workers, but that their approaches to the issue typically differ from one another.

10. Dirk Panter and Philipp Steuer, “Das niederländische ‘Poldermodell’: Zauber oder Wunder?”, *Comparativ*, 10 (2000), pp. 36–61.

11. Corrie van Eijl, *Maandag tolereren we niets meer. Vrouwen, arbeid en vakbeweging 1945–1990* (Amsterdam, 1997), pp. 239–253.

12. Tenfelde, “Germany”, p. 274.

13. Faue, “USA”, p. 174.

the small percentage of workers with regulated jobs in industry to informal workers and subaltern groups had a similar effect. There was also less interest in the ideological debates within the labour movement.

Several essays in this volume note that the New Labour History became less political than the old had been. This had certainly not been the intention of its innovators in the 1960s. Hobsbawm describes their inspiration as one of finding “a way forward in left politics through historical reflection”.¹⁴ Faue sees the New Labour History as an answer to political developments, and notes how the rank-and-file militancy of the 1960s and 1970s inspired New Labour Historians. Emmet O’Connor and Conor McCabe, writing on Ireland, see the transition to New Labour History as an advantage: the English example showed that it was possible to be “scholarly and implicitly, rather than explicitly, *engagé*, and apparently successful in winning approval from both academics and activists”.¹⁵ But Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, writing about Britain, see a loss of political edge after the 1970s as labour history became more entwined with general social history, and they deplore this.¹⁶

One of the challenges to labour history was indeed fuelled to a considerable extent by political developments. When, in contemporary politics, the second wave of the women’s movement took issue with the idea that class differences were the main form of inequality, women’s historians raised the same question in historical research. Putting gender on the agenda was, according to the editors in their introduction, “an innovation of tremendous creative significance”.¹⁷ Issues such as female participation in the labour force, in working-class organizations, and in militant behaviour are clearly core business for labour history.¹⁸ All the essays see the inclusion of gender issues as enriching the field, but they seem to disagree on the impact this has had. Writing about Canada, Bryan Palmer depicts this as a paradigm shift that was absorbed rather unproblematically in labour history.¹⁹ Others are less optimistic on this count. Sometimes the essays implicitly seem to argue that class remains the central analytical category for labour historians.²⁰

14. Hobsbawm, “Preface”, p. 5.

15. Emmet O’Connor and Conor McCabe, “Ireland”, pp. 137–163, 140.

16. Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, “Britain: The Twentieth Century”, pp. 99–136, 120.

17. McIlroy, Campbell, and Allen, “Introduction. Histories of Labour”, p. 11.

18. Faue, “USA”, p. 178; Patmore, “Australia”, p. 242; Behal, Joshi, and Mohapatra, “India”, p. 302. As Faue notes, Joan Scott’s postmodernist critique in her *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988) of New Social History and working-class history in particular was not so easily absorbed.

19. Palmer, “Canada”, p. 211.

20. McIlroy, Campbell, and Allen, “Introduction. Histories of Labour”, p. 12; Palmer, “Canada”, p. 216.

In the wake of gender, other alternatives to class identity as the determining identity for members of the working class came to the fore. Race and ethnicity were the most important.²¹ Religion was another, though it is less often mentioned as a competing identity.²² For India, Rana Behal, Chitra Joshi, and Prabhu Mohapatra mention religion, caste, and community background.²³ Some authors invoke a vision in which all these competing identities are treated together in a balanced way, and see this as a change for the good. Others point out that this remains a promise yet to be fulfilled,²⁴ and deplore the resulting fragmentation of labour history.²⁵ Palmer describes the dilemma as follows:

The surroundings of our time are stimulating, productive and have generated important and fresh perspectives on the lives of Canada's labouring men, women and children. But new studies that are doing this are not, for the most part, framed as labour history. Class matters in this writing, but *not* centrally so.²⁶

If labour history appreciated and integrated the claim that other identities besides class should be taken into consideration, as a discipline it generally responded less positively to the far-reaching claims of post-modernism. At a conference on dock labour in 1997 I heard one labour historian dispose of the linguistic turn with the observation "you cannot load a ship discursively". The linguistic turn was not received into mainstream labour history, the essays here agree.²⁷ The essay on India is critical of Dipesh Chakrabarty's radical culturalism,²⁸ which is likened to the linguistic turn, but on the whole the cultural turn is treated somewhat more sympathetically than the linguistic one.

One of the strongest critiques against some exponents of both old and New Labour History was aimed at reductionism. The Marxist inclination to see historical change as the product of class struggle made labour history vulnerable to this critique. However, it was a complicated critique. To begin with, it was shared by many: by some of the better labour historians who were not averse to using class in their analysis in conjunction with other explanatory variables; by traditional historians opposed to any form of

21. Patmore, "Australia", p. 242; Matsamura, McIlroy, and Campbell, "Japan", p. 332.

22. Faue, "USA", p. 184; Tenfelde, "Germany", p. 276.

23. Nationalism is not discussed in this way, and indeed it has not been analysed as a competing identity to class in labour history as much as it should have been; Behal, Joshi, and Mohapatra, "India", pp. 297–298.

24. McIlroy, Campbell, and Allen, "Introduction. Histories of Labour", p. 12.

25. Tenfelde, "Germany", p. 276.

26. Palmer, "Canada", pp. 217–218.

27. McIlroy, Campbell, and Allen, "Introduction. Histories of Labour", p. 12; Campbell and McIlroy, "Britain: The Twentieth Century", p. 124; Palmer, "Canada", p. 212; Tenfelde, "Germany", p. 276. The exception is Palmer (p. 215), who believes its insights have also been absorbed.

28. Behal, Joshi, and Mohapatra, "India", p. 297.

reductionism or even any conscious use of theoretical concepts; by post-modernists; by cultural historians and historians of mentality; and by many Marxists, who would object to it as vulgar Marxism. Furthermore, types of analysis that were very close to Marxism, or which at least used class as an explanation for many phenomena, were quite common in social history, in the social sciences that were related to social history, and in the long 1970s in history at large. Thus, the essays in this book can truthfully claim that the focus on class was a characteristic of old labour history and of New Labour History, and that it remains central to labour history now. The crux of the matter is whether, and how, it is combined with other characteristics, explanations, and aspects of identity.

If the field has been enriched and been able to defend itself against the claims of competing approaches, it is still treated in these essays as a discipline under threat. In part, this is a reflection of political circumstances. This is not, as several essays note, due to the demise of the Soviet Union, as has often been suggested. Very few labour historians were or continued to be orthodox communists. But the overall retreat of the left and of trade unions and socialist parties since the early 1980s certainly had an impact on the field. With the loss of the cultural coherence of the working class in the West, labour history lost some of its urgency, even in a world where more people rely on wage incomes than ever before.

A number of the essays look also in a different direction to explain the decline in labour history. They blame it on a lack of institutionalization. Some labour historians did not want to form a separate discipline, and preferred instead to engage with history and historians at large. Hobsbawm reminds us that this was the position of the founders of the SSLH.²⁹ But the essays here, especially those describing the situation in the Anglo-Saxon world, bemoan the fact that there are few chairs and other posts in academia devoted specifically to labour history, and few dedicated courses: “Labour history has shaken up [...] ‘history proper’ without finding a proper place for itself in the academy”.³⁰ A historian trained in labour history who moves to a new subject is regarded as a lost soul.³¹ Palmer also notes that recent labour history articles are often “examinations of working-class life that conjoin labour being a *class* with a host of other considerations, among them

29. This is confirmed in Richard Price, “*Histories of Labour* and Labour History”, *Labour History Review*, 75 (2010), pp. 263–270.

30. McIlroy, Campbell, and Allen, “Introduction. Histories of Labour”, p. 13; John McIlroy, “Organized Labour History in Britain: The Society for the Study of Labour after Fifty Years”, pp. 26–63, 49. McIlroy and Campbell have repeated that position in their response to a review of their book by Paul Pickering at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1041>; last consulted 12 October 2012.

31. Palmer, “Canada”, p. 215.

gender, race, region, age, sexual orientation, etc.”. He regards this as a positive development.

And yet it should also raise concerns. Because if “labour history” is advanced by its integration into larger analyses of social, cultural, political, and economic life, so too is it the case that when a subject cannot sustain its name, it is in danger of losing itself among those many other subjects that have no shyness about proclaiming *their* identity.³²

This raises the interesting question of the success of labour history as a specialization. Occupying an academic niche is a double-edged sword. The walls that keep the flock together may turn into a prison, and may keep others out. Where it sought or allowed interaction with other disciplines and historical specializations, labour history has gained much from that interaction. Such exchange is facilitated if working-class history is practised by social, demographic, cultural, political, economic, church, local, maritime, early modern, colonial, gender, and labour historians.

Is the number of specialist labour historians low? Have they flocked elsewhere to the greener pastures of funding and fashion?³³ How should we measure such things? There certainly are very few chairs specifically devoted to labour history. But if we take the number of hits on the Internet as a very rough indication, there are perhaps twice as many specific professors of labour history as there are of colonial history, four times as many as there are of maritime history, and slightly more professors of labour history than of women’s or gender history. But there are five times as many hits for professors of military history as there are for professors of labour history, fifteen times as many professors of church history, twenty times as many professors of social and economic history, and sixty times as many professors of art history.

If, for a moment, we assume that this is a fair way of measuring, is this too many or too few? How many professors of social and economic history will also devote time to labour history, or are perhaps closet labour historians? Many well-known labour historians held or hold a position that is defined otherwise. Faue notes that labour historians are among the most visible and published historians in the US, and that they have held prestigious positions in scholarly organizations.³⁴ This is true elsewhere too.

There is another way, not discussed much in this collection, in which it can be argued that labour historians have been rather good at carving out

32. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

33. Chad Pearson, “From the Labour Question to the Labour History Question”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 66 (2010), pp. 195–230, confirms the idea that labour history has been declining in numbers, a point Faue, “USA”, p. 183, notes also.

34. Faue, “USA”, p. 184.

a niche. There are a large number of institutes collecting the archives, publications, and material heritage of the labour movement.³⁵ In that respect labour history is similar to specializations within history with a material heritage (such as art history and the history of technology), although labour history's material heritage is not especially substantial. It is perhaps even more similar to specializations such as church history, but unlike recent specializations such as cultural history or the history of mentality.

The number of organizations of labour historians is also growing. While some labour history associations in the West have developed to become more general organizations of social historians, or have succumbed to a general decline in associational activity, new organizations have also emerged. The volume mentions the founding of the Labor and Working-Class History Association in the US,³⁶ and of the Association of Indian Labour Historians,³⁷ as well as of national organizations in Brazil and South Africa.³⁸

That includes a number of countries in the global South, which brings us to global labour history. It is generally agreed that global labour history marks the current frontier of labour history, and it is tackled here in the essay by Marcel van der Linden. The labour movement was a proverbially international movement, and old labour history was certainly also interested in institutions, leaders, and ideas that worked internationally. Internationally comparative labour history has developed considerably since Werner Sombart asked, in 1906, "Why is there no Socialism in the United States?". The present collection lists many important such comparisons, for example between coalfield societies, or between Australian and Canadian working-class history.

Global labour history will add to these comparisons entangled histories in which not only are different parts of the globe compared, their interaction is scrutinized too. One example is labour processes involving transport workers, which are inherently global. Even more fundamentally, as Van der Linden notes, global labour history will bring to our attention new questions and data: labour relations that differ from wage

35. Their early history is documented in Jaap Kloosterman, "Unwritten Autobiography: Labor History Libraries before World War I", in Marcel van der Linden and Leo Lucassen (eds), *Working on Labor: Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen* (Leiden [etc.], 2012), pp. 395–416. A brief overview is given in "Introduction", in Lex Heerma van Voss and Marcel van der Linden, *Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History* (New York [etc.], 2002), pp. 1–39. Members of the International Association of Labour History Institutions are listed at <http://www.ialhi.org/members.php>. See also the list at <http://www.iisg.nl/w3vl/archivesandlibraries.html#0701>.

36. Faue, "USA", p. 180.

37. Behal, Joshi, and Mohapatra, "India", p. 307.

38. Van der Linden, "Labour History Beyond Borders", p. 362.

labour, relations between colonizers and the colonized, extended commodity chains, and the mutual influence of labour relations alongside these. There is much to be gained here, and the field seems pretty much in agreement that this is the way to go. That seems a good recipe for the renewed vitality and growth of labour history as a discipline.