

BOOK REVIEW

Moving Workers. Historical Perspectives on Labour, Coercion and Im/Mobilities. Ed. by Claudia Bernardi, Viola Franziska Müller, Biljana Stojić, and Vilhelm Vilhelmsson. De Gruyter Oldenburg, Berlin [etc.] 2023. 267 pp. Ill. € 49.99. (E-book: Open Access.)

In the last fifteen years, the shift away from the dichotomy of free and unfree labour as the major analytical framework towards explorations of the historical diversity of labour coercion has profoundly reinvigorated the field of labour history. The network “Worlds of Related Coercions in Work” (COST Action WORCK) has been a major platform facilitating advances in research and the conceptualization of labour coercion in the long historical perspective. This book is an outcome of the collaboration fostered by WORCK and includes eight contributions from the network’s members. Spanning over five centuries, the beautifully detailed chapters explore the nexus between labour, coercion, and mobility/immobility across diverse contexts.

In the brief but informative introduction, the editors outline the approaches to mobilization/immobilization of workers that have been recently developed in global labour history and mobility studies, and address the ways in which these two fields can be mutually enriching. The introduction outlines and explains the central concepts that unite the chapters – labour, coercion, mobility, immobilization – and sets the scene for the in-depth case studies. The editors highlight the diversity of labour-related human mobility beyond “labour migration” strictly defined, and draw attention to the multitude of power relations within which mobility has been enmeshed. As such, this volume joins the recent scholarship in challenging a long-standing bias of migration history, namely the emphasis on voluntary movement. Instead, its contributions demonstrate how different types and modalities of coercion, whether structural or individual, have shaped the movement of workers historically. They also explore the tensions that arose from attempts to control the movement of labourers, be it by employers, the state, or kin.

Three design principles intrinsic to the book make it stand out. First, although it is focused on Europe and North America, its contributions address the lesser-studied contexts, such as seasonal labour migrations in Iceland (Chapter Four) or the post-socialist migration of Romanians to Spain (Chapter Eight). Second, the authors go beyond labour history’s more conventional focus on industrial workers, and put at the heart of their respective chapters diverse groups of labourers, such as prisoners (Chapter Two) and domestic servants (Chapter Five). The authors showcase to what extent the concept of coercion is key for understanding the condition of subaltern mobilized/immobilized workers. At the same time, an additional layer of complexity is added by the first chapter, in which Gabriele Marcon discusses the limits of mobility among the highly qualified and rather privileged German miners employed in the sixteenth-century Medici mines. Third,

the long chronological span of the book gives the authors an opportunity to directly engage with the role of the state, across different political regimes, in shaping human mobility. Connections and contrasts between the violent, forced displacement carried out by the Soviet Union (Chapter Six) and the state-organized “guest worker” programme for Mexican nationals in the US (Chapter Seven) are thought-provoking.

Chapters work as standalone contributions to the respective regional historiographies, but they can also be productively read together by those broadly interested in mobility, labour, and coercion. Each chapter highlights different facets of this complex nexus, and the diversity of the authors’ approaches showcases the dynamism of recent research on the topic of labour coercion. Taken together, the chapters also enable the reader to appreciate the wide variety of sources – from accounting records to oral testimonies – needed to capture the forms of coercion.

Chapter One stresses that coerced and voluntary forms of mobility were not mutually exclusive, but could actually be co-constitutive in particular contexts: faced with limits on their movement imposed by their aristocratic employers, highly skilled German miners nevertheless continued to facilitate the migration of other miners. Coercion did not necessarily preclude the miners’ strategies of seeking and maximizing their profits, contributing to its longevity as a practice of structuring the labour force. The matter of resistance to immobilization is taken head on in Chapter Two, as the case of the escaping Danish prisoners between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries becomes the foundation for a discussion of change in prison regime. Johan Heinsen demonstrates that actions of prisoners – a group often portrayed as powerless – prompted the authorities to shift their focus from productivity of labour to security as the chief organizing principle of prisons. In Chapter Three, Magnus Ressel offers a close reading of a business prospectus of an eighteenth-century slave trader. As Ressel shows, apparently neutral and purely technical accounting practices in fact enabled slavery by treating slaves as goods and contributing to their dehumanization. Chapter Four zooms in on the documents intended for controlling seasonal labour migration in Iceland between the late eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, and maps the limits of these documents’ intended use. In their space-sensitive account of labour-related mobilities, Vilhelm Vilhemsson and Emil Gunnlaugsson note that the use of passports and permits as a means of control clashed not only with the workers’ autonomy, but was also limited by the needs of the mixed agricultural and fishing economy that relied on a flexible and mobile workforce. In Chapter Five, Müge Özbek uses police records to analyse how employers and kin alike enforced the movement – and the immobility – of girls and young women working as domestics in the affluent households of Istanbul at the beginning of the twentieth century. Offering a gendered analysis and using the notion of dependency to capture the entangled modes of coercion that shaped the lives and labour of these workers, the author also discusses the ways in which these women and girls resisted the immobilization and sought out other, often transgressive, possibilities of urban living and labouring, such as turning to sex work or eloping with men. Chapter Six contextualizes the forced labour of deported Estonian peasants in the Soviet Union in a spectacular manner. Aigi Rahi-Tamm not only outlines the political decisions

and their implications for the deported peasants, but she also painstakingly documents just how disruptive and destructive the uprooting, subsequent immobilization, and modalities of forced socialist labour were for these families. Crucially, she also discusses the aftermath of the deportation and forced labour, describing the challenges that the former deportees faced in society upon their return. In Chapter Seven, Claudia Bernardi employs the concept of valorization of mobile workers, namely of Mexican migrants to the US enrolled in the Bracero Program, in order to uncover the state's and employers' tactics of profit-making and exploitation that permeated the most intimate aspects of the workers' lives. Echoing the preceding chapter, Bernardi places the labour and mobility of these Mexican workers within the wider political and societal context. Here as well, mobility and immobilization do not simply coexist, but are together constitutive of the migration regime that relied on indebtedness and exploitation of waiting times to derive additional value from the migrant workers. In turn, Chapter Eight builds an arc that shows how land dispossession of peasants in state-socialist Romania shaped the migratory experiences of Romanians in the post-socialist decades. Offering a perceptive analysis of life trajectories of women migrating to take part in social reproduction as care workers in Spain, often as part of the informal economy and under exploitative conditions, Angelina Kussy shows how the consequences of collectivization under state socialism fed into the emergence of the marginalized "global care class".

Such exciting diversity of chapters also entailed a challenge for the editors to ensure that the book as a whole is more than the sum of its rich contributions. One way to achieve this could have been to offer a conclusion that addressed the transversal issues raised by the chapters. The authors rightfully remark that the term "agency" has been overused to the point of becoming extremely vague and losing much of its analytical value. Yet, it is clear that even the most constrained workers acted to change their condition. A reflection on the modalities of such action in the long historical perspective, and responses to them, could be one such transversal line of reflection. A discussion of mechanisms and techniques of control and coercion deployed by states, employers, kin, or other workers – and their limits – could be another. Mobility and immobilization, as addressed in several chapters, were frequently parts of the same mobility regime – to which conceptual innovations could this observation lead? The afterword by the philosopher Thomas Nail takes a bird's-eye approach to human mobility, and although this switch of perspective is stimulating, it also means that the connections between chapters that were hinted at in the introduction are largely left unaddressed.

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