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Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives

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The title of this volume is something of a misnomer or, at least, there is a crucial word missing from it. The book is actually a collection of national histories of labour *historiography*. For 'labour historians?', it is, accordingly, a book of many points of interest: an opportunity to evaluate different trajectories in the development of the discipline and consider points of similarity and difference; a chance to compare war stories and to ruminate on current problems and their solutions.

The case studies include a number of predictable candidates ? three chapters devoted to Britain and one each to the USA, Canada and Australia ? as well as some less obvious choices: Ireland, Germany, Japan and India. The absence of a study of any country in Latin America and Africa is unfortunate but the editors are clearly not intending to suggest the absence of anything worth studying in either continent.

In many respects the predictable report cards tell familiar stories. Among other things, they are a reminder that over very many years 'labour historians?' have much to be proud of. They underscore that the quality of the intellectual output under the rubric of 'labour history?' has been, and continues to be, high. In Australia, for example, *Labour History* is acknowledged in the broader academic community to be a fine journal publishing articles dealing with a broad range of subjects, some well beyond the fringe of what traditionally

to be considered labour history. This is not a new departure. One of the first articles I read (too many years ago to admit to) was Iain McCalman's splendid study of feminism and free love in post-Napoleonic war Britain.

Other observations will surprise. Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase, for example, point to the particular importance of Yorkshire as a seedbed of new labour history in Britain. Many of the influential figures in the rise of socialist humanism as it was then sometimes called were clustered in Leeds and Sheffield. In his splendid preface Eric Hobsbawm recounts that at a critical moment he set off from London for Leeds in a sheepskin coat headed to Leeds to recruit Asa Briggs as the figurehead of the fledgling labour history society. It was a foray into the industrial north, the reverse of the pattern of the 19th century when, sooner or later, the capital beckoned all causes seeking to be taken seriously.

In general, the national accounts also show that labour historians are the richer for having come to terms with other analytical categories (race, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexuality to name a few) as well as some of the lessons of postmodernism, the 'linguistic turn' and any other turn for that matter. This conclusion might surprise many, particularly in Britain, who spent years in the trenches defending labour history from the tyranny of the postmodern text.

The accounts of labour historiography from the less likely sites are very interesting. In Germany, for example, Klaus Tenfelde points out that the tradition of labour history had strong base in the practice of many of the iconic figures in the history of socialism: Marx, Engels, Liebknecht, Babel, Bernstein, Kautsky and Mehring were all historians. Mehring and Liebknecht, he notes, were engaged in a polemical assault on bourgeois history part of which was an attempt to produce a 'comprehensive interpretation of Prussian-German history written from a social democratic perspective' (p. 263).

After the war, we are told, the output of German labour history has been prolific 'tens of thousands of books and articles have been published in the GDR and the Federal Republic (p. 277). East and West, however, developed in two very distinct directions. In the GDR, writes Tenfelde, the history of workers' movements 'became the chief branch of history' but, unfortunately, there 'was no shortage of misinterpretation and even falsification of history; virtues were made of stylisation and omission' (p. 267). Although 'important achievements in factual knowledge cannot be denied' the output of this 'impoverished' tradition of scholarship (presumably at least half of the tens of thousands of books and essays) is dismissed with what seems like undue haste and without any detailed examination of a single example.

In West Germany the situation has been far more complex, fragmented and changeable. This story is not helped by the author's exposition, which is itself often unclear. What is clear is that the trajectory of labour history in the Federal Republic has been complicated by debates about the origins of the First World War, the history of National Socialism (and the relationship of the regime to organised labour) and by the Cold War.

Rana Behal, Chitra Joshi and Prabhu Mohapatra's essay on India is the most interesting of the case studies not only because of the impact of colonialism on the development of the labour movement but also by the fact that its historiography is inextricably bound up with the rise of subaltern studies. The historiography of labour, they argue, 'has oscillated between conceptualising the Indian experience as merely an instance of Eurocentric capitalist development and as uniquely indigenous' (p. 307). Notably, they tell us, those employing a traditional Marxist approach were driven to use words such as 'emergent', 'elementary', 'embryonic', and 'incipient' in order to account for the obvious impact of caste and religion on working class consciousness. At the other end of the swing of the pendulum is the contribution of Dipesh Chakrabarty to the discussion. The authors describe Chakrabarty's impact as akin that of the linguistic turn in Britain. Chakrabarty rejected the orthodox accounts of the development of an Indian working class in favour of a culturalist approach: insisting that instances of 'class' consciousness were transient and never supplanted the role of religion and caste in the minds of the labouring poor.

It's hard to overestimate the influence of Chakrabarty's contribution not only in India but also on students of developing countries more generally. Nevertheless, according to Behal, Joshi and Mohapatra, Chakrabarty's approach provoked strenuous debate, being critiqued for seeing 'culture as pre-given'. They give the example of Raj Chandarvarker's study of textile workers in Bombay which showed that the 'workings of the labour market and patronage networks' – 'the nexus between local leaders, dealers in property and credit' – were crucial 'in forging new ties legitimated through the language of caste, region and religion' (pp. 297-8). They go on to suggest that Chakrabarty's radical revisionism been supplanted to some extent among more recent labour historians examining the culture of urban workers. In support of this point the authors point to several studies that 'enrich and complicate notions of community and identity in the urban industrial context'. They also cite a number advances in drawing the informal labour sector – including rural workers – into the conversation. This, they suggest, is the 'most significant shift in focus in recent historiography' (p. 303).

An important fillip for the renewal of labour history in India is identified as the formation of the Association of Indian Labour Historians in 1996. *Inter alia* this has permitted Indian scholars to link up with others from the developing world ('the global South') and to join the call for the 'globalisation of labour history'. This 'attempt to break out of the old Eurocentric frames and search for other comparison, other temporalities' (p. 307) is considered to be a fundamental development. Here Behal, Joshi and Mohapatra lead directly on to the most important contribution to the volume: Marcel van der Linden's plea for a global labour history in the concluding essay: 'Labour history beyond borders'.

At one level van der Linden's call is predicated on the well-rehearsed criticisms of E. P. Thompson's magisterial *Making of the English Working Class*: that it is narrowly Anglo-centric and largely fails to find a place for women in the ranks of the emergent working class etc. (these criticisms are also discussed in Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase's chapter on Britain). According to van der Linden, however, Thompson's mistake was to see 'making' as a self-contained process, using England as the 'logical unit of analysis' eschewing interest in international comparison. Although he recognizes that the new labour history of the 1960s represented a 'genuine intellectual revolution' and that *The Making* was a 'landmark' book, even at its best he argues that labour history remained hidebound by 'Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism'. The future, he insists, lies in reconceptualising and broadening what we mean by the working class and labour; taking labour history out of its intellectual and geographical comfort zones.

Much of what van der Linden proposes makes good sense; indeed, as he notes, transnational labour history has been flourishing for a number of years. In relation to the Anglophone world think of Nev Kirk's *Comrades and Cousins*, published nearly a decade ago, as eloquent testimony to the potential of what we might call the globalisation from below of workers and labour institutions around the British colonies of settlement and the United States. A long list of titles cited by Behal, Joshi and Mohapatra show how histories of the 'global South' are making significant advances in the study of labour in the developing world.

But this does not mean that van der Linden's prescription is unproblematic. Here is not the place for a detailed response to van der Linden (although it undoubtedly warrants it) but there is scope to raise two issues.

First, is the vexed issue of definition. As we have noted from Behal, Joshi and Mohapatra's essay, one of the objectives of a new global labour history is to produce broader definitions that bring more scholars into the conversation. Van der Linden argues that the favoured categories of labour history – such as work, class and labour – are US-Eurocentric. Further, he stresses, in some cultures/languages there is no single word for these concepts. On the one hand, it is important to recall that the definitions of class and labour that underpin much of the labour history produced in the Anglophone world since the 1960s (and since the abandonment of notions such as false consciousness) are those upheld by the historical actors. After all, central to the new labour history project was/is to understand what ideas such as class, labour, poverty, freedom, popular, public and so on meant to those who uttered them in the context of their own times. To the extent that it puts

this at risk, redefining these concepts to make them more effective for a global conversation among labour historians is surely dangerous.

Moreover, if there is no single word in a language or culture for a Eurocentric concept, shouldn't we embrace that fact and seek to understand it? What do the words that are used convey to those who use them? Listening in on such a discussion would be very useful for labour historians of the Anglophone world as it would undoubtedly point to new ways of thinking about the complexities of the language used by the historical actors we study. But this does not mean that we need concepts that encompass all.

Van der Linden is rightly concerned that insouciantly adopting Western definitions means that they are 'fuzzy'. Surely there is a real danger that defining away the fuzziness will leave us with concepts that are so baggy as to be meaningless. Can't we think of a conversation about labour history that is based on active categories that do carry across the globe? As an historian working in a 'tradition of scholarship rooted in empiricism within a generalised Marxist framework' (so characterised by Allen and Chase), experience and agency are two concepts that occur to me.

Second, I wonder how, in practical terms, are studies of global labour history to be written without sacrificing the fine-grained approach that has characterised much of the new labour history since the 1960s? How might Thompson have written *The Making* differently? He was conscious of the inattention to the struggles of the Scots, Welsh and Irish and, undoubtedly, if he had his time again, he would have done more to 'rescue' the experience of women and their contribution to radical culture. The addition of these pages would not make it a work of global labour history in van der Linden's terms.

Even if Thompson had followed up the colonial and imperial references in his evidence would those pages have resulted in a study written according to van der Linden's vision? No. Would following those threads have led him to fundamentally alter what was meant by class, labour, liberty, oppression used in connection with radical artisans during and after the 1790s? No. Whatever the answer to the practical difficulty of knowing where to start and where to stop when writing trans-national and trans-cultural history we must surely be cautious that we do not set a template for labour history such that scholars will not aspire to write books like *The Making*.

Van der Linden's important provocation notwithstanding, this collection has less to offer the general reader than it might. Who do the editors expect to read it? Among readers of this journal many hands will immediately go up; I devoured it voraciously and learned much from it. But who else? As a collection of histories of historiography, the volume is almost inevitably a case of preaching to the converted. Why would you assemble a cast of eminent and talented historians and invite them to talk to each other? The ostensible reason, of course, is to mark the 50th anniversary of the Society for the Study of Labour History but I wonder if this is the best way to ensure that there will be a 75th. In their introduction the editors are at pains to deny that labour history is in crisis? or at least not facing a terminal decline? but then they offer a litany of reasons why the crisis is in fact grave: declining society memberships, struggling journals, thinly attended conferences, falling undergraduate enrolments, lack of recognition in university departments, derisory funding from government, little support from the organised labour movement (itself in decline), a crisis of identity which has seen many labour historians re-brand themselves.

In Australia, a number of these conditions prevail to a greater or lesser extent. Nevertheless, there is plenty of excellent work being undertaken at a doctoral level and among early career researchers that we would regard as 'labour' history in the best sense of word even though those who are undertaking it either don't recognise or eschew the title of labour historian. Perhaps we should be less concerned with the future of the rubric than with the continuation of the work itself.

The other reason for undertaking a volume such as this is pointed to by Hobsbawm: the impetus for many works of labour history penned in the 1960s was 'an attempt to find a way forward in left politics through historical reflection'. For some this remains a powerful motivation. The danger is that our constituency and our audience have already marched on.

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