

Zitierhinweis

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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 and 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 Marxisant 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 de 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.

Author's response

John McIlroy and Alan Campbell

We want to thank Paul Pickering for his thoughtful and engaged comments about the collection we edited, *Histories of Labour*. This response clarifies several of the points that Paul raises about the text before discussing further two important issues: the nature of the problems currently confronting labour history and whether the adoption of transnational approaches can help to significantly resolve them. First, our title: Paul believes it is either a misnomer or there is a crucial word missing from it. The book, he suggests, should be more properly titled *Historiographies of Labour*. This is mistaken. In English, ‘history’ denotes both what happened in the past and how it is represented in the writings of historians. ‘Histories’ has a dual meaning and is interchangeable with ‘historiographies’. Employed in a title, it is simpler and, to our ears, more euphonious. Moreover, it follows recent usage by historiographers such as John Burrow (*A History of Histories*) and Richard Evans (‘The history of history’, chapter one of *In Defence of History*).⁽¹⁾

Second, our intended audience: like Paul’s review, this response and most of our and his published work, the text is aimed primarily at academic historians. It is pitched at scholars and students with an interest or potential interest in the history of labour and more widely the discipline of history. In our experience, and in the context of specialization and the segmentation of the field, some labour historians demonstrate limited awareness of developments outside their own particular specialism, period and country. Not a few historians working in other fields of the discipline possess restricted understanding of what has been happening in labour history around the world since 1960. Contrary to Paul’s estimation, many are not yet converts to its cause. Consequently, we find no problem in historians talking to each other.

The book, Paul feels, ‘has less to offer the general reader than it might’. Writing for the general public is important. It is not without problems of pedagogic adaptation, not least the danger of simplification, elided in the ‘might’. Undertaking popularization properly would have entailed producing a different book for a different audience. Reviewers should surely be primarily concerned with the success of a text in relation to its intended readership. This sort

of reproach is perhaps best levelled at academic history *per se* rather than particular volumes written in a reasonably accessible style and format. Paul records he learned much from it and believes it will interest many readers of this *Review*. If it attracts that constituency around the world we will be more than happy.

Third, our coverage: Paul regrets the absence of essays on Latin America and Africa, although he accepts silence does not bespeak judgement about significance. As we noted (p. 15) selection is inevitable in any global survey, certainly one which at 400 pages and 150,000 words is longer than many conventional and comparable volumes. As we observed (p. 25, n. 47), our knowledge of recent collections which embraced Latin America, North Africa and Russia constituted a further factor in difficult decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion. As with most such ventures, non-delivery of promised contributions came into it: that explains the absence of chapters on France and South Africa (noted on p. 15). Overall, we feel that our expressed purpose – to survey the development of labour historiography around the globe – was substantially realised in analysis of eight countries in four continents complemented by an exploration of transnational history. Given that the heartlands of labour history over our designated period were to be found in Britain, North America, Australia and, to a lesser degree, Japan, we think our selection justified.

It is consequently a little disappointing that the review is oddly skewed in its lack of any real address of the latter chapters, although they constitute most of the book. Only two of the country chapters, those on Germany and India, are considered in any detail. Fully a third of the review consists of critical discussion of Marcel van der Linden's vision of one historiographical future, the coda to our text. Again, we could have done something different and edited a collection on the future rather than the past of labour history. There is a place among the burgeoning histories of different fields of the discipline for a history of histories of labour and this collection deserves consideration as such. Of course, it is a matter of degree: any review must reflect its author's interests and preferences. But the lack of engagement with the four chapters on Britain and Ireland, the two on North America and more peripherally the chapter on Japan (as interesting, although that is only one criterion of significance, as India in its historiographical trajectory) arguably impairs execution of a brief to fully inform readers of the scope and substance of the text under scrutiny.

Much ink has been spilt in recent times on the crisis, real or alleged, of labour history. Yet the issues still require elucidation. Paul perceives a contradiction between our questioning (in the editorial introduction) of whether the subject in Britain is in crisis or terminal decline, and the evidence we assemble – fewer university courses, falling membership of societies, labour historians rebranding themselves, lack of labour movement support, and so forth – which suggests it is. The contradiction is at least diminished if we distinguish, as we endeavoured to do in our essay, between intellectual well-being and institutional health. Much of the literature locates crisis in intellectual trends hostile to, or competitive with, labour history. It cites the challenge of gender, ethnic history, cultural history and postmodernism on the one hand, and the decline of Marxism, often identified with the Soviet Union, on the other.

Yet if we look at the subject in recent years through the prism of the literature and with an equable eye, it seems to be in reasonable if not robust intellectual health. Looking back to the 1960s, 'the historiographical progress', McIlroy judged, 'is unquestionable' (p. 45). Our essay acknowledged reverses. It concluded, 'but they are not intrinsic and therefore they are not terminal' (p. 15). As Paul observes, 'labour historians are the richer for having come to terms with other analytical categories (race, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexuality ...), as well as some of the lessons of postmodernism'. Of course, we may reach different conclusions if we indulge, as some critics do, in the caricatural equation: labour history = Marxism, usually fundamental Marxism. We took pains to demonstrate the frailties of this false equivalence. Labour history was and is more than that.

However, if we turn from epistemological matters to the construction, organization and dissemination of knowledge and its sites, issues relevant to the condition of any field, then, as

we argued in the book, decline on the measures Paul notes is unquestionably marked. We need to specify and historicize its nature and provenance. In institutional, as distinct from intellectual, terms, labour history at its most popular never became a major player in university curricula (or, for that matter, from the 1960s in labour movement classes). It never emulated the post-war surge of economic or later social history and then, still later, cultural history. The Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) never took on the perquisites of a fully-fledged learned society, even in comparison with its economic and social history coevals. The enhanced reach and enlarged audience the subject briefly enjoyed in the 1960s and 1970s, inside and outside the academy, emanated substantially, although not completely, from the impact of the work of Thompson, Hobsbawm and others of that extraordinary generation. Intellectual progress never crystallised sufficiently in institutional armature. Labour history never achieved the critical mass of staff and graduate students in universities (it was marginal to union education) necessary to embed itself as a distinct subject across higher education, able to reproduce itself in the face of hostile changes in its environment. We stress we are writing about Britain.

Problems came not from autonomous intellectual developments. They stemmed fundamentally from political, economic and cultural innovation and its impact on the academy and the labour movement, mediated through the attitudes and actions of academics. Some evacuated labour history in favour of more fertile, relevant or more fashionable fields. Others indeed rebranded themselves as historians of this or that component of the field, whether gender, ethnicity, working-class culture, health, protest, Chartism, the Labour Party, communism or trade unions. The decline and transformation of the labour movement sundered what had at least partially cemented allegiance to an aspirational, incompletely realised, holistic labour history: belief in the progressive mission of the labour movement and the significance to that movement of labour's present and past. These trends continued even as universities once more expanded in the 1990s. SSLH membership declined, the History Workshop movement disappeared, its eponymous journal entered the academic mainstream, and so on.

Histories of Labour, as Paul points out, is a commemorative volume and its tone is at times celebratory. We would maintain that, in comparison with much commemorative history, celebration is qualified and conditional. We freely concede that we may have been over-optimistic. The current state of play in Britain, with cut-backs in universities and retrenchment in history and the humanities, carries the threat of further deterioration in what has been, since the 1980s, an unprepossessing position, at least in institutional terms. If we think of crisis as a decisive moment or a turning point, it may not be the best way to characterize the situation. The implication in some accounts is that 'the decisive moment' has already lasted 30 years. What we are facing today in Britain is rather the result of a more prosaic, gradual process. Rather than a significant subject encountering a conceptual, analytical or methodological crisis, labour history found its limited growth and its practitioners' sense of common identity cumulatively eroded by the consequences of neoliberalism. In today's conditions of specialization, fragmentation and austerity, the very best we can look forward to is consolidation of a small field. Even that may prove over-ambitious. Paul mentions continuing work on labour by doctoral students and early career researchers who do not necessarily identify themselves as labour historians. He hazards that the continuation of the work itself may be more important than 'the rubric'. But what is at stake, for better or worse, is not simply nomenclature but the existence of a discrete, integrated field of study. In that context and citing similar developments in North America, Bryan Palmer detects the danger: the subject becomes more even fragmented, dissolving itself into other fields that have little reticence in proclaiming their identity (p. 218). In Britain that process may be beyond arrest, to the detriment of any unified labour history. In such circumstances, as distinct perhaps from healthier climes, can Marcel van der Linden's prescription of a new, global labour history help to put the pieces back together and stimulate

rebirth? If we begin from where we are, rather than from where we would prefer to be, the prospects do not appear auspicious. Few in this audience will question the cogency of a call for historians, particularly British historians, to overcome insularity, locate the parochial in interlocking global processes which influence labour in regions and nation states, conceive the particular as part of the whole and transcend Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism. E. H. Carr was saying as much 50 years ago. But what is being proposed here is a little more precise, a new paradigm, if still a little short of a full programme. Such histories, it is suggested, require analysis of the global economic, technological and political forces which impact on labour by utilizing and developing the approaches of Marx, Mandel, Wallerstein, world systems theory and developmental sociology. The writ of the new history runs from at least the 14th century. It authorises expansion of the field to include all forms – casual, untypical, waged and unwaged, bonded, servile, lumpen – of labour and the family, as well as the operation of capital in all its diverse and complex ramifications.

This is exacting. At least one advocate of global labour history excludes Hobsbawm's world histories from its ambit. Its scale and grandeur recall but exceed ambitions for a *histoire totale* – 'from social history to the history of societies' – much talked of, less frequently practised, in the 1970s. It overlaps with recent aspirations to globalize other fields of history. To take one example, some imperial historians are engaged in broadening the geographical and social scope of their subject, insisting that it should reflect the voices of the oppressed around the world. Linda Colley goes to the heart of impediments in relation to that and similar projects: particularity is a stubborn problem, these things are difficult to do, or difficult to do well. Paul makes several sensible points about definitions and operationalizing the new paradigm as a means of unifying and broadening actually existing labour history. Thompson, the man, the historian, *The Making*, the attachment to depth, to detail, to difference, suggest the continued relevance of what is now, 40 years after he wrote, traditional labour history. As Carolyn Steedman's recent work demonstrates, it can still act as a spur to innovatory local extension.⁽²⁾ We remain dubious about the degree to which global labour history can adequately and equally penetrate and portray the intricacies and complexities of diverse, sometimes opaque, social formations. As well as the resulting quality and comparability of what multilingual, computerised teams, for they would often appear a necessary prerequisite, are assessing and synthesizing. We would question the extent to which the macro-sociological studies which seem to fit the bill are already to hand. Global labour history figures rarely in courses in Britain while Kirk's admirable text fits more comfortably into conventional comparative history; even Behal, Joshi and Mohaptra's citations in their chapter on India are dominated by studies of India.

Perhaps prospects are better in 'the global south'. Our sense is that like Marcel's crackling provocation to think things anew, the global paradigm remains very much prologue to a work just beginning and difficult to fully realise in research and publication. As with all good historiographical futurology, his efforts should stimulate striving which, if it falls short of the final objective, enriches our literature and understanding. In the end, as one of us wrote in *Histories*:

One route recipes are unhelpful. The subject will always constitute a site of diversity and pluralism in content and approach. There will always be room for localized narratives, for micro-histories, for *Montallou* as well as *La Méditerranée et le Monde ...* (p. 50).

Notes

1. John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (London, 2007); Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997).

2. Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge, 2009).