



ISHA NEWSLETTER

International Social History Association

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The interesting ideas of Eric Hobsbawm

by

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Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi



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The article is the abridged version of Madhavan K. Palat's paper delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 22 November 2012. The complete, much longer paper is available [here](#).

Hobsbawm's modern world originated in the big bang of the eighteenth century, and it was extinguished in an implosion almost exactly two centuries later. To him these two hundred years were defined by the project of the Enlightenment which imagined a world that was equally good for all of humanity and not for just some part of it. More than revolution, the Enlightenment drove this world onward until it seems to have exhausted itself by the end of the twentieth century; the Marxist Hobsbawm is inspired more by the Enlightenment than by one of its consequences, the millenarian dream of revolution. Deriving from the Enlightenment, the conjoined industrial and French revolutions, known as the Dual Revolution in his work, generated all subsequent events. The industrial revolution assumed both capitalist and socialist forms, and the political revolution inaugurated by the French species spawned a series of bourgeois and socialist revolutions, attempts at revolution of both types, and revolutions against revolution, or counter-revolutions. They permeated not only the politics and the economy of the continent, but as much its social and cultural processes and the sciences and the arts. His magnificent *oeuvre* celebrates this universe bounded by the two revolutionary waves of the late eighteenth and the late twentieth centuries; but it is a celebration that broods on its dark side as much as on its stupendous achievements. His grand theme is the hope held out by the Enlightenment, the revolutions that reflected it, and the counter-revolutions that negated it. As this modern world drew to its close in the 1990s, a gloomy uncertainty hangs over the world, and his musings on the post-Cold War world reflects this unease. [...]

Marxism

In what sense was Hobsbawm a Marxist as a historian? He was a Marxist, a communist, and a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain until its dissolution; and Marx accompanies him on all his expeditions like "a shadow or faithful wife", as Pushkin might say.^[1] His works have been described as Marxist and reviewers have generously distributed backhanded compliments with the odd disparagement. Ashworth warns us that "Hobsbawm is to the Marxist interpretation of history [what] Macaulay is to the Whig. His book should be read for new insights and constant stimulus. But, no more than Macaulay's, should his version be swallowed whole."^[2] John F. C. Harrison reassures us that *The Age of Capital* was Marxist in the tradition of Marx himself rather than of Marxists, and that he had worn his Marxism "very lightly indeed."^[3] Stephen Salsbury complained that "Hobsbawm is a confirmed Marxist and this strongly colours his book. While many of his most significant judgements remain free of Marxist bias, the author spends a disproportionate amount of time discussing Marx's view on each particular historical event or trend...Despite this bias, the professional historian will enjoy reading Hobsbawm's work and it will serve as an excellent introduction for the literate reader who knows little or nothing about mid-century world history."^[4] Another applauded his immense erudition while dismissing his Marxism as "loose" and "old-fashioned."^[5] Yet another declared "Although at no point does he ever spell out the theoretical assumptions of his interpretation, the whole architecture of his edifice is firmly rooted in classical Marxism handled with grace and elegance and with a lively attention to the curious but telling detail."^[6] William Langer first paid him the supreme compliment of comparing him to Jacob Burckhardt, but went on to note that "Hobsbawm is a confirmed Marxist, so it is easy for him to elaborate on economic developments and their consequences. I hasten to add, however, that he is not painfully Marxist."^[7] Some were merely perverse: "It is not difficult to see why the attempt to make sense of history on this scale appears to be less difficult for Professor Hobsbawm than many other historians, for the strong hypothesis of Marxist orthodoxy that sustains his exposition throughout, while Marx himself emerges as the solitary hero in an unheroic era." He concluded that this was an example of "how not to write history."^[8] Hobsbawm has had to suffer the embarrassing compliment of having his *The Age of Capital* greeted as a handbook for social and political activism rather than one of scholarship, "For workers, teachers, students, union organizers, female liberationists, and youth group militants, Hobsbawm's book under review, coinciding as it does with an admirable new translation of 'Capital', is an event to be celebrated." Perhaps predictably, it was from the *Economic and Political Weekly*.^[9] In short, he may have been a Marxist, but he knew how to read and write. But nobody has quite explained in what sense his historical work may be considered Marxist. [...]

What does distinguish him as a Marxist historian is neither method nor interpretation but his central inspiration derived from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. (He himself has not said so). It consists of at least the following: 1) modernity is ceaselessly creatively destructive; 2) modern power structures face their gravest challenges from the forces they themselves have released; and 3) the modern society of the nineteenth century was a class society, structured by the polar opposition of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, with the aristocracy, peasantry, and lower middle class attracted to these poles or circling them. At the end of the three volumes of the *Age* series, he summed up his central insight thus: "Their [historians'] central preoccupation, and the one which runs through the present book, must be to understand and to show how the era of peace, of confident bourgeois civilization, growing wealth and western empires inevitably carried within itself the embryo of the era of war, revolution and crisis which put an end to it."^[10] Not merely Marx but Hegel also would have been pleased.

The restlessness of the capitalist pulsates through his work. His history is a record of extraordinary feats of bourgeois achievement combined with spectacular catastrophes of their own making. It is not a history of progress, evolution, problem-solving, and growing stability. His modern world is in the grip of endemic crisis even as it notches up progress that would have been almost impossible to imagine from one generation to the next. Nothing is ever stable or final, capitalism lurches from crisis to crisis dragging the socialist world in its wake. There are losers and there are winners, but his focus is less on their undoubted privations and triumphs and more on the fact of continual change and crisis and the dizzying rapidity of it. Until the middle of the twentieth century these were more likely due to the creativity and contradictions inherent to capitalism; thereafter it shifts to being the dangers of unbridled developmentalism; and humanity faces a greater threat from the latter than from the former.

The story of Victorian prosperity is nothing if not one of crises, of a system always threatening to go out of control and nearly doing so in the crash of 1873. The boom of 1850-1857 was followed by a slump in 1857-1858, a revival and another slump in 1867-1868 culminating in the great crash of 1873. The boom was good for manufacturers but not for workers whose wages could not keep up with the inflation. It induced one more stage in the unification of the world, but divided it yet again into advanced and backward. The world was united into one market, but crises became instantly worldwide instead of being confined regionally and to specific markets. Life became more standardized across the board in the developed world, but it was polarized into standardized nationalisms that tore at each other with a bitterness that could not have been contemplated earlier. The mass hatreds and competitions generated by nations and nationalism could not be contained within the liberal bourgeois world created by the Dual Revolution. Absolutist regimes knew that bourgeoisie and capitalism brought progress and prosperity; but they tried in vain to have them without the political consequences. Contemporaries could not comprehend the paradox of the liberalizing and modernizing Emperor Alexander II being assassinated by the beneficiaries of his reforms.

Democracy is the most famous instance of loss of control. It is celebrated as progress, empowerment, and citizenship; but it energized the masses who tended not to be democratic, liberal, socialist or rational. Bourgeoisies and aristocracies could threaten each other with mass mobilizations and extensions of the franchise; neither wanted it but both resorted to it to outflank their opponents; in the event both faced the dreadful prospect from the eighteen sixties of mass political parties of the proletariat, peasantry, and lower middle class fired in different ways by nationalism, class anger, and resentment and frustration. Bismarck and Disraeli were successful performers on the conservative side displaying the manner in which the masses could be used against the liberals. Napoleon III, the political fixer to whom an unkind fate had granted merely the name without its genius, superseded both conservative and liberal through a plebiscitary dictatorship that revealed the ominous outlines of mass democracy. The mass mobilizations of democracy entailed new loyalties; and regimes desperately galloped ahead of the breaking ice by resorting to irrationalism, xenophobia, colonial conquests, new traditions like national anthems, national days, monuments, and vast official spectacles like coronations, whether in European capitals or even the colonial one of New Delhi in 1911. The coming of progress to agriculture brought with it ever more dangers. As peasants were released from slavery, serfdom, and

independent household production, they threatened insurrections that could join with revolutions, as eventually so many of them did in different parts of the world.

Did the bourgeois enjoy his or her triumph, unlimited prosperity, and freedom to be creative? Not quite. They took to new forms of leisure, be it sport, or trekking in the mountains, or trips to seaside resorts and spas. But why did Anglo-Saxon male urban professionals begin climbing Alpine slopes with such passion? The answer is vintage Hobsbawm: “perhaps the close company of tough and handsome native guides had something to do with it.”^[11] The repression and hypocrisy of bourgeois sexuality has been much written about. But to Hobsbawm they seemed more tormented by their state of liberation than hypocritical about it. Roman Catholic men could philander freely as long as they maintained their families properly; but Protestant men sought to obey the moral law and agonized over their desire to violate it and their actual violations of it. Sex was concealed, not flaunted, with liberation; but secondary sexual characteristics were brandished in the form of luxurious facial hair growth among men and flouncy dresses that exaggerated the buttocks in women. The individual male had been liberated through citizenship, but the family that nurtured him and to which he retreated from the social Darwinism of the outside world was held in thrall. He was a dictator to his wife, children and servants as much as Krupp was to his factories and Wagner to his enthralled audiences. A world of equals had been created, yet hierarchies remained or were engendered. Why? It was agreed that it not due to superior intellect, education, or morality, for that would not account for the wealth of the plutocrat, the subordination of women, or the misery of the proletariat. The answer was found in what was to become the scourge of the twentieth century: genetic selection and scientific racism. This baleful ideology was conceived in the womb of bourgeois liberalism to account for inequalities in a world of equals.

The world of art and literature is not presented as the mere unfolding of creative genius. Like everything else, it was punctuated by crises and highs and lows. His *The Age of Empire* launched into the subject with crisis, and as always, specifically of the bourgeoisie: “Perhaps nothing illustrates the identity crisis through which bourgeois society passed in this period better than the history of the arts from the 1870s to 1914. It was the era when both the creative arts and the public for them lost their bearings.” He saw the crux of the problem in the divergence of the modern from the contemporary. Until about 1900, the modern in art and politics went hand in hand; thereafter they diverged. Thus the Arts and Crafts Movement, which found its incarnations across Europe up to Russia, turned to the pre-modern as a source of inspiration but not for the purpose of restoration. Hence William Morris could be socialist, and art and politics could go together. But anxieties mounted as the bourgeoisie adopted the movement; at the same time mass socialism was becoming routine politics; and art and politics deviated. But the avant-garde which flourished after 1900 failed to remake the world in its image when revolution swept the world in the second decade. The most important movement in the arts since the Renaissance was overtaken by the mass entertainment industry of high technology which remade the world in its own image instead. All that was considered high art was swept up in the mass culture of mediocre, profit driven, and deliberately philistine taste. As he noted, the arts were indeed revolutionized, but not by those who wanted to do so.

Even a subject like trade union history is presented in the manner of stock market fluctuations. There are “jumps”, jerky movements upward in membership and activity, and sudden collapses.^[12] Compare these with the accounts of trade unions by Sidney and Beatrice Webb^[13] or Henry Pelling.^[14] Their histories of impeccable scholarship reveal a steady growth with periodic retreats, expansion into new regions and sectors, attachment to political ideologies like socialism or political parties like Labour, but staid and regular withal. They do not impart that sense of crisis and extremes as Hobsbawm does.

Beyond crisis, he sought out the polarities which drove modernity headlong on its crisis-strewn course. These polarities are the obvious ones which inform all his histories. He plunged into the controversy over whether the standard of living of the masses had improved or deteriorated in the course of the industrial revolution in Britain from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. Expectedly, he denied that it was improving although he was cautious as to how far the charge of deterioration could be made.^[15] He composed a number of important articles on the

thesis of the aristocracy of labour in Britain which revealed virtual class division within the working class itself; but it was motivated, paradoxically it might seem, by the compulsion to explain why the politics of Britain were not polarized to the point of revolution as in various parts of Europe.^[16] But then, that was a famous Leninist thesis. Within the labour movement and especially the Labour Party, he discerned the extremes between a highly militant rank and file, shop stewards, and others, against a reformist leadership. This would have pleased a Subaltern historian of the late twentieth century. In Europe it took the form of the appearance of communist parties opposed to the social democratic ones; but in Britain it led to the constant leftward pressure on the Labour Party. Again in Europe, the nation challenged the multinational empire, in the world, the colony the metropolis, the advanced the backward, and so on until it culminates in the horrors of the twentieth century, of the most extreme ideological contestation, total wars, and the end of modernity. In every area of inquiry, he sought out first instability and change, and with them, apparently, the polar oppositions that generated the crises, structured them, and transformed them. The process was dialectical, as he said of the British labour movement: “But if the socialist consciousness of the British working class is potential rather than real; if indeed it is at every moment transformed into its opposite in the context of a reformist movement and imperialist institutions, we should nevertheless be wrong to underrate the bitter process of political education which has taught it utterly to reject capitalism, even though it may not quite know what such a rejection implies.”^[17] The vision was Hegelian.

But was the centrality of crisis in his accounts the product of a Marxist orientation? Not necessarily. It was the stock-in-trade of the *Annales* historians who were not Marxists but who were much admired by Hobsbawm. They engaged primarily in the history of the Middle Ages, not of industrial capitalism; they delineated the structures and described the crises which occurred within them with almost law-like regularity. They owed much to the work of Wilhelm Abel, who viewed history through the prism of crisis after the experience of the Great Depression from 1929.^[18] These were Hobsbawm’s formative years also, the years of slump, unemployment, revolution and counter-revolution, Marxism, Fascism, the Popular Front, and the Spanish Civil War, before World War II engulfed all else. Marxist theory was merely one of the sources for regarding history as driven by crisis.

But unlike the *Manifesto*, he did not express any belief in a coming proletarian revolution: in this respect he remained firmly social democratic and left liberal. As he admitted early in the twenty-first century,

“With hindsight, one might say that socialism was either a utopian dream or little more than an agitational slogan, for until the Russian Revolution not even the Socialist Left had really thought about what to do in the event of victory. There was not even a serious debate on how an economy should be socialized. It was generally accepted that it could be managed by the state on the model provided by capitalism of the time, in which the larger businesses were already in the hands of public organizations. Socialist theory was a critique of capitalist reality rather than a real project for the construction of a different society. And make no mistake about it, this also applied to Marxists.”^[19]

In his highly polemical dismissal of the Fabians, he has entertained us with irony that is more Gallic than English thus:

“The failure of the Fabians in the big things is to some extent mitigated by their indefatigable activity, their gift as drafters of pamphlets and administrative projects, their wide circle of political acquaintances, and above all, by the self-abnegation with which they were prepared to help any and every person or group which they believed capable of advancing their cause.”^[20]

He has done something more. He excoriated the Fabians, Bernard Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb, for ending “their careers as enthusiastic supporters of Soviet Communism.” But their cardinal sin consisted in something more: “They had always believed in a thoroughgoing reconstruction of society. They had never been committed to the British political apparatus of their youth.”^[21] In his final years he hinted that the Russian Revolution fractured the unity of the left

and the liberals which had together fought for the civil liberties, democracy, and welfare.^[22] His ultimate faith remained the optimistic philosophies of the rational Enlightenment, which gave him hope even when the socialist states had failed in such squalid fashion. Speaking of the nature of political commitment, he reflected:

“Is it directed toward the great causes of the Enlightenment: reason, progress, and the betterment of the conditions of all human beings? Or toward other causes that can be just as strong emotionally, such as nationalism or racism? They are not the same thing. And I think that communism was part of that tradition of modern civilization that goes back to the Enlightenment, to the American and French revolutions. I cannot regret it.”^[23]

For this reason he applauded rather than deplored the fact that communists had fought in the Spanish Civil War for democracy rather than revolution, that they gave up insurrection for a more gradualist politics, and even for parliamentarism.^[24] In the last resort, his Marxism was an aid to the critique of reality, of improving the present, not an instrument of creating an alternative society. But, as a critique, he pursued the insights imbibed from the *Manifesto*.

The contribution that Hobsbawm and his Marxist colleagues made to invigorate historical research has been justly celebrated; but he (and they) could flourish and be imagined only in an ideologically plural environment. Marxism never did have a ghost of a chance of gaining political power in Britain, and the communist party has always been a marginal curiosity to British politics. But Marxist intellectuals, and especially historians among them, have been of the mainstream, not of the margin. They have been immensely influential in British culture however impotent in British politics. With variations, this applies to the advanced capitalist countries of Europe, especially Germany, Italy, or France. He claimed that the strength of Marxism lay in its capacity for critique; if so, the more advanced and entrenched capitalism in Europe, the more fertile the field of academic Marxist action. After all, Marx had subtitled his masterwork *A Critique of Political Economy*. Once again, he owes (and so do we owe) a high debt of gratitude to capitalism and bourgeois society for having spawned gravediggers like himself. It was Britain that had offered Marx and Engels that opportunity, and, as the English would love to say, this is but one of the peculiarities of the English.^[25] But as Marxism invested the citadels of political power in Russia and East Europe, it became sterile and marginal to the cultural and academic life of the Soviet Union and its dependencies. It was the antithesis of the British and western world. Marxism could prosper only as critique. An enthroned Marxism was a contradiction of terms like the bourgeois monarchy; yet both bloomed at opposite ends of the European continent, each a presumed caricature of the authentic species, but each surviving as such long enough to become authentic. The Soviet Union bestowed on Hobsbawm the ultimate honour of never having his works translated although, as he pointed out, he was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and an editor of the English edition of the Collected Works of Marx and Engels.^[26] But, as Russians would love to quote Fedor Tiutchev:

Who would grasp Russia with the mind?
For her no yardstick was created:
Her soul is of a special kind,
By faith alone appreciated.

However, Hobsbawm unerringly placed his finger on the button: ““Much of my life, probably most of my conscious life, was devoted to a hope which has been plainly disappointed, and to a cause which has plainly failed: communism initiated by the October Revolution. But there is nothing which can sharpen the historian’s mind like defeat.”^[27] Dr Samuel Johnson would have concurred as he murmured at a public execution, “Hanging wonderfully concentrates the mind.”

The End of Rationality

[...] All his histories evoked that freedom and creativity at their most inspiring. This is what brings the conquering bourgeois of high finance, industrial entrepreneurship, and technological innovation on to the same page as the visionary artist, musician, and novelist, the inquisitive

scientist and academic, the utopian revolutionary and the social bandit, the political shoemaker, tramping artisan, and the metropolitan mob before bureaucratic rationality flattened it. These are the people that crowd his histories like characters in an epic Russian novel, not the politicians, soldiers, and bureaucrats, be it of state or trade union, unless like a Napoleon or Bismarck they display the creative spark and daring imagination of the artist and scientist. These are not the histories of so much else that the bourgeois made, the great institutions of state, parliaments and bureaucracies, judiciaries and armed forces, academic centres and trade unions. These are stories of how each of them, individuals and institutions, drove themselves to extremes, to the limits, and over the edge. Creativity threatens to consume itself, as Marx warned of the uncontrollably creative capitalism, and the history of the modern world furnishes more than enough evidence of it in Hobsbawm's pages.

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- [1] "Kak ten' il' vernaia zhena", in Aleksandr' Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*, chapter 1, stanza 54.
- [2] W. Ashworth, Review of *The Age of Capital*, in *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Aug., 1976), pp. 528-529.
- [3] John F. C. Harrison, Review of *The Age of Capital*, in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Summer, 1977), pp. 423-425
- [4] Stephen Salsbury, Review of *The Age of Capital*, in *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 18, No. 2, April 1977, pp. 256-257.
- [5] B. W. E. Alford, Review of *The Age of Empire*, in *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 42, No. 2 (May, 1989), pp. 302-303.
- [6] Alain Silvera, Review of *The Age of Empire*, in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Spring, 1989), pp. 460-461.
- [7] William L. Langer, Review of *The Age of Capital*, in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Oct., 1976), p. 817.
- [8] Roy A. Church, Review of *The Age of Capital*, in *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec., 1977), pp. 1347-1348
- [9] Anon, "Creation of World Capitalist Economy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 12, No. 22 (May 28, 1977), pp. 875-877, here p. 875.
- [10] *The Age of Empire*, p. 327.
- [11] *The Age of Capital*, p. 243.
- [12] "Economic Fluctuations and Some Social Movements since 1800" (1952), in E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men. Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1964), Ch 8, pp. 126-157.
- [13] Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism, 1660-1920*, 2nd edn (London, 1920).
- [14] Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).
- [15] "The British Standard of Living 1790-1850", "History and the Dark Satanic Mills" (1958), "The Standard of Living Debate: a Postscript", in *Labouring Men*, ch. 5, pp. 64-104, ch. 6, pp. 105-119, ch. 7, pp. 120-125, respectively
- [16] "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-century Britain (1954)", "Trends in the British Labour Movement since 1850 (1949/1963)", in *Labouring Men*, ch. 15, pp. 272-315, ch. 16, pp. 316-342, respectively; "Debating the Labour Aristocracy" (1979), "Labour Aristocracy Reconsidered", "Artisans and Labour Aristocrats" in E. J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1984), ch. 12, pp. 214-226, ch. 13, pp. 227-251, ch. 14, pp. 252-272, respectively.
- [17] In *Labouring Men*, chapter 16, "Trends in the British Labour Movement since 1850" (1949/1963), pp. 316-342, here p. 330.
- [18] Wilhelm Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur. Eine Geschichte der Land- und Ernährungswirtschaft Mitteleuropas seit dem hohen Mittelalter*, 3rd revised and enlarged edn, (Hamburg: Verlag Paul Parey, 1978; orig. edn 1935); Eric Hobsbawm, "Interview. World Distempers," *New Left Review*, 61, Jan-Feb 2010, pp. 133-150, here p. 148.
- [19] Eric Hobsbawm, *The New Century. In Conversation with Antonio Polito*. Translated from the Italian by Allan Cameron (London: Abacus, 2003, original edn 2000), p. 100.
- [20] *Labouring Men*, p. 252.

[21] *Labouring Men*, p. 254.

[22] *The New Century*, p. 99.

[23] *The New Century*, p. 162.

[24] *Age of Extremes*, pp. 162-163.

[25] E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," *The Socialist Register*, 1965, pp. 311-362.

[26] "Preface" (1997), Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), p. ix.

[27] "The Present as History," (1993) *On History*, p. 239.

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Social History and Migration

Interview with *Marlou Schrover*



The editors of the ISHA Newsletter wish to generate dialogue among social historians regarding the place of the discipline in historical research and stimulate discussion of social history methodology. The following interview with Marlou Schrover, Professor of the History of Migration and Social Differences, Leiden University, the Netherlands, addresses relevant issues, such as how to identify processes that have relevance for past, present and future contexts of world history. It also sketches some of the broad underlying elements of social history thought that link this work to, and distinguish it from other branches of history.

Tell us about your present position and how you got there!

I was appointed Professor of the History of Migration and Social Differences (with particular reference to gender, class and ethnicity) at Leiden University, Netherlands in 2010. Previously, I was Associate Professor at Leiden University (2003-2010), researcher at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam (2001-2003), and at the Institute for Dutch History (Huygens Institute) in The Hague (also 2001-2003), a post-doctoral researcher at Utrecht University (1991-2001) and PhD student at Utrecht University (1987-1991). I studied journalism in Utrecht (graduated in 1979) and social and economic history also in Utrecht (graduated in 1986).

Leiden has a very long tradition of research on migration and related issues. Over 60 people do migration research in various departments at Leiden University. They work together across several disciplines. Leiden also attracts students from abroad who want to do (historical) migration research.

What were the other major stages of your career?

In 1991, I was awarded a PhD in history from Utrecht University, for my research on labour relations in the food industries (published as *Het vette, het zoete en het wederzijdse profijt, arbeidsverhoudingen in de margarine-industrie en in de cacao- en chocolade-industrie in Nederland 1870-1960* (Hilversum, Uitgeverij Verloren 1991).

After 1991 I did research on women's work and technological change (part of the results were published in Gertjan de Groot and Marlou Schrover (eds.), *Women Workers and Technological Change in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, Taylor & Francis/Routledge 1995). It was reviewed favourably, and came out in hardback and paperback. It is currently in its 11th edition. After that I did research on immigrant entrepreneurship, and on internal migration and regional differences in fertility and marital behaviour.

In the last 20 years I published mainly about migration (more than 120 publications, including seven books (co-authored), five edited volumes, and one inaugural speech). My book on nineteenth century German migration (entitled *Een kolonie van Duitsers. Groepsvorming onder Duitse immigranten in Utrecht in de negentiende eeuw* Amsterdam, Aksant 2002) came out in paperback and as e-book. It is currently at its 5th edition. I published a textbook in Dutch on 450 years of Dutch immigration and emigration (*Komen en gaan. Immigratie en emigratie in Nederland vanaf 1550* (Amsterdam, Bert Bakker 2008, with Herman Obdeijn) that was well received by the press. It is available in print and in open access (and can be downloaded from several websites, including my own). I published an edited volume about gender and illegal migration (*Illegal migration and gender in a global and historical perspective* (Amsterdam, AUP 2008, with Joanne van der Leun, Leo Lucassen and Chris Quispel). I edited a volume entitled *Gender, Migration and the Public Sphere 1850-2005* (New York, Routledge 2010, with Eileen Yeo). It came out in hardback, paperback and as e-book, and is currently in its 9th edition.

I am associate editor of the five-volume *Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, which will be published on-line and in print by Wiley in February 2013. It provides a complete exploration of the prominent themes, events, and theoretical underpinnings of the movements of human populations from prehistory to the present day. It features over 600 entries from a multi-disciplinary group of scholars.

I am co-chair of the Migration and Ethnicity Network of the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) conference (since 2000), and founder and moderator of H-migration. H-migration is the international discussion list of migration historians. It has 2000 subscribers. It is one of the busiest discussion lists of H-Net (the American support organisation). I am editor of the IMISCOE book series, and I am founder and editor of a series on historical migration published by Uitgeverij Verloren. I am founder and editor in chief of the new *Journal of Global Migration History* (to be published by Brill from 2014 onwards). I am a member of the advisory board of *Immigrants and Minorities*.

In your view, why is research on migration history needed?

Occasionally, politicians or journalists state that migration is a recent phenomenon. When politicians and journalist acknowledge that migration is not new – often phrased as ‘people have been migrating for centuries’ – it is emphasized that the problems related to migration *are* new, and the migration of today cannot be compared to that in the past. Of course people have been migrating for centuries. For many people it is or was as much part of their life cycle as birth, marriage, and death. And of course the migration of today is different of that in the past, as is true for almost everything. The world today is not the same as it was 50 years ago, let alone a century ago. It is not only ignorance, which makes politicians or journalists say that either migration is new or that the problems are new. Emphasizing newness is a strategic choice for the advocates of policy change. Policymakers and others however, seldom look back at the effect of policies. Migration historians play a crucial role by pointing out continuity and change over time and by analysing when, how, and why changes occur and which factors influence the nature of change.

Why do you consider comparative research on migration history important?

Of course studying one group of migrants only, or one country of settlement or origin only, or men only (and not both men and women) does add to our knowledge about migration. However, a comparative approach generates obvious gains. Groups of countries (for instance all countries which recruited guest workers in the 1960s, or all former colonial countries, or all former colonies) as a rule have shared migration histories and shared policies, but studies that include groups of countries simultaneously are still rather rare. Observations, which are labelled as typical for one group, frequently turn out to be as characteristic for another group, when groups are studied from a comparative perspective. Alleged problems, which are commonly explained from an ethnic perspective, suddenly become very different when studied from a class perspective. It is difficult to always take the comparative view, but the results are well worth the effort.

Gathering information through research - what are your principal sources?

I rely on a range of resources. Newspapers are a foremost source of information, particularly since the amount and size of digitalized newspaper archives has increased tremendously, facilitating my research. Furthermore, I work on oral history. I would like to do more oral history research, but it is quite labour intensive. Analysis of newspaper articles and reports, and oral history research are two great sources for teaching purposes—most students like working with these sources and they get interesting results quite easily. I also utilize government archives (verbatim transcript of parliamentary debates, government reports, archives of the Ministries). Additionally, I draw on archives from organizations.

What impact does your research have on understanding universal patterns in social history?

I hope that my work will help shift the main area of concern occasionally. Gender was, for instance, seen as something that was studied for the private sphere, rather than for the public sphere. It was also something that was studied on behalf of women, but not men. Femininity was addressed and masculinity to a smaller degree. This state of affairs has changed in recent decades. In historical research one observes that some approaches or topics are fashionable for a while and then they disappear. I believe that this is a good thing. Our field of study remains dynamic because of this tendency.

If patterns are beginning to be identified, do we need to understand them more through further research i.e. evidence-based conclusions rather than see them in isolation?

Certainly. Especially with larger projects, the involvement of several PhD students makes it possible to do research from a comparative perspective.

Is there controversy over patterns that you may have identified?

It is difficult to say if there is a controversy. What you do see is that in the field of gender and migration a reasonable amount of research is policy driven or policy-related. I think it is a plus if our research findings can be used for policy-making since that is what we also want, to some extent. However, politicians and journalists frequently have short-term goals. They are not interested in results that favour policies that will only have an effect over a longer time period. As researchers we should not be lured into the trap of supporting their priorities. The same is true for journalism targets. Journalists want to sell news information. They favour stories that are personalized and embellish them, particularly stories concerning women and migration. This results in endless stories about women, who are often referred to as girls even when they are well beyond the adolescent age, and are deemed at risk because they choose to migrate. Thus women are singled out and stories replete with heart-breaking details are offered to the public. These stories are partly fiction and are also highly repetitive. The stories are also exploited by organizations that want to save and protect migrant women. Rather than replicate this discourse we as researchers must look at the functionality of the discourse: who is using which arguments, when and why, and how and why does this change over time.

Very few social issues can be understood in isolation. Do you agree?

No one issue can be understood in isolation. Old-school migration history may have been quite isolationist in the past. Current migration research however clearly is not. Changes in migration patterns, in migration policies, and in integration policies are always studied in the broader context.

Are there any other insights you wish to share with us?

The role of multilateral organizations in this area is a somewhat neglected subject, despite the wealth of data available in the archives of most international organizations. International organizations also often have branches in many countries, apart from the countries where they are based. In all these countries there are archives that can be utilized for further research on the work

of these organizations. This will entail travel by researchers (which, of course, is fun); or may necessitate collaboration by a group of researchers on a particular project to make use of archives in different countries. Collaborative efforts are less demanding, particularly in the area of case studies where different language skills and also information regarding rules and regulations regarding research in countries is concerned. There are archives in African and Asian countries that could be mined much more profitably than they have been in the past.

Furthermore, events in the last sixty years have been somewhat neglected by historians, particularly on the subject of migration. Social scientists, who tend to take a shorter-term perspective, have largely focused on this area.

Interviewed by *Amarjit Kaur*

Selected publications of Marlou Schrover

Books

1. Marlou Schrover and Eileen Janes Yeo (eds.), *Gender, Migration and the Public Sphere 1850-2005* (New York, Routledge 2010).
2. Marlou Schrover, Joanne van der Leun, Leo Lucassen and Chris Quispel (eds.), *Illegal migration and gender in a global and historical perspective* (Amsterdam, AUP 2008).
3. Isabel Hoving, Hester Dibbits and Marlou Schrover (eds.), *Veranderingen van het alledaagse. Cultuur en migratie in Nederland* (Den Haag, SDU 2005).
4. Herman Obdeijn and Marlou Schrover, *Komen en gaan. Immigratie en emigratie in Nederland vanaf 1550* (Amsterdam, Bert Bakker 2008).
5. Marlou Schrover, Judith ten Broeke and Ronald Rommes, *Migranten bij de Demkastaalfabrieken in Utrecht (1915-1983)* (Utrecht, HUA/Matrijs 2008).
6. Marlou Schrover, *Een kolonie van Duitsers. Groepsvorming onder Duitse immigranten in Utrecht in de negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, Aksant 2002).
7. Gertjan de Groot and Marlou Schrover (ed.), *Women Workers and Technological Change in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, Taylor & Francis/Routledge 1995).

Articles (since 2002)

1. Marlou Schrover, 'Problematisation and particularisation: the Bertha Hertogh story', *Tijdschrift door Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis / The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 8:2 (2011) 3-31.
2. Marlou Schrover and Marijke van Faassen, 'Invisibility and selectivity. Introduction to the special issue on Dutch overseas emigration in the nineteenth and twentieth century', *Tijdschrift door Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis / The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 7: 2 (2010) 3-31.
3. Marlou Schrover, 'Pillarization, Multiculturalism and Cultural Freezing, Dutch Migration History and the Enforcement of Essentialist Ideas', *BMGN / LCHR* 125:2/3 (2010) 329-354.
4. Marlou Schrover, 'Family in Dutch Migration Policy 1945-2005', *The History of the Family* 14 (2009) 191-202.
5. Marlou Schrover, Joanne van der Leun and Chris Quispel, 'Niches, Labour Market Segregation, Ethnicity and Gender', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33:4 (2007) 529-540.

6. Marlou Schrover and Jelle van Lottum, 'Spatial concentrations and communities of immigrants in the Netherlands 1800-1900', *Continuity and Change* 22:2 (2007) 215-252.
7. Marlou Schrover, "Whenever a dozen Germans meet ..." German organisations in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32:5 (2006) 847-864.
8. Marlou Schrover and Floris Vermeulen, 'Immigrant organisations. Introduction', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31:3 (2005) 823-832.
9. Clé Lesger, Leo Lucassen and Marlou Schrover, 'Is there life outside the migrant network? German immigrants in 19th century Netherlands and the need for a more balanced migration typology', *Annales de Démographie Historique* (2003) 29-45.
10. Marlou Schrover, 'Living together, working together: concentrations amongst German immigrants in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century', *Continuity and Change* 18:2 (2003) 263-285.

Also see, <http://www.hum.leiden.edu/history/staff/schrover.html>

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Social History in Hungary: the István Hajnal Circle

Zoltán Cora, University of Szeged



Did the system change in 1989-1990 also transform Hungarian historical research, and if so, how do these changes relate to international trends in history? Before answering these questions, one has to briefly consider the context of what has changed in Hungarian historiography. According to Gábor Gyáni, one of the most prominent representatives of Hungarian social history today, the academic turn after the system change in Hungary can be attributed to a combination of factors: (1) the previous scholarly turn within the discipline of history – specifically, the structuralist perspectives applied in economic history writing, and the fact that, unlike in several other socialist countries, the more liberal political milieu of the Kádár regime enabled the early emergence of 'restricted' writings on social history; (2) ideological and political factors involved in the change of the political system, primarily the opposition to Marxist historiography, and the disappearance of political control over the production of narratives about the past; (3) the generational shift among historians; (4) the growing need to 'rediscover' and redefine national identity; and (5) economic and cultural globalization.^[1]

The post-1989 preoccupation with national identity gave way to the revival of a 19th century tendency of historicism and positivism. This tendency explicitly or implicitly pervades almost all the new mainstream historiography. It is a kind of historical methodology and narrative which takes a quasi-positivist approach to history and it focuses mainly on political history within a framework of state history-writing. It creates a historical narrative which tends to reproduce and maintain a new canonical national historical image of the past. The most striking evidence for the dominance of its discourse is its prevalence in education and the media.^[2] That dominance came about because of the disappearance of a strict Marxist ideological control, and because of the return to earlier traditions of Hungarian historiography which focused national history on state history. The intellectual tendency was reinforced by, and coincided with, the emergence and stabilization of a post-1989 mass democracy which required new markers of identity and loyalty for its citizens. In addition, the social and cultural turn, which succeeded the structuralist historiography so dominant in the West during the 1970s and 1980s, only marginally affected

Hungary's academia. It facilitated the survival of earlier forms of the tradition of synthesizing state histories conceived as national histories.[3]

The need for historical syntheses also facilitated the dominance of Hungarian mainstream historiography. National identity was conceived as the result of the linear narrative of the political history of the nation. In the new Hungarian democracy, which replaced the communist dictatorship, the attempt to reshape and refine national identity also set new requirements for the education about history. Apart from rewriting the historical canon, the obvious changes in the mentality, bias and content of education necessitated the compilation of new history textbooks used in schools. Meeting that demand was influenced by the business policy of numerous publishers, and it subsequently catalysed further mainstream publications. At the same time, Marxist narratives were swiftly discredited.

The revival of national self-identification as well as the subsequent necessity of rewriting history after the system change – in which historians assumed a considerable responsibility for shaping and maintaining collective identities – also had beneficial results. The most important repercussion was that earlier topics were “rediscovered” or revisited, especially in 20th century Hungarian history (the Treaty of Trianon and the partition of historical Hungary, the Holocaust, and recently the Hungarian Revolution of 1956). For instance, recent studies of 1956 tend to focus on the social and cultural dimensions or on the collective memory of events, rather than on the diplomatic and political aspects. Besides mainstream (political) history, this interest towards the cultural and social was and is carried forward by a new generation of social historians.

However, the attempt to gain a foothold for social history occurred under the tutelage of some older historians, who also set a path for early institutionalisation as well. A key factor in the post-communist institutionalisation of social history was the founding of the István Hajnal Circle and the Social History Association, already in 1989.[4] The Circle was named after István Hajnal, one of the most prominent social historians in interwar Hungary. Hajnal specialized in the history of writing and technology from the Middle Ages through the early modern to the modern age. He was among the first to attempt an interdisciplinary approach, by applying the methodologies of both sociology and history simultaneously.[5] The Circle's name is quite telling, since it expresses continuity with the pre-communist period; it paid homage to one of the founding fathers of Hungarian social history, who represented the theoretical and methodological diversity the Circle stands for.

Just as István Hajnal played a significant role in early Hungarian social history, so the Hajnal Circle can be regarded as the most important contemporary forum of Hungarian social historians. The Circle was the first and hence the oldest institution of social history in Hungary. It was founded in 1989 before the system change by two historians specializing in social and economic history: Vera Bácskai and Gyula Benda. From the outset, they wanted this forum to become the main organization to promote the advancement of social history in Hungary. Vera Bácskai was an internationally known urban-social historian at that time, while Gyula Benda successfully applied contemporary theories and methods of social and mentality history in the *Annales* tradition.[6] 1989 was a turning point in other respects as well. Both Bácskai and Benda gained chairs at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest, and social history was accepted as a university subject.

Bácskai and Benda can be regarded as representative figures. Ever since its foundation, the leading members of the Hajnal Circle have been prominent scholars of Hungarian social and economic history. All members of the Circle – including historians, sociologists, librarians, archivists, and students – are dedicated to openness to theoretical and methodological innovations, and endeavour to embed their scholarly work in the international trends of social history.[7]

The Hajnal Circle is also a prime organiser of research. It convenes annual conferences, the first of which was held already before the actual foundation of the Circle in 1986. These conferences have been attended by an ever-widening circle of historians, as lecturers or as mere participants. What is more, the conferences have recently begun to offer possibilities for doctoral students from various postgraduate history programs in Hungarian universities to share their research plans and agenda

with the wider scholarly public. The trend that more and more doctoral students appear at the annual conferences is crucial for the successful continuation and development of social history as a discipline in Hungary. In addition, the growing interest and recognition of social history is shown by the growing membership of the Circle. It started with a few members in the early 1990s including the two main founders. The Circle involved more than 70 members in 2000, and its membership at present includes 163 registered scholars.

The thematic range of the annual Hajnal conferences extends to a variety of topics, including, for instance, the history of consumption, the social history of politics or the cultural turn in historiography – prominent themes in social history. A few examples from the last ten years can be cited here: “Gyermekek a történelemben” [*Children in History*] (2001); “A fogyasztás társadalomtörténete” [*The Social History of Consumption*] (2004); “A társadalmi tér” [*Social Space*] (2005); “Kulturális fordulat a történetírásban” [*Cultural Turn in Historiography*] (2006); “Generációk a történelemben” [*Generations in History*] (2007); “A politika társadalomtörténete” [*The Social History of Politics*] (2008); “A kommunikáció története” [*The History of Communication*] (2009); “A város és társadalma” [*The City and Its Society*] (2010); “Felekezeti társadalom, felekezeti műveltség” [*Denominational Society, Denominational Education*] (2011); “Piacok a társadalomban és a történelemben” [*Markets in Society and in History*] (2012).^[8] The proceedings of the conferences are regularly reviewed in Hungarian historical journals (for instance, in *Aetas* or *Korall*)^[9] which further strengthens the dissemination of the discipline.

The Hajnal Circle facilitates publications in social history, and promotes international relations. Originally, the Circle coordinated meetings and provided a forum for historians usually outside the mainstream who were dissatisfied with the prevailing, mainly Marxist historical perspective which united structural history with some kind of political history. This characteristic of its recruitment has remained. It meant an attitude favourable to adopting the most recent results of international historical disciplines, as well as to interdisciplinary approaches and multidisciplinary. Among recent developments in the Circle are the dissemination and popularization of information concerning upcoming thesis defenses, the publication of new monographs about the research field, and organizing workshops on the discussion of works prior to publication.^[10] Yet, although members of the Hajnal Circle have often had more international recognition than mainstream historians, their different social and cultural historical approaches still do not have the same validity and acceptance as the mainstream ones in Hungarian historical scholarship.^[11]

That is not to say that social history is marginalized. On the contrary, the aspects discussed thus far all point to the fact that the Hajnal Circle managed to institutionalize social history in Hungary. That already shows that social history was quite capable of gaining a foothold in Hungarian historical academia. The wide-ranging activities of the Hajnal Circle contributed to the successful integration of social history in Hungarian historical scholarship, thereby increasing its importance and recognition within academia somewhat, and proving that social history is, after all, capable of producing valuable historical works in Hungary.

The new historiography associated with the Hajnal Circle has several distinguishing features, and fits well with 21st century challenges in the humanities. Social historians belonging to the Circle do not pursue ‘any scientifically objective truth’. Instead, their approaches to social history cherish the synchronous legitimacy of numerous, equally valid interpretations of the past. Consistent with their epistemological openness, these Hungarian social historians often try to apply a wide variety of methodological assets, ranging from various kinds of comparative methods, to structural approaches and micro-history or different narratological perspectives. Interdisciplinarity is usually realized through combining history with sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, or literary theory. The global challenges of the 21st century make it necessary for social and mainstream historians alike to go beyond disciplinary boundaries. That creates an environment favourable to groups like the István Hajnal Circle with its pluralist methodologies and 163 active members.

For more details, see the homepage of the István Hajnal Circle: URL: <http://hajnalkor.hu>

- [1] For its wider context, with many examples of this change, see Gábor Gyáni: *Relatív történelem [Relative History]*. Budapest, Typotex, 2007, 285-297, and recently *idem*, "Trends in contemporary Hungarian historical scholarship", *Social History*, Vol. 34. No. 2. (May 2009), 250-260; See also "A Korall körkérdése a társadalomtörténet-írás helyzetéről 1-2." [The General Inquiry of the Journal *Korall* into the status of social historiography], *Korall*, 5-6. sz. (2001), 186-238; *Korall*, 7-8. sz. (2002), 187-207.
- [2] The best example is the most successful synthetic work of 20th century Hungarian history, written by Ignác Romsics: *Magyarország története a 20. században. [History of Hungary in the 20th Century]*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2004.
- [3] Gyáni (2009), 254-255; Gyáni (2007), 287.
- [4] Besides the Hajnal Circle two journals should be mentioned. *Korall* explicitly published thematic issues on social history. *Aetas* has a firm dedication towards methodological and theoretical novelties. The next level of institutionalisation was the foundation of a postgraduate program at the ELTE, Budapest (ELTE Atelier postgradual program in social history). For details see the websites: *Korall*: URL: <http://www.korall.org> Atelier: URL: <http://www.atelier.org.hu> *Aetas*: <http://www.aetas.hu>
- [5] Just to mention a few of his works: *L'enseignement de l'écriture aux universités médiévales*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1959; *Írásbeliség, intellektuális réteg és európai fejlődés. [Literacy, intellectuals and the European development]*. Budapest, Sárkány Nyomda, 1933; "Le Rôle social de l'écriture et l'évolution européenne" *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie Solvay*, Bruxelles, 1934; "Die sozialen Grundlagen der Entwicklung der Technik im Mittelalter und in der Neuzeit", *VIII e Congres International des Sciences Historiques, Zurich, 1938. Actes du congres*. Kraus Reprint Nendeln/Lichtenstein, 1976, 428-430; *Vergleichende Schriftproben zur Entwicklung und Verbreitung der Schrift im 12-13. Jahrhundert*. Budapest – Leipzig – Milano, 1943; "Universities and the Development of Writing in the 12th-13th centuries" *Scriptorium, International Review of Manuscript Studies*. 1952, 177-195.
- [6] 1989 was a turning point in other respects as well. Both Bácskai and Benda gained chairs at the Eötvös University (ELTE), Budapest, and social history was accepted as a university subject.
- [7] See also György Kövér: "Milyenek vagyunk? – A "Hajnal István Kör Társadalomtörténeti Egyesület" – tíz év múltán" [How are we? – The István Hajnal Circle Social History Association – After Ten Years], *Századvég*, 2. évf. 4. szám, (1997), 43-54.
- [8] Altogether 26 conferences have been organised since 1987, and material from 15 conferences has already been published in the book series, *Rendi társadalom – polgári társadalom [Estate Society – Bourgeois Society]*. See: URL: <http://www.hajnalkor.hu/content/rendi-t%C3%A1rsadalom-polg%C3%A1ri-t%C3%A1rsadalom-sorozat> Access date: 21-11-2012.
- [9] See, for example, Melinda Kovács: "A Hajnal István Kör pápai konferenciája 'A fogyasztás társadalomtörténete' címmel" ["The Conference of the István Hajnal Circle at Pápa entitled 'The Social History of Consumption'"], *Aetas*, 20. évf. 1-2. szám (2005), 270-273; "Gyermek a történelemben – Beszámoló a Hajnal István Kör 2001. évi konferenciájáról" ["The Child in History – Review on the Conference of the István Hajnal Circle organised in 2001"], *Korall*, 5-6. szám (2001), 239-241.
- [10] See: URL: http://www.hajnalkor.hu/regebbi_rendezyvenyek Access date: 21-11-2012.
- [11] Despite the publication of an excellent summary by a collaboration of 29 authors (many of whom are members of the Hajnal Circle). See Zsombor Bódy – József Ö. Kovács (eds.): *Bevezetés a társadalomtörténetbe. Hagyományok, irányzatok, módszerek [Introduction to Social History. Traditions, Trends, Methods]* Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2003.

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Report on the Inaugural meeting of the Italian Society for Labour History (SISLAv)



The inaugural meeting of the Italian Society of Labour History (SISLAv) was held on 5 October 2012 at the *Camera del Lavoro* (Buozzi room) in Milan. Luca Baldissara, Debora Migliucci and Michele Nani presided over the meeting, with more than forty founding members in attendance.

Following endorsement of the Society's Aims and Regulations, the members elected an Executive Board and the Board of Auditors. The Executive Board comprises Luca Baldissara, Lorenzo Bertucelli, Andrea Caracausi, Pietro Causarano, Laura Cerasi, Christian G. De Vito, Giulio Mellinato, Debora Migliucci, Stefano Musso, Michele Nani, Paolo Passaniti, Jorge Torre Santos and Gilda Zazzara, while the Board of Auditors consists of Fiorella Imprenti, Paola Lanaro and Maria Grazia Meriggi. A general discussion then followed relating to the Society's broad aims, the promotion of the Society, proposals on forthcoming events, and the proposed research programme.

All members present endorsed the importance of pursuing traditional research fields and also emphasised the need to revitalize labour studies in order to overcome traditional boundaries and specialization vis-à-vis chronological and disciplinary interests. In particular, the meeting stressed the need to expand the chronology of modern studies in the direction of the early modern period and consider an inter-disciplinary approach to add to our perspectives on labour (e.g. through investigations in the juridical history of work and the study of literary and visual representations of work). With these goals in mind, proposals regarding the formation of three working groups on the following themes: the history of Mutualism and the union movement; labour history in the pre-industrial period; and gender studies in labour history, were approved. The proposers of each working group agreed to provide further details about their initiatives in order to facilitate coordination with all Society members. A detailed investigation of the "social time" of work was also proposed and will eventually form the basis of a rotating seminar series to be held in various cities.

A large number of participants argued that the main role of the Society was to facilitate research on labour history. Thus a broad survey of current research activities will be carried out in concert with the establishment of a national-level research index. Special attention will be placed on the current state of labour history archives and the "material" conditions of research in Italy.

On the matter of promoting or advertising the Society, members emphasised the need for a broader and more systematic involvement of academic and related institutions as well as involving individual scholars from all over Italy and initiating a dialogue with analogous scientific societies. The importance of establishing contacts with foreign institutions was also highlighted, together with the active participation of Italian scholars in major international conferences as one method to achieve this goal.

Scientific training and learning will also become important activities of the Society. These activities will include a range of actions, for example, the preparation of teaching templates to be disseminated via a proposed website; the promotion of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in labour history; and the instigation of a SISLAv Summer School.

To conclude, the extensive debate resulted in an important conversation, an interesting exchange of ideas, and achievable plans that will undoubtedly support the desirable revitalization of labour history studies in Italy. The coming months will require a concerted effort by the Executive Board and Society members (around 90 at the moment), to bring to fulfilment an important collaborative project.

Stefano Gallo

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ISHA Newsletter

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