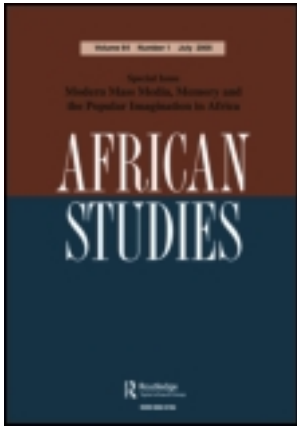


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Labour History: The Old, the New and the Global

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I

EP Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* was a landmark publication for the discipline of social history. David Brody (2005:15) rightly concluded that this work, first published in 1963, provided 'the new labour history' with 'a model it sorely needed': Thompson's great book, by emphasising culture and consciousness, transformed labour history into working-class history, once its message was assimilated. In the English-speaking world, Thompson's book was the most important signpost marking the transition from the so-called old labour history to the new one. A broad consensus exists nowadays about the nature of the transition.¹ The Old Labour History was institutional, focused on the description of organisational developments, political debates, leaders and strikes. It was represented by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the Wisconsin School of John Commons and others, and also by Marxists like Philip Foner. The New Labour History attempted to *contextualise* workers' struggles. As Eric Hobsbawm put it, it accentuated 'the working classes as such ... and the economic and technical conditions that allowed labour movements to be effective, or which prevented them from being effective' (Hobsbawm 1964:4).

The differences between Old and New Labour History are often exaggerated, because in the Old Labour History attention was not infrequently given to 'the working classes as such', visible for example in John and Barbara Hammond's magnificent trilogy *The Village Labourer* (1912), *The Town Labourer* (1917) and *The Skilled Labourer* (1920) which cover approximately the same period as Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Even so it cannot be denied that the New Labour History of the 1970s and 1980s introduced a drastic renewal of the discipline. Not just labour processes and everyday culture, but gender, ethnicity, race and age also finally gained the attention they deserved, along with household structures, sexuality, and informal politics. The New Labour History marked a genuine intellectual revolution.

II

Labour history – I use the term here in the broad sense, and include working-class history – was for a long time studied mainly in the advanced capitalist countries

(plus, with a very restricted political focus, in the so-called socialist countries). Since the 1990s, however, the discipline has developed into a truly *global* project. To be sure, many earlier studies were already published about the history of proletarianisation and workers' movements in the Global South – I could cite as one shining example Rajani Kanta Das, who – in 1923! – published no less than three volumes about South-Asian labour (Das 1923a, 1923b, 1923c). However, the real breakthrough, in terms of conferences, associations, etc. is of very recent vintage. After an important early South African effort in 1977 – the History Workshop group, formed that year, which ran ongoing conferences on labour history (Brown *et al.* 1991; Legassick 2002) – the take-off occurred in 1995 with the founding of the Association of Indian Labour Historians, a dynamic organisation that not only stages conferences every two years, but also engages in many other activities. Soon afterwards *Mundos do Trabalho* was established, a network of labour historians within the Brazilian historical association ANPUH [Associação Nacional de História]. First conferences were held in Karachi (1999), Seoul (2001), and Jogjakarta (2005).

This geographic expansion, and the substantial reflections it gave rise to, enable us to view the Old *and* the New Labour History in a new light. Take, for example, Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. From the new global perspective, there is something peculiar about this book, something that probably no one noticed before, but which now, under different circumstances, commands our attention: Thompson reconstructs the English process of class formation (in the period 1792–1832) as a *self-contained process*. England is, according to his analysis, the logical unit of analysis – while external forces certainly influenced it, these are specifically portrayed as *foreign* influences. Thus, the French Revolution plays an important background role in Thompson's narrative, as a source of inspiration of working-class activities, but developments in the neighbouring countries always remain an 'externality'. Added to this is the fact that Thompson pays no attention in *The Making* to imperial connections. Colonialism, with its increasingly significant influence on the lives of the lower classes through the nineteenth century, is simply disregarded.

Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have pointed out that the London Corresponding Society (LCS, which plays such an important role in *The Making*) declared itself at its foundation in 1792 in favour of equality, whether 'black or white, high or low, rich or poor'. But in August that same year, the LCS declared: 'Fellow citizens, of every rank and every situation in life, rich, poor, high or low, we address you all as our Brethren.' Here, the phrase 'black or white' had disappeared. Linebaugh and Rediker persuasively argue that this sudden change of phrase must be explained with reference to the revolt in Haiti beginning shortly beforehand. 'Race had thus become a tricky and, for many, in England, a threatening subject, one that the leadership of the LCS now preferred to avoid' (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000:274). Such trans-Atlantic linkages cannot be found in Thompson's writing. Thompson's 'insular' approach is all the more surprising, given that

politically he was clearly an internationalist, familiar from his childhood days with stories about British India, where his parents had lived for quite some time (Palmer 1994; see also Thompson 1994 and Nairn 1977:303–4).

III

Despite its path breaking achievement, *The Making of the English Working Class* in this way also shows us that there have been important continuities between Old and New Labour History. The emerging field of labour history in nineteenth century Europe, and a little later in North America, was characterised from the beginning by a combination of methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism; a combination which only very recently has become a topic of debate. Methodological nationalism links society and the state together, and therefore considers the different nation-states as a kind of ‘Leibnizean Monads’ for historical research. Eurocentrism is the mental ordering of the world from the standpoint of the North-Atlantic region: thus, the ‘modern’ period begins in Europe and North-America, and extends step by step to the rest of the world; the temporality of this ‘core region’ determines the periodisation of developments in the rest of the world. Historians reconstructed the history of the working classes and workers’ movements in France, Britain, the United States etc. as separate developments. Insofar as they paid attention to the social classes and movements in Latin America, Africa or Asia, these were interpreted according to North-Atlantic schemes.

That is not to say that labour historians did not look beyond national borders. Of course they did, and already early on, but the approach nevertheless remained monadologic: the ‘civilized’ European world was regarded as consisting of peoples who all developed in more or less the same direction, albeit each with a different tempo. One nation was regarded as more advanced than another, and that is why the more backward nations could see their future more or less reflected in the leading nations. Initially, this thought was simplistically interpreted, and labour movements in other countries were studied, for example, to discover policy ideas for everyday politics in one’s own country. This approach can be witnessed, for example, in the writings of the German pioneer of cross-border labour movement history, Lorenz Stein. In his 1842 study of socialist and communist currents in the French proletariat, he assumed initially that history develops via separate nations. In this way, he placed himself firmly on the terrain of monadologic thinking. Stein assumed, that every ‘profound movement’ in one nation would sooner or later repeat itself in another nation. For this reason, a study of developments in France seemed an urgent task for him; the radical movement appearing in the neighbouring country would beset Germany as well in due course, and he queried rhetorically: ‘Can we passively stand by and watch, how [the movement] grows among us, and remains rudderless, because it is not understood?’ (Stein 1842:iv, ix).

This somewhat instrumentalist attitude led to a strong interest for the apparently ‘highly developed’ peoples. Soon, however, it became apparent just how difficult

it was to derive useful political recipes from elsewhere. When Werner Sombart reconstructed the history of the Italian proletariat half a century after Stein, he concluded that such comparative studies provided hardly any useful policy advice for everyday politics at home. Although Sombart believed that nations can learn from each other, he argued for a more fundamental approach that focused centrally on purely theoretical questions ('from where?', 'to where?'). Such a modified approach meant a significant expansion of the terrain for research, because now a study of more advanced countries was no longer sufficient, one also had to immerse oneself in less developed countries, 'insofar as they belong to the same cultural areas [*Kulturkreise*]'. After all: 'If regularities in social development can be identified at all, these must recur in the late starters; it is there that the correctness of the hypotheses, formulated on the basis of earlier experiences in other countries, must be confirmed' (Sombart 1893:178).

Thus Sombart expressed the elevation of monadologic labour history to scientific status. Gradually, however, the monads gained windows. Sombart himself was conscious of 'the influence of the example of the advanced countries on the lands that follow them' (Sombart 1893:178). In the course of the twentieth century, attention for reciprocal influences between separate peoples increased, even though those separate peoples remained the fundamental units of analysis. From James Guillaume (1905–10) to Julius Braunthal (1961–71), international organisations of the labour movement were, for example, interpreted as collaborative ties between workers who represented different countries, among patriots with different fatherlands – an interpretation which also lived in the movement itself (Callahan 2000). In studies of international labour migration, the migrants were seen as people who either preserved the culture of their country of origin or assimilated in the culture of the country to which they emigrated.

IV

Only in the last decades has the Eurocentric monadology as a whole been questioned. On the one hand, Sombart's idea that only peoples belonging to the same 'cultural area' could be meaningfully compared came under fire. On the other hand, the nation-state was increasingly 'historicized', and thereby 'relativized'. These two subversive tendencies must be clearly distinguished, but they run more or less parallel to each other. Their appearance is linked to a series of changes that occurred since the Second World War, or started even earlier, namely:

- Decolonisation led to many new independent countries, especially in Africa and Asia, which began to investigate their own social histories; in this way, labour history acquired not only an increasingly important 'peripheral' component (the number of monads expanded), but it also quickly became clear that the peripheral history obviously could not be written without constantly referring to the metropolitan history (see for example the work of Walter Rodney).
- Transcontinental imagined communities developed, such as Pan-Africanism.

- In historical migration research the insight dawned that the perspective of ‘nation-to-ethnic-enclave’ misinterpreted the reality of migrant life because they often lived transculturally.
- The border cultures that were ‘discovered’ did not fit in the monadologic schema, creolisation, etc.
- The same applied to transnational cycles of protests and strikes.

All these developments (plus the strongly intensified contacts between historians of different countries and continents) have led to a situation where the two premises of traditional labour history are now clearly visible, and therefore a topic of debate. We are now in an exciting transitional situation, in which the discipline is engaged in re-inventing itself. New Labour History begins to give way to Global Labour History (Van der Linden 2001, 2004).

V

To what does the term Global Labour History refer? Everyone can of course attach the meanings they like, but personally I mean the following:

- As far as *methodological status* is concerned, I would suggest an ‘area of concern’ is involved, rather than a theory to which everyone must adhere. We know and should accept the fact that our conceptions of research and our interpretative frameworks can differ. Not only is this pluralism inevitable, it can equally well be intellectually stimulating – provided we are at all times prepared to enter into a serious discussion of our disparate views. Notwithstanding our different points of departure, however, we must also strive to work productively in the same fields of research.
- As regards *themes*, Global Labour History focuses on transnational and even the transcontinental study of labour relations and workers’ social movements in the broadest sense of the word. By ‘transnational’ I mean the placing in a wider context of all historical processes, no matter how geographically ‘small’, by means of comparison with processes elsewhere, the study of interaction processes, or a combination of the two.

The study of labour relations encompasses work that is both free as well as unfree, paid and unpaid. Workers’ social movements consist of both formal organisations and informal activities. The study of both labour relations and social movements requires that equally serious attention is devoted to ‘the other side’ (employers and public authorities).

The study of labour relations concerns not only the individual worker but also his/her family. Gender relations play an important part within the family, and in labour relations involving individual family members.

- As regards the *period* studied, I think that in Global Labour History there are in principle no limits in temporal perspective, although I would say that practically the emphasis is on the study of labour relations and workers’ social movements, which have evolved along with the growth of the world market

from the fourteenth century. However, wherever indicated, for instance for comparative purposes, studies going back further in time should by no means be excluded.

This is, indeed, an extremely ambitious project that has just begun. Many of the goals of this new approach remain unclear or need further elucidation.

The development of Global Labour History will have to scale many obstacles in order to flourish. These obstacles include practical problems, such as the fact that in many countries of the Global South well-climatised, actively collecting archival institutions are absent.² I will not dwell on these technical difficulties, but will concentrate on the substantive challenges, because the greatest obstacle we have is ourselves, with our traditional theories and interpretations. I have mentioned the two most important pitfalls already: methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism.

Methodological nationalists are the victims of two important intellectual errors. Firstly, they naturalise the nation-state. By this I mean that they consider the nation-state as the basic analytical unit for historical research. Even although they recognise that nation-states only flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth century, they nevertheless still interpret older history as the *prehistory* of the later nation-state and consider cross-border or border-subverting processes as distractions from the ‘pure’ model. We are therefore dealing with a teleology that we really ought to abandon. From a global perspective, the existence of nation-states obviously remains an essential aspect of the world system, but it is an aspect, which needs to be thoroughly historicized in connection with sub-national, supra-national, and trans-national aspects. Secondly, methodological nationalists conflate society with the state and a national territory.³ That is to say: they think that societies are geographically identical to nation-states. The United States has its own society, Mexico has its own society, China has its own society, and so on. Here, too, a totally new approach is required. Perhaps we should think more profoundly about Michael Mann’s suggestion to regard societies as ‘multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of [ideological, economic, military and political] power’. The implication is that ‘Societies are not unitary. They are not social systems (closed or open); they are not totalities. We can never find a single bounded society in geographical or social space’ (Mann 1986:1–2).

There are three variants of *Eurocentrism* I should mention. The *first* is simply *neglect*: there is only attention for part of the world; and the author assumes that the history of ‘his piece of the world’ can be written without giving any attention to the rest. This attitude is well expressed by the popular distinction between ‘the West’ and ‘the Rest’, mentioned by Samuel Huntington and others.⁴ The *second* variant is clear *prejudice*: the authors do consider global connections, but nevertheless believe that Greater Europe (including North America and Australasia) ‘shows

the way'. This Eurocentrism is especially evident among modernisation theorists (Binder 1986). Robert Nisbet characterised this approach to development as follows:

Mankind is likened to a vast procession, with all, or at least a very large number of peoples made into the members of the procession ... Naturally, Western Europe and its specific, historically acquired pattern of economic, political, moral, and religious values was regarded as being at the head, in the vanguard, of the procession. All other peoples, however rich in their own civilization, such as China and India, were regarded as, so to speak, 'steps' in a procession that would some day bring them too into the fulfilment of development that was the sacred West. (Nisbet 1971:101)⁵

The third variant consists of *empirical beliefs*. This variant is most difficult to recognise and combat. We are dealing here with scientific viewpoints, which seemingly have been confirmed time and again by research. Empirical Eurocentrists make assertions because they think that all of this is *fact*. They believe, for instance, that trade unions are always most effective if they concentrate on some form of collective bargaining. This, they think, has been proven repeatedly. Historians defending such a view would deny emphatically that they hold any Eurocentric prejudices, and very few of them actually do hold such prejudices. As the late Jim Blaut wrote: 'Eurocentrism ... is a very complex thing. We can banish all the value meanings of the word, all the prejudices, and we still have Eurocentrism as a set of empirical beliefs' (Blaut 1993:9). Attacking the first two variants (neglect and prejudice) is relatively straightforward, but the third variant presents a bigger obstacle. Lucien Febvre already formulated it half a century ago: 'Any intellectual category we may forge in the workshops of the mind is able to impose itself with the same force and the same tyranny – and holds even more stubbornly to its existence than the machines made in our factories' (Febvre 1973:258).

All core concepts of traditional labour history are primarily based on experiences in the North-Atlantic region, and therefore should be critically reconsidered. This applies, to start off with, to the concept of 'labour' itself. In the most important Western languages (English, French, Spanish, Italian etc.) a distinction is often made between 'labour' and 'work', in which 'labour' refers to toil and effort (as in 'woman's labour'), while 'work' refers more to creative processes. This binary meaning – to which a philosopher like Hannah Arendt (1958) attached far-reaching analytical consequences – simply does not exist in many other languages, and sometimes there is even no single word for 'labour' or 'work', because these concepts abstract from the specific characteristics of separate labour processes. We ought therefore to investigate carefully to what extent the concepts 'labour' and 'work' are trans-culturally usable, or at the very least, we should define their content much more precisely than we are used to doing. Where does 'labour' begin, and where does it finish? How exactly do we draw the boundary between 'labour' and 'work', or is that boundary less obvious than is often assumed?

The concept of ‘working class’ also merits a critical survey. It looks like this term was invented in the nineteenth century to identify a group of so-called ‘respectable’ workers in contrast to slaves and other unfree labourers, the self-employed (the ‘petty bourgeoisie’) and poor outcasts, the lumpen-proletariat. For many reasons, which I will not discuss in this article, this interpretation is simply not appropriate in the Global South. The social groups, which in the eyes of Old and New Labour History are quantitatively not significant – exceptions which prove the rule – *are* the rule in large parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. We will have to devise a new conceptualisation, which is less oriented to *exclusion* than *inclusion* of various dependent or marginalised groups of workers. We have to recognise, that the ‘real’ wage-workers, which were the centre of attention for Marx, i.e. workers who as free individuals can dispose of their own labour-power as their own commodity, and have no other commodity for sale (Marx 1976:272), are only one kind of way in which capitalism transforms labour power into a commodity. There are many other forms that demand equal attention, such as chattel slaves, indentured labourers, sharecroppers, etc. (Van der Linden 2005).

The necessity to reconsider our theoretical and methodological assumptions need not, of course, prevent us from tackling empirical research straightaway. Probably in reality it is precisely through the interaction of conceptual renewal and exploratory research that we will be able to build a Global Labour History.

What could empirical research of this type look like? I think that we can promote activities on different levels. In the first place, there is the level of data collection. Here I see two closely interconnected tasks. On the one hand, the collection of large quantities of quantitative and qualitative data on such themes as the structure of the world labour force, real wages, demographic developments and workers’ movements; and on the other, the development of techniques making it possible to compare data gathered from different contexts. Two examples of such data collections will suffice here.

Example one: There are advanced plans to build a database on Indian indentured labourers across the world. Between 1834 and 1937 some thirty million people from British-ruled India moved to other parts of the world. About eighty per cent returned. Hindustani communities now exist in South-East Asia, South America, North America, Africa and Europe. The database is meant to cover this whole diaspora, but with a different precision per region. For some regions (for example Suriname in South America) individual datasets can be produced, while for other regions only sets of a higher aggregation level seem feasible at the moment (www.nationaalarchief.nl/suriname is a building block of this project).

Example two: Since 1985, the Research Working Group on World Labor at the Braudel Center in Binghamton, USA, set up a database, using the indexes of *The Times* (London) (from 1906 onwards) and *The New York Times* (from 1870 onwards). Information on the year, type of action, country, city and industry

was recorded for every mention of labour unrest anywhere in the world. To begin with all the numerical data assembled in this way for the period 1870–1985 was used in further analyses. The most important results have been published in Beverly Silver's book *Forces of Labor* (2003). Other scholars are following this initiative. In 2005 a conference in Amsterdam further developed strike statistics for a large number of countries.

Such projects require that we develop techniques that make data from different historical and geographical contexts comparable. An example is the so-called HISCO-project, which aims at creating an occupational information system that is both international and historical, and simultaneously links to existing classifications used for present-day conditions. The information system will make available on the Web a historical international classification of occupations (HISCO) combined with information on their tasks and duties in historical settings as well as images on the history of work (see <http://historyofwork.iisg.nl>). Currently the HISCO scheme is based on the coding of the one thousand most frequent male and female occupational titles in datasets from eight different countries (Canada plus seven European countries), spanning the period 1670–1970, but mostly from the nineteenth century. The coding of new data is now undertaken in Columbia, New Zealand, Russia and the United States, planned for India, and nearing completion in Portugal and Spain.

A second level at which we can be active is obviously real historical research, which reveals the interactions between different regions of the world and thus can answer questions which until recently could not even be asked. The number of research questions that can be asked within the new approach is limitless. I have published a list of ideas on the topic elsewhere (Van der Linden 2004). Here I will limit myself to just one example, which I call 'global labour chains'. This concept continues an old idea from the economic theory, which in essence can be traced back to Adam Smith. The conservative Harvard economist Frank Taussig summarised this idea in the 1920s as follows:

We commonly speak of a tailor as making clothes, a carpenter as making a table, a cobbler as making boots. The familiar phrase, like most such, is elliptic, and it leads easily to misunderstanding. The labor of the tailor but gives the finishing touch to the work previously done by a long series of persons – the shepherd who tended the flocks, the wool shearer, those who transported the wool by land and sea, the carder and spinner and weaver, not to mention those who made the tools and machinery of these workers. Similarly the carpenter is the last of a succession of persons who worked toward a common end – the lumberman in the woods, the sawyer in the mill, the trainman and the engineer on the railway, and so on. Many laborers, arranged in long series, combine in making even the simplest commodities. (Taussig 1921:15)

When Taussig wrote this, he thought within the framework of the nation-state, the United States to be precise. But in the meantime we all know, that labour chains span the globe. Take, for instance, the jeans that many of us wear. The cotton for

the denim is grown by small farmers in Benin, West Africa. The cotton for the pockets is grown in Pakistan. The synthetic indigo is made in a chemical factory in Frankfurt, Germany. The rivets and buttons contain zinc dug up by Australian miners. The thread is polyester manufactured from petroleum products by chemical workers in Japan. All parts are assembled in Tunisia. The final product is sold in Europe. Our jeans are, therefore, the result of a global combination of labour processes (Abrams and Astill 2001).

One relevant question, especially important from the point of view of trade union internationalism, would be how these different labour processes relate to each other. One could, for instance, hypothesise that the nearer workers are to the finished product, the greater is their interest in a low remuneration for workers in earlier stages of production. Workers in a car factory profit in the short-run if steelworkers receive low wages, because this will increase the profit margin on the cars, and results in job security and, perhaps, higher wages. In other words, by studying the historical development of labour chains, we could develop an empirical and historical theory of the problems and possibilities of international solidarity. This is, of course, just one example. Many other important questions suggest themselves.

Global Labour History will not only enable us to view transcontinental developments in their mutual connection. It will also enable us to view history in our own regions in a new light. The challenge will be to transcend Old and New Labour History in a new approach, which places the insights already acquired in a new and broader context. By this means, our ability to understand the world and explain it can only increase. As EP Thompson remarked in his *The Poverty of Theory*: 'Each historical event is unique. But many events, widely separated in time and place, reveal, when brought into relation with each other, regularities of process' (Thompson 1978:84).

Notes

1. The terms Old and New Labour History seem to have been invented in the United States of America around 1970 (see Krueger 1971). A kind of codification of the distinction can be found in Brody 1979.
2. That it is possible to build a well-functioning archive with modest financial means is shown by the example of the VV Giri National Labour Institute in Noida, India.
3. This does not mean that they were identified with each other. Rather they often functioned as counter-poles, as in Germany around 1848, when the concept of 'society' was used to show one's opposition to the state.
4. The inventor of this expression seems to have been the Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani (see Mahbubani 1992).
5. Nisbet noted that Eurocentrism (at that time still called Ethnocentrism) is symbolised according to a biological metaphor of growth and development: societies are a bit like plants, emerging from seed and then developing into mature organisms. This growth metaphor is based on at least five additional assumptions:

'This meant, in the first place, that change is normally *continuous*. That is, each identifiable condition of a thing, be it a tree, a man, or a culture, is to be understood as having grown

out of a preceding condition of that same thing. Second, large changes are to be understood as the *cumulative*, as well as incremental consequence of a host of small changes. Third, social change is characterized by *differentiation*. Precisely as the seed or fertilized germ cell is marked by differentiation and variegation of function and form in its history, so is the human culture or institution similarly marked by this kind of manifestation over time. Fourth, change of a developmental sort is regarded as caused for the most part by some persisting, *uniform* property or set of properties. From the doctrine of uniformity came the belief that social conflict, cooperation, geographic location, race, or any of the other alleged causes so richly strewn across the pages of social history, is the prime and continuing cause of all development. Fifth, it is clear that in all of these theories of social development a kind of *teleology* is present. Always there is some 'end' in view. The 'end' is conceived 'in purely Western terms'. (Nisbet 1971:100)

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