Global Labor History: Promising Challenges

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Abstract

My essay "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History" in issue 82 (Fall 2012) received commentaries from five colleagues. In this reply I focus on seven central issues: the ambiguities of commodification; the contested notion of "capitalism"; the concept of class; household labor; the need for comparative approaches; the newness of Global Labor History; and its prospects in the coming years.

I am grateful for the five commentaries that my essay "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History" (*ILWCH*, 82, Fall 2012) received. A lot of wisdom, scholarly experience, and knowledge is packed in this feedback from fellow researchers. It provides me with valuable corrections, additions, and suggestions. It also reveals, as I hope to clarify in what follows, some misunderstandings. Most of all, though, this feedback shows that whatever differences of opinion we might have, we all do agree that a Global Labor History (GLH) approach is pertinent and worth pursuing in today's world. I will respond briefly to some important issues raised by my critics.

Commodification

In my own approach to GLH, I have given central place to commodification, that is, to the transformation of labor products, labor, or natural resources into a marketable commodity. Commodification—some do not like this word and prefer another, such as marketization or market expansion—is a process riddled with social contradictions. In the last centuries, it has begun to encompass an ever-increasing part of the world and extends to more and more different spheres of society, thereby drastically transforming the lives of billions of people. One effect has been a certain *formal* homogenization of human relations. All of us are subjected in more and more ways to the "laws of the global market," whether we like that or not. Yet, at the same time, *real* adversarial relations and fundamental antagonisms are also being generalized—between production and consumption, between public and private property, between nature and society, etc., not to mention those between classes, nations, and religions. Directly or indirectly, commodification brings huge masses of people in contact with each other across the globe every day—through trade, tourism, telecommunications, and mass media, but also through wars, unequal exchange, and ecological catastrophes. The global connections accompanying commodification can be peaceful and progressive. They can also express themselves in destruction, dispossession, rape, and exploitation.

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So, commodification is most definitely not a smoothly operating and unilinear process. It is instead a global development that is full of strife, constantly accelerating in one place and reversed or deflected in another. Franco Barchiesi therefore mistakes my position when he attributes to me the belief "that global capital necessarily enables emancipatory connections among workers," that the "working-class subject [is] determined by the structural conditions of commodification" and that there exists "a linearly progressive time." I have never claimed any such thing. Indeed I would agree with Barchiesi when he points out that Africans have a long history of "*refusing* to become a working class" and that they therefore did not "necessarily" embrace proletarianization "as a promising opportunity for unprecedented global connections." I would argue that such resistance to proletarianization has occurred and is occurring all the time around the whole world, right up to the present. It is a topic that I think deserves a lot of attention from historians interested in GLH, if only because it has an enormous impact on people's lives.[1]

Dorothy Sue Cobble queries "why labor historians [should] limit their study of labor to 'commodified workers'? Why not study all working people whether or not they are 'commodified'?" My response can be straightforward, as I stated my position already in my original text: Ultimately, labor historians ought to be studying *all* working people, across the whole world, and through the millennia. It is only with some practical and political considerations in mind that I suggested that we should concentrate first on those people who are already partly or wholly caught up in the process of *commodification*. Such a focus obviously does include women (and sometimes men) who through subsistence labor reproduce commodified labor. The broader approach that is recommended by Cobble is, in fact, supported by quite a few historians, as indicated, for example, by a new issue of the open-access magazine *Workers of the World*, which will appear shortly.[2]

Capitalism

Capitalism remains a much contested notion, I know. Prasannan Parthasarathi has difficulty with that predicament: "There is no consistent definition of the term, and it fails to accurately describe the past." He therefore proposes that we should drop the term altogether. He is not alone in this attitude, of course. In his book *The Wheels of Commerce*, Fernand Braudel wrote, "Personally, after a long struggle, I gave up trying to get rid of this troublesome intruder [the notion of capitalism]. I decided in the end that there was nothing to be gained by throwing out along with the word the controversies it arouses, which have some pertinence to the present-day world. [… If] capitalism is thrown out of the door, it comes in through the window."[3] Following Braudel, I propose to keep the concept of capitalism but to give it a more exact and credible definition. I think that is possible, provided that capitalism is not defined as a state of affairs, but as a process; namely, as a set of circuits of commodity trade in which both the inputs in labor processes (labor, raw materials, natural resources) and the

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outputs (goods and services) have acquired the commodity form. Capitalism is, in other words, a cyclical commercial process in which, tendentially, "the production of commodities by means of commodities" is generalized (to use Piero Sraffa's famous expression) and in which, therefore, not just labor products, but also means of production and labor itself acquire the status of commodities.[4]

When I characterize capitalism in these terms as a specific "way of producing," I should, however, straightaway add three important qualifications. Firstly, commodification is a process without an endpoint, and the trading circuit has never consisted only and exclusively of reproducible commodities. The production and regeneration of labor power still presupposes, even in the most advanced capitalist regions, a lot of private subsistence labor and noncommercial human cooperation.

Secondly, although capitalist expansion has its own self-reproducing logic, it never operates in isolation or regardless of circumstances. Commodification generally, and commodification of labor power in particular, is always embedded in an historically formed culture as well as in a natural environment to which it responds and adjusts. That is why patterns of commodification differ according to location and period. If we seek to understand the incorporation of people in capitalist relations, "we need to know not only what new order is installed but how the installation of that new order dislocates and rearranges the preexisting relationships governing the deployment of social labor."[5] The exact scope of preexisting influences can only be established by empirical research. Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly questions in this regard the idea that "workers all over the world, irrespective of their specific cultural pasts, *experience* capitalist production in the same way."[6] But with equal justification, Janaki Nair has objected that while objective labor conditions "cannot be assumed to be exactly the same in all societies or cultures," they "nevertheless form the starting point of a history of the working class."[7] These viewpoints are not incompatible. The commodity economy has its own intrinsic dynamic, but it does not unfold this dynamic under self-selected circumstances; it must adapt to a complex of conditions inherited from the past.

Thirdly—this is possibly only a variation on the two qualifications mentioned previously—the modes of life that people have are not identical with the modes of production they perpetuate. The rich diversity of life among subaltern workers is not fully enclosed or disclosed by commodification. There are always many aspects of people's lives that cannot be fully subordinated by the logic of commodity trade. At issue is the "block of real life" resisting the valorization process of capital, as described by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge.[8] Many authors have pointed out aspects of subversion and the transformation of meanings in everyday life. For example, Alf Lüdtke emphasizes *Eigensinn* (the idiosyncratic pursuit of one's own interests) as joyful expenditure of time "without any calculation of effects or outcomes."[9] Georges Bataille refers to *dépenses*, modes of behavior often not fully integrated in the logic of accumulation, such as "laughter, heroism, ecstasy, sacrifice, poetry, eroticism, and others."[10]

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Class

In my contribution, I said that what "all members" of the redefined working class "have in common is their economic exploitation by employers, and the commodification of their labor-power. Therefore, they share a common class interest in transcending capitalism." These statements are not so naive as they might seem at first sight. Obviously, I do not want to claim that all people whose labor is commodified spontaneously form "one big united front against world capitalism." If I really believed such a thing, then I would not have said that "the short- and medium-term interests of particular segments in this 'new broad-spectrum proletariat' can obviously diverge strongly." Ordinarily, the "short- and medium-term interests" are decisive in determining the outcome of particular conflicts, not the long-term interests.

Cobble alleges that I "objectify" class, and make it "a category external to culture." She invites us to follow E. P. Thompson instead, who argued "that class is made between people at a particular time and in a particular place." But that is, in my opinion, a misreading of both Thompson and myself. Thompson, for his part, wrote literally:

> Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*."[11]

What he is saying here, is that the "productive relations"—which people are "born into," or "enter involuntarily"—in large measure "determine" class experience but also that the ways in which workers "handle" this experience "in cultural terms" depends on "traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms." With justification, William Sewell asks, "If he [Thompson] intends this sort of account of class formation, how can he deny that class exists *in the productive relations themselves*? It seems utterly metaphysical and arbitrary to deny the presence of class in the productive relations yet affirm its presence in the experiences and the consciousness that those productive relations generate."[12] I would put it this way: Class is constituted *both* within the productive relations *and* external to them. Knowledge about productive relations is therefore just as essential as knowledge of the (gendered and racialized) "traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms"—and at both levels, political states and legal systems also play an important role. I therefore do not intend to "objectify" class at all. Rather, I think that economic determinants are very important to

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understanding the historical movements correctly. Historians obviously cannot understand the mentality of working people unless they can relate that mentality to the total situation in which workers have to make a life and try to prosper.

My broader interpretation of the working class emphasizes heterogeneity, characterized by numerous different combinations of economic and extra-economic compulsion as well as all kinds of gradations of personal autonomy. Jürgen Kocka has grave doubts about such a broadened class concept, though, because—he says—"shared experiences, sufficient internal communication, and common enemies" are lacking. Then it might appear as if "a *global* working class in the ambitious sense of the word … has never existed, nor does it exist today."

While Barchiesi contends that I strongly *over*estimate the tendential homogenization of labor relations, Kocka thinks I *under*estimate such homogenization. Kocka believes that I emphasize hybrid combinations far too much, since—according to him—these are rather "unstable and transitory." He thinks it is probable that their overall significance will decline in the course of time. It is, of course, possible that Kocka's hunch will be proved correct. For now, however, compelling empirical evidence that would put his historical assessment to the test is lacking.[13] It is at least equally plausible, I think, that the standard wage-employment relationship that became normal in the North Atlantic region represents only a regional and historically temporary phenomenon, which is now gradually giving way to more and more precarious, contingent and even partly unfree forms of labor, together with much greater social disparities and stratification of the population.

Household Labor

In what I said, Dorothy Sue Cobble misses "the household mode of production" and the relation between "the labor of production" on the one hand, and "the labor of reproduction" on the other hand. That criticism is fair. I should have emphasized—as I have done elsewhere—that labor that is part of the global process of commodification takes *two* connected forms: labor that assumes the commodity form, being sold or hired to employers (wage labor, etc.), and labor that creates such commodified labor or regenerates it (parental and household labor). In my book *Workers of the World,* I have indeed extensively discussed the importance of such "entangled subsistence labor."[14] More generally, I think that it is better to use households as the basic unit of analysis than individuals because, as Jean Quataert once noted, "it permits keeping in focus at all times the lives of both men and women, young and old, and the variety of paid and unpaid work necessary to maintain the unit."[15]

The Need for Comparisons

Parthasarathi makes a strong case for "questions or problems in labor history that require a global framework." He considers that we could use the debate about the Great Divergence between Europe and Asia as an exemplar, given

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that it contributed so much to the interest in global economic history. Actually, I don't regard that particular debate as a good example of global history because large parts of the world have almost no role in it. But I do very much agree with Parthasarathi that big questions appealing to a broad public are vital for the dynamic and fate of a scholarly discipline.

In the International Institute of Social History, we have also thought about that issue. Since 2006, we attach central importance to the following problematic: "(1) which labor relations have emerged parallel to the rise and advance of market economies? (2) how can their incidence (and consequently the transition from one labor relation to another) be explained? Are these worldwide transitions interlinked? and (3) what are the social, economic, and cultural consequences of this changing incidence?" The second one is the central one of the three questions; the first question serves to enable an answer to the second one; the third elaborates on the first two. Under the umbrella of this overarching inquiry, all kinds of questions can be pursued, such as the conditions under which child labor can be abolished, the rise and decline of the "male breadwinner" norm, or the worldwide erosion of the standard employment relationship. Conceivably, some of these questions could stimulate wider interest, provided that historians from all persuasions enter into the debate. But obviously it is also possible that quite different, even unexpected, themes would capture the public imagination much more.

In answering these and other questions, both comparative research and studies of interactions are important, as Parthasarathi says himself. I cannot deal here with all the relevant methodological considerations, due to lack of space. I have, however, discussed them at length elsewhere.[16] I am certainly not at all keen to "minimize the comparative dimension of global historical research," as Parthasarathi alleges. If that was true, I would never have done the transcontinental comparative research that I have carried out myself in previous years, and I would never have supported many fellow historians working at it.

Newness

Cobble believes that I greatly exaggerate the difference between GLH and the older labor history. She points to numerous publications, ranging from Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* to various contributions in *ILWCH* from the 1970s onward, which take a global approach. I should have made clearer what my point is. It goes without saying that, long before the idea of GLH was mooted, historians were already writing about "global flows" of people, products and ideas. As a matter of fact, the first serious studies of border-crossing labor organizations and transcontinental migrations date back to the nineteenth century. The point, though, is that there are two crucial divides between most of the older ("traditional") labor history and the newly emerging global approach: eurocentrism and methodological nationalism ("nation-centrism"). GLH breaks with the usually implicit assumptions that the nation-state is the

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natural container of historical developments and that the world should be mentally ordered from the standpoint of the North-Atlantic region. This orientation, I would say, is the main new departure *vis-à-vis* our predecessors.[17]

The Future

I have said that "a modest but increasing number of research projects worldwide" are inspired by GLH. But is this also "the wave of the future" that will "embrace … the Global South"? Like Peter Winn, I am a bit skeptical about that idea. I remember well going to the first conference of *Mundos do Trabalho* (2001), the Brazilian network of labor historians. When I presented a few ideas about GLH, I not only received some gratifying support, but also two severe objections: (1) "Now that the labor history of the Global South is beginning to take off, you Northerlings try to restore your hegemony by going global." (2) "Why should we be interested in transnational or even global history when we don't even have a national history yet?" Both of these objections are justified to some extent. After all, the resources needed to develop GLH still exist mainly in the Global North (even though this situation is now rapidly beginning to change). And, North Atlantic historians still assume far too often and too easily that national history has already advanced greatly everywhere and, therefore, can be transcended, even though in many countries that is simply not true, or only partly true. So the fact that historians in the Global South are sometimes rather suspicious of GLH is not very surprising. Perhaps it is healthy if they keep Northerlings like myself on our toes.

Gaining Influence

I will stick to the claim the GLH is gaining influence. I am very aware that the great majority of labor historians (including those in the United States and Europe) are inspired mainly by local and national events. Because GLH is perceived as "more distant" from everyday experience insofar as the global dimension only has its impact via mediations; because GLH requires more teamwork among researchers from different countries than "traditional" historiography; and because GLH requires more time and money—for all these reasons, it is, for the time being, unlikely that the GLH approach will be able to inspire anything like a majority of the global community of labor historians. It is more reasonable to expect that GLH will remain a minority current, although I hope it will be a growing one that inspires more and more circles of researchers.

Jürgen Kocka rightly notes that GLH is a relational concept. "Global" refers to the "non-global." That is an important insight, I think. Even if it is difficult to "globalize" the world's labor historians completely, it would be great if we could interest them more in the GLH approach, so that our mainstream colleagues, too, would at least now and then "dare to venture outside their own familiar terrain."

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NOTES

1. See also Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden, 2008), Chapters 15 and 16.

2. I mean issue 3 (2013), with guest editor Christian de Vito. See http://www.workersoftheworldjournal.net (Accessed August 30, 2013).

3. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century. Vol. 2, The Wheels of Commerce.* Trans. Siân Reynolds (London, 2002), 231.

4. In this and the following paragraphs I am plagiarizing from my own book, *Workers of the World* (363–66).

5. Eric R. Wolf, "Incorporation and Identity in the Making of the Modern World," in *Pathways of Power. Building an Anthropology of the Modern World*, ed. Eric R. Wolf (Berkeley, CA, 2001), 354.

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Class Consciousness and the Indian Working Class: Dilemmas of Marxist Historiography," *Journal of African and Asian Studies* 22 (1988): 29.

7. Janaki Nair, "Production Regimes, Cultural Processes. Industrial Labour in Mysore," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 30 (1993): 262.

8. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), 107.

9. Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn. Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg, 1993), 140.

10. Georges Bataille, "L'expérience intérieur," in *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 5, ed. Georges Bataille (Paris, 1973), 11.

11. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 9–10.

12. William H. Sewell, Jr., "How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E.P. Thompson's Theory of Working-class Formation," in *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McLelland (Cambridge, 1990), 57.

13. I expect that it won't be very long before more can be said about this question, as the database of the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labor Relations is extended more and more. See https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourrelations (Accessed August 30, 2013).

14. van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, Chapter 14.

15. Jean H. Quataert, "Combining Agrarian and Industrial Livelihood: Rural Households in the Saxon Oberlausitz in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Family History* 10 (1985): 158. Also see on this problematic my "Introduction" and "Conclusion" in Jan Kok, ed., *Rebellious Families. Household Strategies and Collective Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford and New York, 2002), 1–23 and 230–42.

16. See the chapter "Doing Comparative Labour History: Some Preliminaries," in Marcel van der Linden, *Transnational Labour History: Explorations* (Aldershot, 2003), 155–71.

17. See, for more extensive argumentation, Marcel van der Linden, "Labour History: The Old, the New and the Global," *African Studies* 66 (2007): 169–80.

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