Global Labor History: A Dialogue with Marcel van der Linden

Prasannan Parthasarathi
Boston College

History writing is going global, and labor historians, as witnessed by this forum, are riding the wave. While there is much that is laudable in the global turn, the purpose and methods of global labor history remain to be worked out, however. Marcel van der Linden's several writings on the topic have shed much light on possible paths forward, and this forum is very welcome as it is an opportunity for members of the *ILWCH* community to engage with his thoughts on the topic.[1]

For van der Linden, global labor history has a number of dimensions. It is a "distinctive 'field of research,' just like art history or linguistics" and "within that research area, different theories can be constructed and tested, whether inspired by Karl Marx, Max Weber, John Commons, or other thinkers." It is a subset of the larger field of global history and therefore rejects the confines of the nation-state to take up "the description and explanation of the intensifying (or weakening) connections … between different world regions." According to van der Linden, the practice of global labor history is "in the first instance a question of mentality" and demands that historians "be bold in their inquiry, and dare to venture outside their familiar terrain."

These are valuable observations, but at the same time they are restricted in their utility because they are confined to historical method and practice. A field of inquiry is defined, in this case global labor history, whose method rests on rejecting narrow national specialization and adopting an attitude of globality. Van der Linden has put forward similar methodological recommendations elsewhere and argued for the pursuit of global labor history on the grounds that it is a way to transcend the Eurocentrism and nationcentrism of much labor history.[2]

While questions of method are of enormous importance, methodological recommendations cannot bring global labor history to life. What are needed are questions or problems in labor history that require a global framework. This point may be illustrated with the example of global economic history, which has become a lively area of debate and discussion in the last fifteen years.[3]

Global economic history has been animated by the problem of divergence between Europe and Asia. This question has been the focus of major debates and sparked the founding of the *Journal of Global History*. Out of necessity the discussion of divergence requires a global framework in which comparisons and connections can be explored. (Van der Linden pays too little attention to the place of comparison in global labor history, a point that will be taken up in more detail shortly.) The question of divergence has raised methodological issues and led to methodological innovations, but these emerged as a consequence of the debate over a historical problem.

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 82, Fall 2012, pp. 108–113
© International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., 2013
doi:10.1017/S0147547912000294

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What global labor history needs are compelling historical problems that can only be answered in a global context. As Giorgio Riello and I wrote in the introduction to a collection of essays on cotton textile production and consumption in the early-modern world:

> A consideration of mutual influences and the integration of the cases of comparison into a single framework lead logically to the global economy. For the Indian subcontinent had a truly global reach and putting together its areas of influence in the centuries from 1200 to 1800 highlights the nature of the global trading system … A focus on the global economy, and therefore a history written at the global level, emerges organically from the study of cottons in disparate locations. It is only within a global framework that the many connections and mutual influences can be contained and understood.[4]

There are a number of questions in labor history that lead organically to a global framework. Van der Linden himself suggests several, including the nature of the working class, changes in class composition, differential class formation, class cultures, and producer self-organization and resistance. However, if we define a historical question as an attempt to understand why and how something happened in the past, these do not fit that definition. Even van der Linden labels them topics for research. As topics, they lead to the description of the past, rather than interpretation. Reconstructing the changing class composition, for instance, leads to an exercise in taxonomy of labor relations. While this is a valuable undertaking, it only partially pushes forward the agenda of global labor history. To truly advance that agenda, global labor historians must pose new questions or provide new answers to longstanding problems.

The topics for research that van der Linden proposes are also not amenable to the connective history, which he suggests is an essential feature of global labor history. The study of class composition, formation, and cultures—or the exploration of producer self-organization and resistance— may raise issues of mutual interaction or connection, but they are primarily matters for comparison between the laborers of different regions of the world. Van der Linden minimizes the comparative dimension of global historical research, but in this respect he is not alone, as comparison is neglected in much global history. Of course, global historians know that comparison is a critical part of their arsenal of techniques, but it is wielded too little, and it is often deployed without sufficient attention to goals and methods. Comparisons may be far more important than connections in the writing of global labor history, however.

Comparison is the means by which the divergent fates of laborers in different regions of the world may be comprehended and made sense of. Only with rigorous and systematic comparisons can new analytical insights be achieved and new categories be formed for understanding the pasts of laborers. Comparative exercises cannot be undertaken without historical problems. The method of comparison, therefore, forces historians to formulate problems and to ask questions that need answering, which lends the writing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of global history an analytic rigor. For one cannot compare without a larger purpose in mind. This paper will return to the issue of analytic categories shortly, but a few more words on comparison in global history are first in order.

The most systematic analysis of comparison in history was penned by Marc Bloch three-quarters of a century ago. For Bloch, comparison is indispensable to historical interpretation, as it aided in the identification of causes. "The comparative method seems capable of rendering the most conspicuous service to historians by setting them on the road that may lead to the discovery of real causes," Bloch wrote.[5] Through a rigorous analysis of similarities and differences, the comparative method allows for a deeper interpretation of causation in history and to reach the holy grail of at least some history writing, a deeper understanding of change over time. Comparison was also an aid to historical interpretation, according to Bloch, as it can identify mutual influences or connections. For Bloch, this was a more obvious and less interesting use of the comparative method than that of identifying causes. (He wrote that the discernment of mutual influences was the "most obvious service we can hope for from a careful comparison" while comparison for the elucidation of causes is the "most conspicuous service."[6]) From the perspective of writing global history, however, the identification of mutual influences or connections may be an equally significant contribution of comparison, for from the study of mutual influences comparison must, in a kind of dialectic fashion, produce a new synthesis of the objects of comparison into a single framework of analysis. Comparison, therefore, creates the possibility for the more rigorous study of connections in global labor history.

Armed with compelling historical problems and the method of comparison, global labor history can provide new analytical categories with which the experiences of working people in the past as well as the present can be understood. As van der Linden has trenchantly noted in other writings, global labor history also makes it possible to decenter Europe in accounts of historical change. In order to produce non-Eurocentric histories, however, historians must give up the use of the category capitalism, which continues to give the main stage to Europe, being the "birthplace" of capitalism.

Van der Linden recognizes the analytic limitations of the term capitalism, particularly when he argues for a broadening of what historians mean by labor. Nevertheless, there are tensions in van der Linden's exposition, and capitalism continues to inform his understanding of global labor history. A number of issues that he explores in his essay emerge from an attempt to understand the modern world in terms of the development of capitalism, the problem of free versus unfree labor being the most striking. (Here Jairus Banaji's recent contributions represent an important way out of what has been a strikingly sterile debate, as van der Linden notes.) Van der Linden also continues to believe that capitalism shapes worker politics. He writes that approaches that seek to broaden the definition of the working class nevertheless conceive "of all members of this redefined working class have in common … their economic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

exploitation by employers, and the commodification of their labor-power. Therefore, they share a common class interest in transcending capitalism." Perhaps in certain historical contexts and under specific historical conditions workers seek to transcend capitalism, but this is hardly the sum total of worker politics for the past several hundred years.[7] One of the major contributions of global labor history may be toward a better understanding of worker movements such that determinist projections of this sort may be abandoned.

This requires abandoning capitalism as a category of historical analysis. Historians of medieval Europe have long found the category feudalism tyrannical and given it up.[8] Medieval historians of Asia have similarly rejected the appropriateness of feudalism to describe the social and economic organizations of the diverse places in that vast continent.[9] Global labor history, which seeks to escape the fetters of a European view of the world and rejects the universalization of a European process of historical change must similarly discard the category of capitalism.

For historians of medieval Europe the term feudalism restricted their vision of the past. The contours of medieval societies were forced into a preconceived model; evidence that was not relevant to that model, and thus deemed to be irrelevant, was ignored; and the actual workings of the social order were often poorly understood. The notion of a feudal society or of feudalism is not grounded in medieval sources, but a later construct—Susan Reynolds dates it to the sixteenth century—which was then projected onto the past as its essential operating principal. By the twentieth century, there was no consistent definition of feudal or feudalism, and numerous historians agreed that it was not an accurate description of medieval European societies, but continued to use it out of sheer habit.

The use of the category capitalism by modern historians in many respects parallels the use of feudalism by medievalists. There is no consistent definition of the term, and it fails to accurately describe the past.[10] For labor historians, capitalism has most salience as a generalized system of commodity production in which labor—or more accurately, labor power—has been commodified. Van der Linden is fully aware that labor regimes in the modern period do not conform to this definition, and he explores several ways in which the definition of the working class under capitalism has been broadened. One approach is to consider "*all* forms of labor under capitalism (including unfree labor) as variations of 'capital-positing' labor," van der Linden writes. Another approach is to expand the concept of the working class to include all "carriers of labor-power whose labor-power is sold or hired out to employers, whether under economic or non-economic compulsion, regardless of whether these carriers of labor-power are themselves selling or hiring out their labor-power."

Much as medieval historians found that the term feudalism was forcing social phenomena into prefigured boxes and constricting the interpretation of complex social phenomena, the use of capitalism, and the need to abide by given definitions of that term, forces the range of social relations that characterize modern production systems into a predefined framework. In the case of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Europe and North America, capitalism leads to a neglect of many noncommodified forms of production, including petty producers who owned their means of production, the self-employed, and those who combined the above forms with wage work, shifting among different tasks or jobs over the annual calendar or over the life cycle. In the case of areas outside Europe, such as India, the use of the category has been similarly accompanied by either the forcing of the evidence into accepted categories or trying to explain why the path of historical change did not conform to the norm established by Europe.[11]

The continued use of the term capitalism, as previously noted, also restricts historians' understandings of worker politics and views them through a determinist lens. Several of the topics that van der Linden identifies as potential areas for the development of a global labor history—class formation, class composition, and class cultures—emerge from a dialogue with a Marxian understanding of the role of the working class in the long arc of modern historical change. Since capitalism is a transitional mode of production, which will be superseded at some point in time, political actions that push forward this historical development are prioritized, to the neglect of other forms of political expression.

Global labor history provides the opportunity to move from capitalism to the construction of new analytic categories. While many labor historians are indebted to the work of Karl Marx, as well as Friedrich Engels, it is now high time—given that we are in the twenty-first century, 150 years after Marx and Engels produced their seminal works—that historians read their work as nineteenth-century theorists, and perhaps sources of inspiration, not as providing a blueprint for understanding the past, the present, or the future.

A number of problems in labor history may be taken up in a global vein and thus contribute to the development of alternatives to capitalism as an analytic framework. Three stand out in particular. All are exercises in comparison, not connection, but putting a number of cases side by side may reveal unknown or underappreciated mutual influences. The first is the survival strategies of workers, which shifts the study of laborers from the formal institutional context in which they may have been embedded to the ways in which they exploited economic opportunities and the social relations that they entered into in order to promote the goal of survival. These relations could, of course, at the same time hinder that goal. A focus on laborer strategies of survival must out of necessity include the family and household and questions of gender, which are conspicuously absent in van der Linden's essay.

A second set of questions revolves around worker politics. Global labor history must take up the actual political projects that workers both created and participated in. It must take both the utterances and actions of workers seriously and not impose upon them a historical mission. Only with comprehensive and open-minded studies of this sort can those interested in the fate of laborers begin to interpret the monumental defeats of labor in recent decades and perhaps contribute to a rethinking of alternative visions and politics in the present.

A comparative analysis of worker politics leads logically to a third major historical problem, which has to do with the state. State policies and actions

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are critical in shaping virtually all aspects of workers' lives, especially as we get closer to the present, yet it, too, is absent in the van der Linden essay. Global labor historians, in their eagerness to reject nationcentric accounts, must take care not to overlook the important role that states play. Global histories of labor must compare the divergent labor policies of states, the ideologies and politics that produce these divergences, and the mutual influences that shape state actions across the world.

Taken together, worker survival strategies, worker politics, and state actions can produce a comprehensive picture of the social, political, and economic situation of laborers. A global perspective will not only enrich this picture, but also provide new analytic insights that can expand both the understanding of the past as well as the present of workers, both men and women, inhabiting the many regions of our vast, yet increasingly interconnected, world.

NOTES

1. In addition to the essay in this volume, see Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Towards a Global Labor History* (Leiden, 2008) and Marcel van der Linden, "Labour History Beyond Borders," in *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy (Pontypool, Wales, 2010), 353–83.
2. Van der Linden, "Labour History Beyond Borders."
3. See Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000) and Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge, 2011).
4. Prasannan Parthasarathi and Giorgio Riello, "Introduction," in *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi (Oxford, 2009), 12.
5. Marc Bloch, "A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies," in *French Studies in History*, vol. 1, ed. Maurice Aymard and Harbans Mukhia, (New Delhi, 1988), 44. Also see Prasannan Parthasarathi, "Comparisons in Global History," in *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century*, ed. Maxine Berg (Proceedings of the British Academy, Oxford, in press).
6. Bloch, "Contribution," 42, 44.
7. Both Dipesh Chakrabarty and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar make this point but from very different premises and in very different ways. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, 1989) and "Trade Unions in a Hierarchical Culture: The Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1920–50," in *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi, 1984). Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, 1994); "Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay between the Wars," *Modern Asian Studies*, 15 (1981), 603–47.
8. Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe," *American Historical Review*, 79 (1974), 1063–88; Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994).
9. See the essays in *Feudalism and Non-European Societies*, ed. T. J. Byres and Harbans Mukhia (London, 1985).
10. See Prasannan Parthasarathi, "Was There Capitalism in Early-Modern Indian History?" in *Rethinking a Millenium: Perspectives on Indian History from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century: Essays for Harbans Mukhia*, ed. Rajat Datta (New Delhi, 2008), 342–60.
11. See Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, "Industrialization in India before 1947: Conventional Approaches and Alternative Perspectives," *Modern Asian Studies* 19 (1985): 623–68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press