Defining Global Labor History: Introduction

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The Scholarly Controversies section of this issue continues the journal's long tradition of promoting debate and investigation into core concepts and themes of labor history. In the past our scholarly controversies have elicited considerable interest from our readers and have featured discussions that accurately reflect the debates in the field. This time we have asked our roving international associate editor, Marcel van der Linden, research director of the *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam,* to contribute an essay that speaks to an international subject—the development of global labor history (GLH), a field with an international frame. For several decades van der Linden and the *Instituut* have been a driving force in promoting the idea that the internationalization of capital has revealed the limitations of labor history framed within the confines of the nation state. The *Instituut* has played a leading role in sponsoring global labor history projects that bring together scholars from around the world to focus on topics that it believes can best be examined using this global frame. In his numerous books and other scholarly publications, van der Linden has argued strenuously for the designation of global labor history as a field, not just a perspective. This argument forms the core of this section. Debates surrounding the global perspective form the core of this section of the issue which is structured around an introductory essay "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History." The essay is a review of the history of the field, an exploration of the question of definition and an advocacy paper that passionately argues for the centrality of Global Labor History for an understanding of workers' current and past experiences, economic position, forms of exploitation and autonomy. It also explores the political consciousness of laborers and workers broadly construed. The task is challenging and not without its pitfalls, some of which will be critiqued by our respondents. Nonetheless, van der Linden offers an outline of how the field would open new themes for research and insights into the complexity of laboring people internationally. ILWCH is privileged to have this enthusiastic and challenging review by a person who is so closely identified with research and expansion of the field.

As several of these essays note, when ILWCH emerged in the mid-1970s, the field of global labor history was gathering traction. Scholars formed a series of associations to promote international collaboration in research and publication. Yet these initial forays were limited largely to the scholars of Western Europe and the North Atlantic. In the intervening years, the cohort of scholars engaged in these discussions grew exponentially as colleagues in what was formerly called the "Third World" (now the "Global South")

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struggled with the legacy of colonialism and its residue, neocolonialism, and sought to document and analyze the role that labor had and could play in the struggles for development and social justice. This necessarily led them to make comparisons with the "West" and to develop theoretical instruments that attempted to capture both the uniqueness and similarities with them. Labor historians of Africa, Asia, and Latin America began to document the experiences of men, women, and children engaged in productive work, both as affected by capitalist penetration and engaged in the multitude of varying labor forms and social relations that *were not* influenced by capital.

The authors of our responses bring to their reading of the essay reflections on the claims and assumptions, both theoretical and empirical, that inform van der Linden's promotion of global labor history. In each case, their intervention both acknowledges the important role played by the corpus of work constituting the field and prods the field to take on the challenges that are currently outside the frame of reference. Some call for scholars to upend the assumptions and research preoccupations of the field in order to pull it away from a perspective that they feel still privileges the West and the forms of socioeconomic development and change that emerge there.

Franco Barchiesi's essay argues that African workers have no place in van der Linden's analysis because the "conceptual foundations" of the essay make assumptions that fail to capture the complexity of their own struggles with capital—an important one being their resistance to being transformed into a working class. He challenges the role that African workers can play in this "global working class" envisioned by the essay. Each of the terms of this new discipline—*global*, *labor* and *history*—he argues, tell a troubled story of Africa's engagement with capitalism and "undermine" any attempt for their inclusion into a world working class. Dorothy Sue Cobble challenges the "uniqueness" and "newness" of the themes included in current GLH by arguing that "traditional labor history" was much more open to unique forms of labor (i.e., the "producing classes") and global/comparative perspectives than is alleged in the essay. Moreover, she argues that the essay fails to incorporate the contributions of feminist scholars regarding both the "global" perspective and the willingness to expand "labor" into the household—the realm of reproduction.

Prasannan Parthasarathi explores the theoretical blind spots of the essay, making references to the history of labor in South Asia with its complexity of forms, systems of control, and political articulations of workers' interests. He also argues that van der Linden's definition of GLH is fundamentally a claim about methodology, which is insufficient to define the field. He argues instead that it is in its ability to explore new historical problems that GLH will gain traction and make a contribution to the broader field of global history. Jürgen Kocka also questions the propriety of the "concept of capitalism" as a defining factor shaping the world of workers, especially the new working classes in the Global South. He argues that by doing so, one assumes that the historical experience of Europe is universal and the institutional forms of workers' critique of

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capital are a template that was or should be followed by labor in the Global South. He nonetheless applauds van der Linden's proposal that these workers may be using other institutions (his example being radical religions) besides trade unions and radical politics to articulate their critique of capitalism.

Peter Winn**,** a Latin Americanist, applauds the essay's synthesis of the historiography of global labor history and the optimism and enthusiasm with which van der Linden advocates for the field as the beacon of light in the future of labor history. However, as a Latin Americanist, he reflects on the persistent preoccupation with national histories among scholars of Latin America. Thus while it is with considerable skepticism that he greets van der Linden's claim that global labor history will change the conceptualization and research agenda of labor historians internationally he nonetheless argues that it is still an important goal of estimable urgency in a world that is being shaped by globalization.

The editors found this debate to be so important and rich that we would like to extend the discussion into future issues of ILWCH. We have therefore asked van der Linden to respond to the critiques published here, and we ask our readers to join the debate. Please send your comments to ilwch@rutgers.work.edu: Write "GLH debate" in the subject line of your email.

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