

Call for Papers

International Workshop, 22–23 January 2016, V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, NOIDA, India

Chronologies of 'Labour': a Global Perspective

M.S. Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies "Metamorphoses of the Political"

(MICAS:MP)

Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH)

The political metamorphoses of the long twentieth century saw the rise and demise of 'labour' as a political category the world over. While the 'social question' began to be framed as a 'labour' question in some regions of the world from the late nineteenth century onwards, this development had come to affect large parts of the globe and assume a new quality about half a century later. By the mid-twentieth century, 'the worker' served as a paradigmatic figure across the political spectrum and 'labour' emerged as a rallying cry in cultural and aesthetic movements. The employment relationships of a variably defined 'core' section of the workforce were seen as the fulcrum of the state's social policies, which were increasingly perceived as an essential prop and property of the redefined or incipient nation state. Fascist Italy, wartime and postwar Britain, state socialist eastern Europe, French colonies in Africa, social democratic Sweden, Peronist Argentina and Nehruvian India all serve as instances of this polymorphic trend. In the process, ideas of political regulation, such as tripartism and corporativism, were circulated, adapted and remoulded on a transnational scale.

Since the 1980s, in an uneven and as yet incomplete process, trade unions have faced crises and erstwhile labour parties have, more often than not, shifted their social constituency. Academics have proclaimed 'the end of work', while artists have aestheticized 'labour' as a relic of an archaic, marginal if fascinatingly ugly world. Social policy remains a key area of governance, but the historical connections between labour and citizen rights appear broken in most national and trans-national contexts though parts of Latin America seem to offer a divergent scenario. Even so, labour 'reform' today almost universally signifies retrenchment, 'informalization', and 'precarity', where earlier it signalled rights to and at work. In the mid-twentieth century, the political visibility of 'core workforces', of those covered by labour law and welfare schemes, often exceeded their demographic presence by far. This relative over-visibility of a section of the workforce was replaced towards the end of the century by a relative under-visibility of 'labour' at large. 'Labour', according to hegemonic discourse, had either exhausted itself or revealed its ineptitude as a source of 'authentic' social identification receding into the objectified and apolitical status of a 'factor of production' and of a target of technocratic social engineering.

In our own time, the historical limitations of both narratives – the 'forward march of labour' and the 'end of work' – have become more apparent. So have the ways in which they have coloured and encumbered studies of labour in recent decades. If labourist narratives of the mid-twentieth century appeared to follow divergent, but uniformly predetermined historical paths, the workers of the early twenty-first century seem to be going nowhere: effectively, they are often represented as people without history. This workshop attempts to transcend the debilitating alternative of teleology versus ahistoricity by drawing on a growing body of recent writings that reconstruct the multiple chronologies of 'labour' as a political category across the globe. Thereby another gap in historiography is also addressed: For while the end of an age of 'labour' has sometimes been announced as a global phenomenon, the study of labour-centred social policies has been confined typically to analysis at the national level, and compared mostly within the North Atlantic region. This has largely obscured the complex articulation of global entanglements, the impact of asynchronicity and countervailing tendencies, and the forces that reproduce heterogeneity among the world's labour regimes.

The workshop seeks to bring together an interdisciplinary group of younger as well as experienced scholars from both the social and historical sciences in order to compare notes with regard to the temporal dynamics of 'labour' as a political category in the course of the long twentieth century. Such transregional comparisons, it is hoped, will permit to rehistoricize 'labour' by tracing convergences and

divergences in its chronologies. We invite contributions based on original research that examine crucial transformations of 'labour' as a political category in one specific context, the appropriation or adaptation of certain transnational political discourses to specific labour regimes or compare such processes in more than one context. On this basis, we intend to initiate a discussion on a broad range of larger research questions:

- To what extent does a comparison of the chronologies of labour politics across the globe sustain the notion of the twentieth century as an 'age of the working class' (Therborn) that drew to a close in the final quarter of that century? Can we postulate this as a general tendency, or are the patterns less synchronous, and perhaps even divergent?
- How do we explain the ambiguity and multiplicity of the terms currently used to describe the worldwide polarization of labour relations that are distinguished by differential levels of state regulation and social protection? Why are conceptualizations of the division between 'core' and 'peripheral' workforces (such as the binaries 'informal'/'formal', 'regular'/'precarious' or 'standard'/'substandard) simultaneously plausible and fuzzy, connected and inconsistent, analytically both unsatisfactory and hard to avoid? Can the terminological quandary be understood as the offshoot of an incomplete process that has 'politicized' and 'depoliticized' the labour question in particular ways?
- How has the definition of 'labour' as a political category been linked, in different socio-spatial and temporal contexts, to processes of defining citizenship, the role of law in regulating social relations of production and the nature of the state?
- How is the transformation of migration regimes in the course of the long twentieth century linked to political redefinitions of 'labour'? What are the political implications of the tendency to predominantly conceptualize workers in terms of 'ethnicity' or as 'migrants'? How have such redefinitions been expressed in the interrelation of migration law and labour law? How have they fed into xenophobic political mobilizations?
- Can a global comparison of processes of the politicization and depoliticization of 'labour' shed new light on changing regimes of capitalist accumulation, labour processes and strategies of coping with crisis? How are overall tendencies of technological change, labour management and of spatial reorganisation of production articulated politically in various labour regimes?
- How did redefinitions of 'labour' as a political category as expressed in processes of formalization/informalization impact on life courses, gender roles and household patterns of workers in global comparison?
- Does a comparative perspective on the chronologies of 'labour' as a political category yield new insights into convergent or divergent tendencies with regard to labour conflict and militancy?

This workshop is convened, in cooperation with the Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH), by the Research Module 'Labour as a Political Category' on behalf of the newly established and New-Delhi-based M.S. Merian International Centre of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and Humanities (micas-mp.org). The Research Module is coordinated by Ravi Ahuja (Göttingen), Rana Behal (Delhi), Sharit Bhowmik (Mumbai), Andreas Eckert (Berlin), Chitra Joshi (Delhi), Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (Göttingen), Prabhu Mohapatra (Delhi), Christoph Scherrer (Kassel), Aditya Sarkar (Warwick), Marcel van der Linden (Amsterdam) and Willem van Schendel (Amsterdam).

Proposals for papers (including an abstract of maximum 1,000 words) should be emailed to Prof. Ravi Ahuja, Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Göttingen, rahuja1@gwdg.de by 1 September 2015. The selection will be concluded by 15 September. The papers are to be submitted electronically by 15 December.