

## REVIEW ESSAY

# The Global Proletariat after the Model of the Doubly Free Wage Labourer?

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LINDEN, MARCEL VAN DER. Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History [Studies in Global Social History, Vol. 1.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2008. 469 pp. € 129.00; \$192.00.

Only recently, discussion in many Western societies was still dominated by claims that, with progressive rationalization, ever fewer people were able to find work and that consequently the traditional configuration of social security systems was threatened. As a result, interest in the history of labour, long a domain of classical social history, appeared to have justifiably waned. However, hardly had a younger generation become accustomed to this news and lowered its expectations accordingly about a secure workplace and the certainty of a pension after a continuous work biography, when we were recently surprised by the announcement that in the very near future German industry would have to reckon with a serious shortage of skilled workers.

The transformation from a work society to a service society, accelerated since the 1990s, can thus be misunderstood as the end of a society based on labour. As we now see more clearly, even classical industrial labour does not simply disappear; rather it is increasingly characterized by a division into highly qualified jobs that no longer correspond to our images of blue-collar workers of the early twentieth century, and those

work processes that, under pressure to lower unit labour costs, are very poorly paid – at least by the standards of the OECD world. This means that in the age of global commodity and production chains, nation-states and political economies conceived in national terms are no longer the appropriate framework for making judgements about a work society. The creation of value through mechanized labour has by no means disappeared, but is subject, in the course of a readjustment in the international division of labour, to increasingly rapid relocation, for instance, outsourcing to China's special economic zones.

This transition to a global view of commodity chains is currently taking place in many academic disciplines and above all in political and economic practices. And this undoubtedly represents a challenge to adapt historical investigations to such increasingly significant perspectives.

Despite the most recent incipient efforts, however, we are still far from a global history of labour. This is due, on the one hand, to the generally observable slowness in adjusting to global perspectives, the institutional presuppositions of which were unfavourable until very recently. On the other hand, the transition to a global-historical approach to labour requires a conceptual expansion, since in broadening our field of investigation, scholars based in Europe have discovered numerous phenomena outside our established horizons of experience. These range from the question of which countries pay for labour done by prisoners in penitentiaries to the debt bondage that large companies force upon their employees by paying a portion of their wages in credit per store cards.

For a long time the history of labour as performed in Europe was primarily the history of free wage labour, focusing on its establishment and development. This accorded with the liberal model of society, in which free labour and contracts made in the market between employees and employers were regarded (and continue to be regarded) as the most efficient model among the established forms of labour. In this way, the differentiation between unfree and coerced labour became a residual category. It disappeared from European historians' field of vision, displaced in their narratives of the rise of the West to the chronological and geographical peripheries: slavery, serfdom, and coolie labour were located in the distant prehistory of ancient or feudal relations, the plantations of the Caribbean and the American South, or the depths of the informal sector of the modern economy and the business of prostitution. Scholars of ancient history did address this issue as a matter of course, as did medieval historians and specialists in non-European history; however, the abolition discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries erected a powerful normative barrier against the acknowledgement of the continuation of coerced labour in the West.

The return of slavery and forced labour in the Nazi camps did evoke a deep abhorrence. Nevertheless, only the most recent initiative for victims'

reparations has prompted studies with more precise calculations about the scope of these forms of labour (and those businesses and segments of society that profited from them). Comparable investigations of camp labour in the Soviet Union and China have just begun. Only after the collapse of the real socialist disciplining of historiography was it possible to give voice to the victims of the Gulag and other expansive systems of coerced labour in penal and re-education camps and to document the inhumane conditions under which they were compelled to erect an industrial basis in inhospitable areas.

In a similar way, historians from Asia, the Americas, and Africa have pointed to the brutality of slave labour and the long-term effects on culture and social structures brought about by the establishment of the transatlantic slave trade. This heightened sensitivity has led most recently to the thesis that the era of coerced labour is by no means over, and that many forms of work involving extra-economic compulsion continue to be a part of the global economy, from which businesses and consumers in the highly industrialized countries profit.

Compared to this attempt to make the concept of coerced labour fruitful for a more broadly conceived history of globalization, official estimates of the ILO – that 12.3 million people are trapped in the different categories of forced labour – are rather conservative.<sup>1</sup> Behind this reserve stands an order of knowledge that defines coerced labour as an exception and deviation that should be registered and described with caution in order to avoid being drawn into an unacceptable dramatization. At the same time, however, we are also informed that numerous mixed and transitional forms exist, which a history of labour committed to a global perspective should register precisely in terms of their origins and survivability.

The International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam indisputably occupies a central place in the renewal of the history of labour and workers. This is at once self-evident and astonishing, given the history of the institute. Established in 1935 on the initiative of Nicolaas W. Posthumus (1880–1960), the institute responded to an emergency situation at the time, rescuing the archives of many organizations and individual activists of the labour movement threatened by the expansion of German fascism and by Stalinist repression. Precisely because, from the beginning, the institute did not take sides in the conflicts among the many tendencies of the labour movement, but concentrated instead on the safeguarding and registering sources of a diversely intertwined history, it was able to gain authority and trust. It was above all the central, western,

1. On the ILO's battle against coercive labour relations, see Daniel Roger Maul, "The International Labour Organization and the Struggle against Forced Labour from 1919 to the Present", *Labor History*, 48 (2007), pp. 477–500. For the figure cited above, see: [http://www.ilo.org/global/Themes/Forced\\_Labour/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/Themes/Forced_Labour/lang-en/index.htm).

and eastern European movements that represented, or at least claimed to represent, the interests of the working class that were threatened in the 1930s.

This changed in part after World War II – if one recalls, for example, the persecution of the Turkish labour movement under the military dictatorship – although the focus of the institute remained on Europe. With its collection of manuscripts by Marx and Engels, the institute was able to play a crucial role in making more scholarly and objective the Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA Marx–Engels Collected Works) project, the annotated edition of the writings and correspondence of the two forefathers of so many Marxisms. In the context of the late Cold War and the coexistence of the two systems, this encouraged many scholars in eastern Europe to abandon prevailing ideological commitments in favour of philological and editorial precision. In a constellation in which the dispute over the “correct” interpretation of the Marxist theory of society was simultaneously a dispute over political legitimacy, and thus was carried out with particular doggedness between the leaders of the communist parties in Moscow and East Berlin, the MEGA project had a pacifying effect and contributed to eroding the encapsulation of eastern Marxism.

It was ironic but virtually inevitable that with the completion of this erosion this function of the institute fell into a crisis. The MEGA project – regarded by some as megalomaniacal and which went beyond the careful annotation of the marginalia in Marx’s books – lost its market in the metropolises of previously Soviet-dominated states as well as its legitimisation for the *Wandel durch Annäherung* [change through rapprochement]. This does not mean that the project lost its exemplary quality in contemporary annotated editions or that the incredibly thorough reading of Marx’s texts was for naught. On the contrary, after 1945 the work of the IISH – which did not concentrate solely on Marx and Engels, but focused rather on the context of the many labour movements and Marxisms – proved to be a foundation for a new work phase.

This was, however, by no means self-evident and apparent in the late 1980s, as the critique of class division and exploitation as patterns of modern capitalism lost in cogency in the face of the enormous decline in the legitimacy of socialist counter-models. Hadn’t the masses been justified in using revolutionary means to liberate themselves from the power of a state class that did indeed draw only comparatively ridiculous, trivial privileges from others’ labour, but nevertheless thereby forced upon the majority its own notions of society, for which its engaged in enormous redistribution of the earnings of an economy said to be owned by the people? Was a critique of capitalism still relevant when precisely these masses wholeheartedly embraced it and were not particularly concerned about warnings of new forms of exploitation? And was this apparent lack of concern not justified in some respects as long as the workers of the

Global North could trust that their standard of living was effectively subsidized by the enormous differential from labour costs in the South, even if they were thereby only the auxiliary and by no means the primary beneficiaries of a worldwide inequality?

As in many other contexts, a new generation came of age in the IISH and associated universities in the Netherlands that, in formulating its own projects, asked how the accrued expertise could be connected to contemporary debates about globalization and their historicity. In the early 1990s it was by no means clear that this newly proclaimed globalization had a history at all. The discourse of newness initially caught many historians off-guard, as its central argument was that all the phenomena they had previously investigated had already become irrelevant or would, in any case, be so in the foreseeable future: the nation-state, isolated and self-contained societies, national economies, and any cultural essentialism that impeded the homogenizing effect of the free circulation of goods, capital, workforces, ideas, and democratic norms. The counter-model of a clash of civilizations formulated soon after this once again provided an operating space for those who wanted to resurrect the history of strictly distinct and spatially separate civilizations from the evidence room of the old universal history.

For the history of labour and workers, the globalization debate offered an opportunity, and Marcel van der Linden, Jan Lucassen, and their colleagues deserve recognition as being among those who saw this opportunity and seized it. Edited by Jan Lucassen, the anthology *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* – weighty alone through its size – attests to this situation: the first step was to secure for labour history an empirical basis that historians had long observed only out of the corners of their eyes. Seemingly banal bibliographic work has produced an impressive literature list of almost exactly 100 pages. The list is organized solely alphabetically according to authors' names, as it includes local studies on the living conditions of workers as well as large-scale investigations of labour movements in individual countries; jubilees for the Soviet proletariat are juxtaposed with indictments of Gulag atrocities; the omnipresent racism that immigrants faced in many jobs stands next to a new attention to gender and life cycles; new accents from area studies and global history are also listed, and the sovereign refusal to abide by the usual language barriers makes clear that this project is serious in its attempt to take a global perspective on the diversity of labour relations.

Allies are quickly identified for this. The Amsterdam institute is by no means alone in attempting to engage in this new kind of labour history. Its members hurry from conferences of the Association of Indian Labour Historians to those of the work group Mundo de Trabalho in the Brazilian National History Association (ANPUH), from Karachi (1999) to Seoul (2001) and then to Yogyakarta (2005) and Johannesburg (2006), and have

provided new impulses to the Linz International Conference of Labour and Social History, which had in the meantime become somewhat set in its ways. New technologies have aided the boom in global networks and comparisons on new scales: data that still has to be laboriously collected on the ground now circulates almost in real time and constitutes the basis for the Historical Standard Coding of Occupations (HISCO), which has emerged under the direction of Marco van Leeuwens and addresses central issues of the (non)translatability of many local and historically specific occupational designations through the combined knowledge of all relevant experts, or for the Worldwide Web on the History of Wages and Prices (WWWP) advanced by Jan Luiten van Zanden. All of this can be accomplished only with the means of a well-endowed research institute that publishes its own international journal,<sup>2</sup> holds a major conference every two years,<sup>3</sup> and also has an excellent infrastructure and academic staff.

Whereas in Europe labour history appeared to decline in significance in light of the question of whether we had not long ago made the transition from a work society to a service society, interest in the Global South has inevitably increased. For quite some time now Marxist-Leninist conceptions of the proletariat have proved poorly suited to describing the social reality of postcolonial countries (and unfortunately, it should be added, Marxist theorists in the real socialist countries were even less willing to take seriously the doubts of their African, Latin American, and Asian colleagues as the sign of an epistemological crisis). Together with technological advances in the communication, transportation, and financial sectors, the advancing liberalization marked by the Washington Consensus and the decline of Cold War bipolarity led to an intensified integration of many previously marginalized territories into global commodity chains. In the former socialist countries and in those countries that sealed off their state sector in a protectionist manner, the establishment of special economic zones created regions subject to a shock-like transition into a constellation in which technology and capitalization was massively increased, production for foreign markets (with their quality standards) was boosted, and simultaneously a rapidly increasing demand for extremely cheap labour emerged, which was frequently brought in over great distances from other regions.

The (critical) analysis of this introduction of a form of capitalism that was new in many respects was significant not only for those directly affected by it and their interest groups; it was also needed by governments competing for foreign direct investment, by environmentalists who pointed to the often catastrophic consequences for natural resources, and

2. The *International Review of Social History* is undoubtedly one of the most highly regarded journals on the history of social movements.

3. More than 1,000 researchers attended each of the most recent European Social Sciences and History Conferences in Lisbon in 2008 and Ghent in 2010.

by representatives of regionalist movements who found themselves forced to renegotiate territorial authority. This list is by no means complete, but should suffice here to suggest to what extent and for which actors global labour history became relevant in a new way.

In a new hierarchy in the production of knowledge about global connections, postcolonial critics have certainly initially taken a back seat to this broad interest (and the political explosiveness of any interpretive authority about the phenomenon of dependent employees). They should not, however, be forgotten with the fascination – in my view, completely justified – for the way in which it has now become possible to integrate local knowledge into global interpretation patterns. Here the local is often located in the South, while the integration takes place in the North. The expansion of an academic infrastructure in several of the resource-rich countries of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, as well as the new possibilities for regional confederations, give rise to hopes or fears (depending on one's temperament) that this relation will soon change, although it is still unclear whether regional hegemony or perspectives critical of domination and exploitation will gain ground here.

The IISH has also gone beyond compiling an overview of the current state of international research, however significant this feat – assisted by representatives of the Global South and area studies – has been for Western historiography.

Marcel van der Linden's monograph, *Workers of the World*, offers insight into the path taken in Amsterdam for a reconceptualization of the field. The book is a collection of essays, several of which appeared in various anthologies and journals between 1994 and 2007. Six of the sixteen chapters deal with new material, and the introduction successfully ties the different parts together.

This arrangement has the advantage that the respective texts address concrete issues, in particular those of conferences, which allows the volume to take a systematic passage through the central fields of discussion. As the book's subtitle accurately states, these essays revolve around redefining important categories and situating Van der Linden's approach in relation to other schools also dedicated to the investigation of labour history. These intermediate steps on the path to a global history of labour and workers derive their persuasiveness from the critique of a long historiographical tradition that does indeed have much illuminating to offer, but at the same time appears to impede a global-historical perspective.

The central idea of the book is presented in Part 1: "Conceptualizations". Marcel van der Linden's focus is not further immersion in a debate about the ideal type of the doubly free wage labourer, but rather a registering of the diverse realities of dependent employment relations. This is the turn that he proposes away from Marx, whom he accuses of absolutizing a certain figure in the history of labour relations and thereby

devaluing all other forms as deviant or merely of transitional significance. Van der Linden wants to avoid precisely this restriction and pleads passionately and with good reason for a labour history that is as inclusive as possible. Only in this way can we overcome the stifling Eurocentrism that has made a labour history fixated on the doubly free wage labourer into an accomplice of teleological modernization theories, the consequences of which can be observed in diminishing solidarity with those exploited under capitalism.

From systematic perspectives the empirical research upon which Van der Linden's work is based doubtless provides overwhelming material confirming his thesis, and it is undeniable that the political orientation around the doubly free wage labourer led to various exclusions and ruthless devaluations (for instance, of the petty bourgeoisie, the lumpenproletariat, etc.). The history of the costs of this orientation has yet to be written, as part of a self-critique of portions of the labour movement that in this way contributed to a deeply Eurocentric modernization theory unable to comprehend adequately the global reality of exploitation relations or to establish worldwide solidarity.

A global history of labour and workers must, as Van der Linden convincingly argues, depart from the Marxist legacy in this crucial point. From this primarily *systematic* perspective, the author's concern is not to historicize Marx and to question the theoretical-historical, social, and political contexts of this congruence between ideal type and real type.

I think it is important to bear in mind, however, that in the situation before and after the defeat of 1848–1849 – a depressing experience given the high hopes – Marx sought to invent a historical subject capable of action. Legitimizing this invention of the proletariat through scientific means at a point in time when its contours could only be vaguely identified motivated the author of *Capital* politically. His analysis of the emergence of the relations in which such an invention would be possible included numerous references to the many other forms of dependent employment. His predictions (like all predictions, to be enjoyed with interest as well as with caution) and his disputes with competitors for interpretive authority within the emerging labour movement led to assessments that would subsequently prove to be disastrous.

Marcel van den Linden focuses with good reason on deconstructing the doubly free wage labourer as the core of the modern workforce. In doing so, however, he perhaps ignores the reasons for the enormous effectiveness of this emblematic figure, which appealed to the pride of the modern industrial workforce and augured hopes of a dialectical volte-face, as if this doubly free wage labourer had nothing to lose but his chains and was thus – through qualification and degree of organization stemming from the capitalist dynamic and the simultaneous absence of ties to the continuation of capitalism – born to be the carrier of a social order beyond capitalism.



As is well known, things turned out differently. The moral appeal did help to create a powerful opposition movement to capitalist exploitation. The working class of doubly free wage labourers, however, was unable to dismantle the hierarchical character of society and instead became part of it. This in turn made it possible to look at other forms of labour, which Marcel van der Linden addresses in subsequent chapters of the book by initially examining more precisely those cases in which *doubly* free wage labour is not self-evident: slave labour, all forms of subcontracted labour, coerced labour, and child labour (p. 20).

In recent decades research on slavery has no longer focused primarily on distinguishing in economic and social terms social formations based principally on slave labour, but rather on reconstructing the concrete circumstances, especially of modern slave labour. Here as well, the result has been insight into diverse transitions, which occasionally even come into conflict with the generally plausible moral indignation about the existence of slaves.<sup>4</sup> From the discussion of the numerous transitional forms, Van der Linden proposes the following definition: “Every carrier of labor power whose labor power is sold (or hired out) to another person under economic (or non-economic) compulsion belongs to the class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether the carrier of labor power him- or herself owns means of production.” (p. 33)

Subaltern workers, as Van der Linden calls them, are characterized by the fact that they are first and foremost subject to a “*coerced* commodification of their labor power” (p. 34). In this way the author succeeds in providing as inclusive a definition as possible for this fundamental category upon which he constructs his global labour history, by including both the diachronic diversity of labour relations since the early capitalism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as the variety of relationships (encountered synchronically even today) that emerged with the commodification of labour power. Compared to Marx’s own approach (expressed thereby in his concepts), such a definition incorporates numerous new empirical findings about the diversity of labour relations into a definition of the “class in itself”. However, the problem that especially interested Marx – how from these social relations a “class for itself” with a corresponding collective identity emerges – has not yet been resolved. Van der Linden by no means avoids this issue, but rather dedicates subsequent chapters of the book to precisely the issues of resistance forms and the (rudimentary) establishment of a transnational identity.

Using the collective term “the class of subaltern workers” (p. 31 and frequently thereafter) for slaves, self-employed workers, lumpenproletarians,

4. See Michael Zeuske, “Neue Arbeiten zur Sklaverei, zum Sklaven- und Kulihandel”, *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, 20:3 (2010).

and free wage labourers expands our view for potential forms of resistance in comparison to a historiography concentrating above all on strikes, which were employed primarily by doubly free wage laborers to attain higher wages and improved living conditions (Part 3 of the volume discusses these forms in various details.)

In the chapter “Why ‘Free’ Wage Labor?” Marcel van der Linden examines the particular cultural dispositions that induce employers and workers to agree to the model of free wage labour, which is by no means self-evident. In this way, the transition to the dominance of this model (at least in certain societies) is stripped of its necessity and inevitability. Van der Linden introduces instead a cultural-historical perspective here. His concern is to analyse the motivations of this transformation, which has been regarded as normal simply because of its frequency, but which by no means became universal and did not necessarily bring with it a massive improvement in living conditions or the elimination of insecurity in workers’ lives (pp. 55ff). This transformation has indeed frequently gone hand in hand with an expansion of workers’ capacities for action, since this reduction in the variety of labour relations allowed for a transparency that could accelerate the recognition of similar interests.

However, by insisting that this transition was neither necessary nor even advantageous in terms of employer cost analyses, Van der Linden opens an interesting line of research that calls for further empirical work: Which long-term cultural factors and which short-term political and economic factors were crucial for the establishment of the model of the doubly free wage labourers in certain regions of the world? Here labour history will not be able to manage in the future without research on the bourgeoisie, a field that is also in need of renewal. From this perspective, the dividing line between early modernity and the nineteenth century also loses its significance – not only because such a periodization oriented around developments in one region of the world necessarily appears dubious for any form of global history, but also because the cultural decisions in favour of one particular form of employment relations over another suggests significant path dependence.

In the next chapter Marcel van der Linden turns to an issue that has been relevant since Adam Smith: the extent to which slave labour and capitalist rationality are compatible. Through a cost analysis from the perspective of employers, the author shows that there are indeed numerous situations in which the use of subaltern workers as slaves appears rational. Here Van der Linden directly connects with recent discussions about the continuation of slave-like employment into the present day and once again demonstrates the fruitfulness of the category of subaltern workers.

Part 2 of the volume discusses different kinds of mutualism and cooperatives as organizational forms through which workers assisted one another in order to minimize relations of dependence due to a (short-term) demand

for resources or for security against constraints on their labour power. The emergence of the welfare state led to the bureaucratization and depersonalization of the corresponding relations between participants of these support systems. From a global perspective, however, Van der Linden points quite correctly to the fact that this nationalization of workers' mutual support was by no means the norm (p. 131). By also including producer cooperatives, the author remains true to his goal of depicting the diversity of employment relations. One does get the impression, however, that the connection here to subaltern workers – the focus of the previous section of the book – requires further research, as forms analogous to mutualism can doubtless be found beyond the class of wage labourers as well.

In Part 3 the author shifts perspectives from a more structural historically oriented definition of subaltern workers to an investigation of the different forms of resistance that workers have developed over the past 200 years. In addition to strikes, consumer protests, and trade union federations, chapter 12, "Labor Internationalism", seems to me particularly interesting for the book's objectives. Van der Linden discusses the traditions of cross-border solidarity as well as the factors that impeded such internationalism, and then proposes a provisional periodization: in the decades prior to 1848 a modern labour movement began to form and to communicate intensively about its self-conception; the distinction between "respectable workers" and other parts of the proletariat became crucial here at least within the European context – and this is also where the doubly free wage labourer privileged by Marx is anchored culturally.

However correct this might be, one could have also imagined an investigation of this period (and the previous centuries, which are astonishingly largely absent from the chapter) that included a discussion of the (dis)continuities between the interculturality of the Enlightenment and the anti-slavery movement, as well as the resistance forms of the "many-headed hydra",<sup>5</sup> on the one hand, and the early internationalism of the labour movement of the nineteenth century, on the other. Here the author clearly falls below the standards he sets for himself in other parts of the book and focuses his presentation too much on the classic western European labour movement.

Van der Linden notes the existence of a sub-national internationalism during the period between 1848 and 1870, by which he means in particular that membership in associations was not yet pre-structured through national organizations. This began to change after 1870 in an approximately twenty-year transitional phase, until the internationalism of

5. This is the term that Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have chosen for their book on subaltern workers tied to the early modern Atlantic: *The Many-Headed-Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000).

national organizations predominated between c.1890 and c.1960, during which time international organizations with individual memberships declined massively in significance. Van der Linden notes another transition beginning in the 1960s, which could perhaps best be called transnationalization. This transition occurred within transnational businesses, along globally oriented commodity chains, as well as through the spread of nationally oriented trade unions to foreign countries with a markedly lower degree of trade-union organization (principally the “Third World”) and was flanked by the activities of NGOs in the realm of workers’ rights (initiatives against child labour, ecologically questionable production, slave-like forms of exploitation, etc.).

If we review the existing literature on international organizations, the author undoubtedly makes a well-founded reference here to a largely suppressed dimension that is certainly worth pursuing further. His systematic approach should make it easier for researchers to situate their case studies within this field; at the same time, the periodization he proposes represents a challenge for global-historical approaches that suggest a similar caesura for the 1960s, but in their evaluations of the long nineteenth century offer proposals oriented less around the dates of European history.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, chapter 15 presents an excellent overview of the integration of non-capitalist societies into the world of subaltern workers and their employers. Using the example of the Iatmul in Papua New Guinea, Van der Linden examines in detail how a secondary evaluation of anthropological field reports – combined with classic archival sources from mission societies and colonial or mandate administrations – can add hitherto ignored dimensions to the global history of workers.

Global labour history can – as the author concludes after a jaunt through different aspects of a history as yet unwritten and in large parts not even researched, but which nevertheless remains central for the genesis of contemporary capitalism – either be the most inclusive possible history of all aspects of human labour, or focus on global networks of labour relations as the most important basis for the observable global process of commodification (p. 367). For practical research and political reasons, Van der Linden’s sympathies lie with the latter perspective, which represents a restriction only at first glance since the author presumes that this systematic focus will provide the greatest contributions to understanding the present.

Here the author once again summarizes his approach. Initially expanding the conception of labour history to include all possible variants of labour commodification, he consciously introduces the concept of the

6. I mention here only the profound caesura between 1840 and 1880 proposed by Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, during which global conditions were established, or the suggestion by Charles Maier that the years between c.1860 and c.1970 can be designated as a regime of territoriality.

class of subaltern workers without further restrictions. He then examines these subaltern workers and their employers from a global perspective, whereby the changing structural composition of the subaltern world working class over the past 500 years becomes the focus of a structural history of the working class. This ever recurring recomposition enabled different forms of collective action by workers to improve their living conditions, which in turn led at different points in time to various ways of becoming aware of collective interests.

This, however, raises a number of questions. How have members of the world class of subaltern workers, living and labouring under such different conditions, communicated with each other? How have they come together in order to engage in collective action? And how can researchers approach these processes of perception and learning? Here classic labour history often took one part for the whole and substituted teleological hopes for empirical investigations.

Marcel van der Linden has written a superb book, which will be more than merely rounded out by further research at the Amsterdam institute. The volume outlines an agenda on which researchers in this field will work for some time to come. This will doubtless also lead to conceptual and pragmatic clarifications. What is crucial, however, is not that one agrees with the author in all points, but rather whether the perspective he proposes opens doors. And this, I think, is the case in at least two respects: If we avail ourselves of the worldwide diversity of historically observable labour relations, we gain the capacity to perceive the basis of our contemporary world in globally operative working conditions. And, conversely, from the current diversity of the social situations of dependent employees and the possibilities and impediments these imply for solidarity along global production networks we can learn much about the potential for the formation of a class of subaltern workers in previous centuries, which we can investigate more intensively in archives.