

# **52<sup>nd</sup> ITH Conference**

## **Commodity Chains and Labour Relations**

**15-17 September 2016**  
**Museum Arbeitswelt Steyr/Upper Austria**

Conference language: German / English

### **CALL FOR PAPERS**

Due to the increasing linkage and hierarchical connection of global production sites, the concept of global commodity chains has become indispensable for the investigation of production at a global scale. It is based on the observation that commodity production often – and increasingly since the 1970s – exceeds the boundaries of production sites in one country and that specific production processes are being outsourced to subsidiary or subcontracting companies in other countries and, thus, divided among several locations with different legal, wage, social and fiscal systems. Their combination can save costs. In producing raw materials and food, primary producers have also been integrated into transnational commodity chains.

Approaches and concepts in the historical and contemporary commodity chain research differ depending on whether the unequal division of labour in the world-system, the organisation of business networks or the possibility of upgrading companies, regions or states are emphasized. A global historical perspective demonstrates that transnational supply chains – outsourcing and splitting production processes to different locations – are historically by no means new phenomena: Particularly in the textile and metal sector export production has been characterized by transnational commodity chains at least since the “long 16<sup>th</sup> century”. Even before then, interregional trade existed that occasionally took the shape of commodity chains. In the long term, periods of local centeredness and transregional combination of locations seem to have been alternating.

The ideal-typical distinction between “producer-driven” and “buyer-driven commodity chains” is also relevant for the analysis of power relations from a historical perspective. Whereas large, vertically integrated and multinational industrial enterprises control the usually capital- and technology-intensive production process (e.g. in the automotive industry) in the first case, it is commercial companies and trademark proprietors organising decentralised production networks between regions and beyond national borders in the second case (production of food and consumer goods). Control and governance of these arrangements have become important research areas.

So far, research has given little attention to the specific relations of production, the organisation of the work process within the particular links of a chain and the exchange ratios between them. Therefore, commodity chain research frequently concludes in some kind of “commodity fetishism”. Work – although the basis of production in every involved location – is being neglected as a research subject or merely addressed as a cost factor, without taking interest in the workers, the work processes and the working conditions.

The conference aims to empirically investigate labour relations in commodity chains in their diversity and combination and, thus, also aims to contribute to the conceptual debate on work and labour, value, the functioning of capitalism and the agency or lack of power of directly and indirectly involved producers. On the one hand, it is of central interest to what extent and how working conditions, labour relations and work experiences in particular locations have

influenced the formation of product chains. On the other hand, the impact of the involvement in such product chains on labour relations and workers in the particular locations will be explored.

The conference focuses on the role of work and labour in the commodity chain:

- The focus is on the mobilisation of labour force for work within the commodity chains and their incorporation and involvement in commodity chains, the (individual and organised) actions of workers and the question how the willingness for integration, refusal and social struggles impact the specific composition and development of different commodity chains.
- Special attention will be given to the combination of different labour relations and the effects of such combinations on the companies and workers located at different positions in the production chain, including the linkage of workers operative within the commodity chains with their family members performing unpaid work in their respective households. This requires a broad concept of work including regulated and informal, paid and unpaid, free and unfree work.

We invite contributions focusing on labour and labour relations and addressing:

- different periods from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (cross and longitudinal sections) with regional, international and global scope;
- all economic sectors (from agriculture and raw materials production to cottage industries and industrial production to development, logistics and transport);
- the infrastructure of commodity chains (transport, labour supply, order procurement, transnational management);
- mechanisms of control and regulation as well as the distribution of power, income and added value along the chain (forms of governance, role of governmental institutions, treaties and international organisations);
- conceptual issues in a general-theoretical way, in combination with case examples or as the synopsis of case examples;
- the relations between the respective workplaces and their social context.

The city of Steyr – the historic hub of a commodity chain in the metal sector – serves as an exemplary venue. Since the early modern period this chain has extended from the Styrian Erzberg to the processing regions of the Eisenwurzen – that were supplied with food (products) from the Alpine foothills – to the sites of highly specialised further processing to weapons and tools in the world economy at that time. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this commodity chain was replaced by centralised metal factories in Steyr that merged all processing steps in their factory halls. While the old factories in the historical Wehrgraben district have been museumized, the city still hosts important companies of the metal, automotive and arms industry that nowadays are however integrated into global commodity chains. Thus, contributions on the transformation of the role of the city of Steyr and the region Eisenwurzen in transregional production networks and on the role of labour relations and labour conflicts in shaping these relations are particularly welcome.

## **SUBMISSION**

Proposed papers should include:

- abstract (max. 300 words)
- biographical note (max. 200 words)
- full address und e-mail address

Proposals to be sent to **Lukas Neissl**: [lukas.neissl@doew.at](mailto:lukas.neissl@doew.at)

## **TIME SCHEDULE**

Submission of proposals: by **10 January 2016**

Notification of acceptance: **14 February 2016**

Full papers or presentation versions: by **15 August 2016**

## **PREPARATORY GROUP**

*Ulbe Bosma (International Institute of Social History)*

*Karin Fischer (Johannes Kepler University Linz)*

*Erich Landsteiner (University of Vienna)*

*Jürgen Kocka (Berlin Social Science Center/WZB)*

*Andrea Komlosy (University of Vienna)*

*Lukas Neissl (ITH)*

*Susan Zimmermann (ITH)*