

Conference Report of the 50th ITH Conference

“Work and Compulsion: Coerced Labour in Domestic, Service, Agricultural, Factory and Sex Work, ca. 1850-2000s”

Linz, 26-28 September 2014

by Dietmar Lange

In its anniversary year the ITH continued the conference cycle on labour relations beyond typical industrial wage labour that had started in the previous year. This year the conference focused on the exploitation of human labour in the context of coerced labour and debt bondage. The conference organisers emphasized their aim to investigate different coerced labour relations beyond chattel slavery (understood as the legal ownership of humans) as these forms of coerced labour have – contrary to chattel slavery – received little scholarly attention in the historical and social sciences research. As the organisers stated in their call for papers, most states would still tolerate labour relationships involving violent control, economic exploitation through the forced appropriation of labour power, restriction of workers’ freedom of movement and fraudulent debt obligations after the abolition of slavery in the course of the 19th and 20th century. Hence, the conference aimed at investigating these forms of coerced labour in a global historical perspective.

Even though the conference intended to address labour relations characterized by compulsion after respectively beyond classic commercial slavery in the Atlantic region – in many contributions and discussions it continually remained present as a horizon of reference. This fact was also made clear by the first keynote lecture of **Michael Zeuske**: He brushed the conference against the grain even before its beginning, in so far as he emphasized the continuities of slavery and slavery-like relations even after the abolition movement. Thereby, he explicitly rejected a master narrative according to which a linear advancement from slavery to freer (or at least less pressing unfree) relations under the influence of liberal and humanist forces could be observed in a global historical perspective. The discussion whether slavery would be quasi “eternal”, whether “legal ownership” has to be a central feature of slavery and whether a too broad notion of slavery would not be analytically useless (and politically doubtful) has not been concluded until today and also accompanied this conference.

The conference was organised along five consecutive thematic panels on the politics of coerced labour in agriculture and industry, sex work and migration, convict labour, unfree labour in the “free” capitalist world and national and international policies on unfree labour. Furthermore, two panels for doctoral researchers were organised, in which they presented and discussed their dissertation projects. Just as last year, the conference was characterized by numerous young international participants from various disciplines and subfields of history, sociology, anthropology and law. Definitions and concepts, theoretical approaches and political perspectives were discussed very actively and also controversially. In this respect the conference can be referred to as successful, even if many questions remained pending and even more questions arose.

Therefore, I will not discuss the way more than 20 contributions on the basis of the mentioned panel topics, but rather refer to the range of topics and the discussions alongside of five emphasises that were highlighted in the concluding debate. The hereinafter mentioned contributions only constitute a very small segment of the conference programme. The entire programme can be consulted under http://www.ith.or.at/konf_e/50_programm_final_e.pdf.

The debate on definitions and classifications of compulsion in labour relations constituted a main focus. In an overview on the legal classifications **Magaly Rodríguez García** emphasized that she prefers to use coerced labour as an umbrella term rather than the notion of forced labour – coerced labour in a physical sense – used in international legislation, as *coerced* also implies psychological and not directly violent physical compulsion. At the same time she insisted on the necessity of adequate differentiations in order to respond to different forms of compulsion in labour relations. In other contributions and discussions the currently popular notion of “modern slavery” was criticised (e.g. by **Nicole J. Siller**). This term would obscure changes and would at the same time distract from the conditions in legal standard employment relationships by scandalising certain forms of labour relations as slavery.

Therefore, the debate on definitions and concepts was closely intertwined with the discussion on continuities between free and unfree labour as well as the fluctuation between different forms of labour. The debate on the “end after the end” of slavery can be subsumed hereunder – for instance, in the US-American South (**Nicola Pizzolato**), where despite the abolition of slavery Afro-Americans still worked under similar conditions on the plantations for 70 years – this time in different forms of debt bondage. In other contributions a strict delimitation to work under free labour contracts was questioned. In this context the Marxist legal theorist Eugen Paschukanis was quoted (**Giselle Sakamoto Souza Vianna**), who defined the free labour relationship in capitalism as one, in which “individuals are being forced to voluntarily sell their labour power”. At the same time an orientation along a liberal contract theory analysing and conceptualising social relations as relations between legal subjects was criticised in the discussions as methodical individualism.

The role of gender relations in coerced labour relations constituted a third point. This aspect was particularly approached along the topics of sex work and human trafficking. Not only the different self-perception of sex workers (**Johanna Neuhauser**) was addressed in this context, but also the masculine habitus of male pimps (**Julia Laite**). Nonetheless, it was assessed in the discussion that the role of gender in the interaction with coerced labour and migration has not yet been definitely clarified.

The latter – the question regarding free and unfree migration – constituted a topic that in other contexts is less often addressed in connection with coerced labour, although it bears a close relation as – for instance – the contribution of **Rossana Cillo** on migrant workers in Italian agriculture made obvious. In these cases the immigration policy itself contributes to creating coerced relations at the workplace – for example, by tying residence permits to the workplace or by impeding a regulation through the criminalisation of undocumented immigration.

The example of migrant work also reveals the close connection with the last issue: the compatibility of capitalism and unfree labour. In several contributions and the concluding debate itself the idea of an advancement in the sense of a progressive development from unfree to free labour as well as monolithic perceptions about labour as free wage labour resulting from a Eurocentric perspective were rejected. Instead, many contributions revealed a continuity and an interaction of unfree and free labour relations across different historic periods and ruptures: For instance, the contributions of **Christian G. de Vito** on convict labour in the Spanish colonies and **Justin F. Jackson** on forced recruitments for road building in the Philippines after their conquest by the USA. Both of them emphasized that coerced labour in the implementation of capitalism in these cases is not to be understood in the meaning of “primitive accumulation”, but rather as a means of creating the respective infrastructure and subjectivities. A similar continuity also became apparent in the contributions of **Jyoti Bhosale** on coerced labour in British India and **Geetisha Dasgupta** on coerced labour in 20th century post-colonial India. In these cases coerced labour also took place within the context of disciplining measures (convict labour in the factory), but also of governmental “biopolitics” (measures against hunger and unemployment).

Altogether the conference left a positive impression; a fact to which also an evening lecture on the second conference day at the *Wissensturm Linz* (a cultural and educational centre of the City of Linz) contributed, where two Austrian trade union initiatives working on the documentation of forced labour relations and in support of affected – mainly migrant – workers. But also this year a lacking political-economic analysis that would have taken into account a more precise evaluation of long-term continuities and ruptures was criticized. Furthermore, uncertainties concerning the role and importance of legal definitions for historical research remain. Thus, a number of contributions would also have been possible within the scope of addressing the disposition of labour and its formation. In this context it was also referred to the topic of the third part of the conference cycle: "Work and Non-Work". For the first time an ITH Conference will not take place in Linz, but in Berlin from 17-19 September 2015 in cooperation with the International Research Center "Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History" (re:work) at the Humboldt-Universität.

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An adapted German version of this conference report was originally published for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation under

http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/images/Themen/Geschichte/Bericht_50_ITH.pdf.

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