

51st ITH Conference (Berlin, September 2015)

Conference Opening, 17 September 2015

Opening remarks by Susan Zimmermann, ITH President

Without exaggeration it can be stated that this conference is taking place during an extraordinary historical moment. Violence is escalating globally, and both violence and the decomposition of the rule of law are spreading in Europe in such forms as has been rather marginal in this part of the world so far. Because some of the tragic and outrageous events signaling this development took place in Austria, the home of the ITH, and in Hungary, an important backbone of the border-crossing character of the ITH back then in the middle of the Cold War, the two countries have been in the spotlight of media attention in the last couple of weeks. On September 5, 2015, during the first peak of the refugee crisis on the highways and rail tracks all over the country, and in the streets of Budapest, the Editorial Board of the Hungarian Journal *Eszmélet*, or *Consciousness* in English, released a short statement. In 1989, *Eszmélet* was the first independent scholarly journal established in Hungary, committed, as state socialism was shattered into pieces, to the struggle for an alternative systemic change. The text issued in September 2015 firmly places the responsibility of the right-wing Hungarian government for the humanitarian and political catastrophe in the country in the broader context of European refugee policies within and outside the EU-borders, and European co-responsibility for war and destruction in the Middle East. In conclusion it says:

“The ‘turbulences’ within the world system visibly have reached a new quality: the world system is shaken by the consequences of the warlike adventures of the hegemonic capitalist state (the USA) and its allies, and the class struggle of these powers against their own populations in the name of ‘austerity’. The streets of Bagdad, Athens, Baltimore and now also of Budapest, though in a dissimilar manner, descend into the chaos of world capitalism as it is eating up itself.

It must become obvious: The search for an alternative is not a gentlemen’s passion, it is not a hobby and not a personal obsession, but imperative for survival.”

What can labour history, what can the ITH contribute in terms of developing concepts which help us understand how the world (of work) globally has been characterized by more or less inequality, and more or less violence, in certain periods of time and in different places? The ITH, historically, has been the product of both the Cold War between the East and the West, and its politically containing and enabling features as it continued to dominate the global theatre. After 1989, even if thoroughly shaken by the stormy political circumstances of the 1990s, the ITH managed to partake in and promote the turn to more global perspectives on the past and present of labour, and to nurture these perspectives even within Europe. It did so in a period when in the core regions of our globe, and amongst core strata of the working populations everywhere, we witnessed the

dismantling of workers' rights, the reduction of their share in the value produced, and mounting insecurity and instability of the life of these formerly more privileged strata of the working classes of the world. The rise of global labour history as a new paradigm in these years clearly was a reaction to this evaporation of the 'old' working class and in this sense the turn to global labour history was, once again, driven by historical developments centered on the core regions of the world. Yet, by the same token new global labour history makes productive use of the falling-apart of the old, in order to contribute to the construction of something new – quite similar to what *Eszmélet* had tried to achieve in Hungary in 1989. On this second level, new labour history aims to build some of the important scholarly 'hinterland' for the struggle for a new world order which would be more rather than less egalitarian, and less rather than more violent on a global scale. The new global labour history has enlarged and reversed the glasses through which we see the world of labour. It focuses on what has been labeled marginal labour to understand better why and how concepts in use in the old labour history have been restrictive in more than one sense, and in order to develop integrative perspectives which help us to see the world of labour as a whole. It looks at unpaid labour and non-work so that we understand better how these demarcation lines, and the blurring thereof, have been an important organizing principle in the struggle over the production and distribution of value. The new global labour history, in other words, has responded to the post-Cold War condition, to a new era of unstable and unequal globalization induced by the end of the Cold War, by generating forms of integrative thinking and debate about the world of labour which might contribute to the "search for an alternative" as is being advocated, amongst many others, by our Hungarian colleagues from the journal *Eszmélet*.

In this sense I am looking forward to hopefully most exciting exchanges and debates amongst all of us in the days to come. I hope to learn more about the oscillating relationships between work and non-work under a myriad of circumstances and with a myriad of actors involved, and about the larger intellectual implications of our findings on this important theme for our thinking about the world of labour from a global perspective.