



53rd ITH Conference

Worlds of Labour Turned Upside Down – Revolutions and Labour Relations in Global Historical Perspective

Linz/Upper Austria, 21–23 September 2017

Conference languages: German / English

CALL FOR PAPERS

After a long quarantine, “revolution” is back as a topic of historiographical debate. The upcoming anniversary of 1917 – arguably one of, if not *the* most momentous event of the 20th century – has further fuelled this renewed interest. The reasons for the trend might be sought, on the one hand, in broader contemporary social experiences of crisis – including economic crises, recent upheavals in the Arab world, or movements and governments in Latin America aiming at transformation or even explicitly revolution. On the other hand, internal shifts within the domains of historical studies have made revolutions an attractive object of study again: Under the influence of dynamic debates around “global history” and “transnational perspectives” revolutions have emerged as an obvious object of study for those interested in the circulation of ideas, persons, commodities, practices, etc., as well as the connection between locations.

Taking this fresh attention given to revolutions as a starting point, the ITH Conference 2017 proposes to realign the focus and to discuss the specific interrelation between revolutions and labour relations. This interrelation is, of course, most conspicuous in all those movements and political projects, especially after 1917, in which a shift in ownership and labour relations was explicitly seen as a prime mover of revolutions. Labour relations were, however, not only on the mind of actors who were following Marxist ideas about what constitutes the social. Furthermore, also without an elaborated ideology and programme on labour-related issues, revolutionary processes have always been greatly shaped by the crises and conflicts emerging from the worlds of labour and by the aspirations and agency of labourers. For instance, the revolution of the slaves of Saint-Domingue in 1804 has to be seen as such directly labour-related upheaval (figuring as the iconic example of so many revolts and attempted revolutions by those bound by modern Atlantic chattel slavery). Yet, the importance of all matters of labour can also be seen in more recent events: for example, in a number of labour conflicts during the 2000s that preceded the movements of the Arab spring.

Approaching change within the “worlds of labour”, the conference aims at bringing the renewed interest in revolutions together with the vibrant debates in the field of Global Labour History. The latter has evolved over the last two decades focusing on the analysis of labour relations – emphasizing their diversity and the interrelated co-existence of various forms in the development of modern capitalism. Broadening both the geographical scope of labour history and the notion of “worker” it has set out to include the history of slaves and other unfree labourers, as well as of self-employed, informal,

precarious, or unpaid (subsistence) workers. How were revolutions grounded and shaped by this diversity of labour relations? How did different groups of labourers act in and influence revolutionary processes? And, how did these revolutionary transformations determine shifts in the composition of the labour force as well as the shape of labour relations?

Starting from these basic questions about the interrelations of revolutions and labour, the following themes, topics, and lines of enquiry are possible:

Before-&-After-analysis: One line of enquiry can be a systematic analysis of labour relations before, during, and after revolutions. Contributions might analyse both the transformation of labour relations “on the ground” and the changes in the institutional and legal frameworks of labour (such as the introduction of novel labour laws, or, as in some countries after 1918, comprehensive “labour constitutions”). Such papers might focus both on the groups of labourers directly involved in revolutionary struggles or on those not, on groups faring better during or after revolutionary transformations or on those faring worse, on intended changes and unintended consequences.

Labour, Revolution and War: A further dimension which merits attention is the frequent interrelation between war and revolutionary events. As epitomized in the experience of WWI, wars often brought about sharp and enforced changes for labourers, turning workers into soldiers or dictating the militarization of labour. This had multiple repercussions for the whole of society, with the intensified recruitment of women for industrial non-household work being among the most important. As wars and home front policies caused multiple and contradictory shifts along the spectrum of “free” and “unfree” labour, the composition of the industrial workforce as well as the worlds of everyday reproduction, these upheavals both fuelled revolutionary unrest in the wake of wars and, in many cases, cast long shadows on the way labour was organised during revolutionary periods and post-revolutionary societies. It is this interlinkage between “labour under war” and “labour under revolution” which will be at the heart of this line of enquiry.

Microanalysis: A sizeable literature has built up over the last decades allowing unique glimpses at the “big” processes of revolutions by focusing on rather small units either of production (factories, workshops, plantations, households) or community (villages, neighbourhoods). In that, one of the topical issues for researchers about revolutions in the 20th century is the self-organisation of workers, peasants, and other groups in councils, soviets, or committees. Which insights do these approaches allow on the ways labour relations have been transformed and re-arranged during revolutionary periods? How did local issues and labour grievances connect to more overarching revolutionary themes? Which interrelations between female reproductive and subsistence labour on the one hand, and out-of-household labour on the other hand, can be observed during revolutionary periods? In which ways did the gendered division of labour interact with revolutionary processes?

Tele-connections: Papers in this line of enquiry might, for one, analyse translocal connections between actors in different localities, e.g. the (seasonal) migration of labourers during revolutionary periods and its repercussions, or the active solidarities between actors considering themselves to be revolutionaries. At the same time, they might also focus on transhistorical connections between revolutions by analysing how actors in revolutions referred to previous examples, e.g. how actors during 1917 referred to 1789 in its vision of social transformation of labour.

Revolution as labour: Revolutions have generated a specific type of social actor – those living for and from revolutionary activity. From intellectual instigator to political orator, soldier to activist, or emissary to spy, this line of enquiry will analyse the conditions, forms, and changing characteristics of those making a living while or through being dedicated or enlisted to revolutionary activity.

Thinking revolution and labour relations: The interrelation of revolutions and labour relations is also shaped by the ways actors (both of the time and subsequently) have reflected upon and intervened regarding this relation. What were the aspirations revolutionary actors had about labour relations? How did after-the-event interpretations – by activists, intellectuals, or, more specifically, historians – conceive this interrelation? Did they highlight specific factors, such as technological change or the role of ideology?

While this list is not exhaustive and the organizers are open to all proposals connecting to the general topic of the conference, this conference particularly seeks to encourage papers which use comparative approaches (both synchronic and diachronic) or point to connections between places and actors apart. The conference encourages papers covering all world-regions and going beyond the well-known array of “classical” revolutions. The organizers also encourage a long global-historical perspective and the conference is open to papers on different periods. This includes the more remote processes and events in early modern period or the transformations around 1989 and beyond, as long as they stick to the focus on the interrelation of revolutions and labour relations in an original way. The conference will also explicitly use the notion of larger transnational “cycles of revolution” presupposing the existence of interconnected clusters of revolutions affecting different regions at the same time.

This conference will be organized in a spirit that expressly acknowledges the fundamentally contested nature of all revolutions (both among actors of the time and subsequent historians). It adheres to a rather broad notion of “revolution” – including failed or attempted revolutions, revolutionary situations, as well as those imposed from above or through war. It nevertheless insists that the debate is on condensed (and relatively short) processes of crises, conflict, and change. The conference’s focus thus remains on cases where there was both an element of (political) transition and one of (social) transformation. While this encourages papers on, for instance, the interrelations between decolonization and labour relations, other instances in which the notion of “revolution” is common to denote processes of deep transformation (such as “industrial revolution”, “Fordist revolution”, “neoliberal revolution”, etc.) will not be at the centre of interest.

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

TIME SCHEDULE

Submission of proposals: by **29 January 2017**

Notification of acceptance: **1 March 2017**

Full papers or presentation versions: by **20 August 2017**

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