

ITH 50: Notes on its History

by Susan Zimmermann, 22 April 2014, Auditorium Maximum, University of Vienna

2014 is not only the year for the ITH to celebrate its 50th anniversary. 2014 also marks the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the International Workingmen's Association in 1864, and the coinciding of these two anniversaries is no coincidence: The ITH – back then: “International Conference of Labour Historians” or “Internationale Tagung der Historiker der Arbeiterbewegung” – was established in 1964 in the aftermath of a scholarly conference held on the occasion of the centenary of the First International entitled “Austria-Hungary and the International”. This conference brought together historians of the labour movement from various successor states of the Habsburg Monarchy, and thus from both sides of the Iron Curtain; it was also aimed at working for the inclusion of topics related to the history of the labour movement into the programme of the 12th International Congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences to be held in Vienna in summer 1965. The participants of the 1964 Conference on Austria-Hungary and labour internationalism “suggested starting a regular exchange of experience”¹. As a result, the first regular ITH Conference was held in Linz in September 1965, in the immediate aftermath of the Vienna Congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences.

Two Austrian historians, the communist Herbert Steiner, in 1963 co-founder and for many years academic director of the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW), and the social democrat Rudolf Neck, who in 1979 was to become the Director General of the Austrian State Archives, had been instrumental both in organizing the 1964 Conference and establishing the ITH. They also were driving forces behind the “Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in Österreich”/“Association for the History of the Labour Movement in Austria”, which organized the 1964 Conference and had been promoting the establishment of modern labour historiography in Austria since the early 1960s. Both of these men were to remain central figures in the ITH for the following decades.

A recent study on the history of the international community of historians describes the Vienna World Congress of the historical profession in 1965 as a landmark of change in the ongoing Cold War confrontation within the historical sciences: The participants were made to realize that the simplifying dichotomy between East and West and between bourgeois and Marxist historiography could no longer be sustained. Marxist historiography from the Eastern bloc presented itself in a process of de-petrification and renewal; the “undogmatic” Marxist and

¹ Winfried R. Garscha: The ITH and its “Linz Conferences” / Die ITH und ihre “Linzer Konferenzen”, ITH 1994, 24.

socialist historians from Western countries made their presence felt; and there was an increasing interest in and knowledge of “social and structural research and the theoretical element contained within them” of non-Marxist Western historiography. The Habsburg Monarchy was discussed, among other things, as an example of the failure of half-hearted social democratic internationalism.²

What are we to make of these facts and contexts? In one sense, the ITH was certainly the result of changes within the Cold War confrontation on historiography; these changes reflected the shifting international political landscape of the time. It may also be speculated that the ITH was the outcome of what Immanuel Wallerstein has depicted as a particular *conjoncture* when describing the process of alternative institutionalization for the case of the *Annales* and Fernand Braudel. In any case, the founders and early leading figures of the ITH seized Fortuna’s proffered hand with a view to counteract the ongoing academic marginality of labour history within the historians’ profession on the international level during the Cold War period. They may also have made good use of the geopolitical location of Austria as a neutral state in the heart of Europe to create a successful alternative historians’ internationalism on stable institutional foundations, although outside of the traditional(ist) bulwarks of the academia.

Yet no definite conclusions can be drawn regarding the interaction of these and other factors in “the making” of the ITH up to now. (By the way: E.P. Thompson’s “The Making of the English Working Class” had been published in 1963.) To date only a few precious publications by Winfried R. Garscha assemble important information and reflection on the history of the ITH.

One thing we can, however, say for sure is that for decades to come the ITH somehow was to function as an institutional and intellectual incarnation of Cold War labour history. By the 1980s for many less conventional or politically radical students of history and professional historians the ITH was present as both a politically rather inconceivable and intellectually rather dissuasive construct. Politically inconceivable it was, at least for me, because I could not – I really couldn’t – make sense of how it was possible that loads of social democratic and communist historians would join forces, and would together realize any number of conferences on various aspects of the history of the labour movement – in, so it appeared to me from afar, immaculate mutual consent that this was the right thing to do. Was this a proof of the fact that dominant historiographic and political forces in the Eastern bloc were no longer intellectually committed to actually challenge the abysses of capitalism? Or was it a proof of the fact that the rules of

² Karl Dietrich Erdmann, *Toward a Global Community of Historians. The International Historical Congresses and the International Committee of Historical Sciences, 1898-2000*, edited by Jürgen Kocka and Wolfgang J. Mommsen in collaboration with Agnes Blänsdorf, Berghahn 2005, 249ff.

international diplomacy, with its formidable capacity to maintain inter-state relationships irrespective of ideological cleavage, had successfully overwritten the otherwise definitely irreconcilable cleavages between pro- and anti-capitalist socialist thinking?

These perspectives and questions furthermore fuelled my sense of intellectual dissuasion. The ITH functioned – I felt – with the full-scale backing of key official actors on this and the other side of the Iron Curtain. Such institutional setting, which involved the elite of state- and party-sponsored research institutions across the Eastern bloc as well as core institutions – insofar as labour was concerned – of the social democratic Austrian state, for my taste had for too long resulted in the production of intellectual shallowness, or at least in the endless reiteration of concepts and perspectives which I considered on the one hand ponderous and dated at the same time.

Yet such outsider-views circulating back then contrasted sharply with the experience of those who actually did travel to Linz in September, year after year, and, in quite a number of cases, did so throughout decades. “Linz”: Physically this was the rather remote and isolated Jägermayrhof, at the hillside on top of the city, where the annual international conferences of the ITH were held since 1965; it was also the famous “spirit of Linz” which had, against all counter currents, sheltered and intellectually stimulated labour historians from many different countries; there it was possible to reach out to each other across Cold War divisions; in “Linz” generations of historians from both sides of the Iron Curtain broadened their intellectual horizons and gained a sense of the intellectual currents in each other’s scholarly universe, and of what it meant institutionally and career-related to be a historian in both systems; in and beyond “Linz” an increasingly global network of labour historians, and so many life-long contacts and friendships, were shaped; new directions in writing the history of labour gained recognition; initial suspicion and confrontation notwithstanding, new ideas of feminist or cultural historians were adopted so as to remould the inherited canon; as early as 1978 a foundational conference about women workers and women in the labour movement in countries around the globe took place in Linz; and so on ... If anything, then this “spirit of Linz” is well and alive to the present day. The hospitality of the Upper Austrian Chamber of Labour and its Jägermayrhof has been indispensable alongside with countless others who have sustained the Linz Conferences all the way along.

If we sum up the components of the history and identity of the ITH in its pre-1989 history, we might argue that the ITH in this period thrived because of three entangled and productively interacting, foundational characteristics: its stature as a Cold War construct; its institutional entrenchment outside of the actual academe; and the fact that it brought together people with a

fundamental interest in and dedication to the history of labour, a theme which in the dominant international institutions of the time, and in the discourse of the established profession as a whole, remained a secondary enterprise – and which at the same time attracted many smart and in a broad sense progressive historians.

While the first of these three foundations of the ITH vanished with the end of the Cold War, the two other foundations – after the inevitable initial crisis – would gradually turn into an asset which enabled the ITH to enter an exciting second life-cycle. In other words, after 1989 the ITH lost its quasi-diplomatic function, but it could make positive use of its status as a massive institution of the otherwise rather tiny international traditions of labour history, and of its relative autonomy as a self-sustained and international organization which continued to enjoy the support of a variety of institutions related to labour and progressive-socialist politics. Under the presidency of Helmut Konrad and then Gabriella Hauch, who steered the ITH through this difficult period, this constellation at first enabled the ITH to withstand the political attacks on labour during the high-tide of neoliberalism and the low-tide of labour history as well as the vanishing interest in “class” as a relevant category of historical writing and social theory. While, sure enough, after 1989 in terms of choice of topics the Linz conferences were dedicated to what has been labelled as a change of identity³, they constantly kept “labour” or the “labour movement” in their very titles. From the 1988 Conference onwards the edited volumes published after each of the conferences featured selected contributions rather than the complete proceedings of the conference, a change that was definitely to the advantage of the ITH’s academic profile.

Yet, in 2003 one of the former presidents of the ITH at the annual General Assembly proposed the organized dissolution of the ITH.⁴ By then two things had become obvious: It had become clear that the global attack on labour and its institutions had caused chronic wounds in the material and political status of some of those institutions that for a long time had financially guaranteed the viability of the ITH. In addition – while during the Cold War co-operation with “communists” had carried political weight in the eyes of important factions within the historians’ establishment in the West – a considerable number of representatives of this establishment now had lost all interest in such co-operation.

But at the same time, the ITH in the early 2000s also experienced an upswing which, at least retrospectively, makes its fourth decade appear to be the cautious beginning of a second life-

³ Winfried R. Garscha, *Networking Labour Studies: The ITH Experience, 1965-2005*. Paper given at the 9th Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 2005, http://www.ith.or.at/ith_e/sydney2005_garscha.htm.

⁴ Garscha 2005.

cycle rather than a terminal crisis. From around the year 2000, the ITH experienced a most exciting intellectual renewal. The organization since then developed into an internationally highly visible and respected representative of a new labour history, which has attracted new generations of historians from all over the world. The conference of the year 2000 marked conceptual renewal, when Josef Ehmer and Helga Grebing brought together and subsequently edited (together with Peter Gutschner) a volume full of interesting papers on the “History and Future of Labour”. The volume is truly global in outlook, and in its introduction discusses conceptual changes which have since proven to be of central importance for a new, more inclusive and more global labour history. It also contains Marcel van der Linden’s foundational paper on “Globalizing labour historiography: The Amsterdam Approach”,⁵ which, among other things, advocates the broadening of the concept of labour so as to include unpaid, unfree, and informal labour, and in this way contributes to “mainstreaming” insights first developed by scholars of colonialism and feminist scholars into the emerging new field of global labour history. These and other inputs, and from 2005 the presidency of Berthold Unfried, helped to make positive use of a new *conjoncture* looming in the life of the ITH: As an international organization with its own infrastructure and institutional logic it could now be reconceived as not only representing the past, but also the future of progressive transnational labour history in a broad sense. After the onslaught of global economic liberalization, such new and more inclusive global and transnational history of labour, and social movements with a focus on labour, might finally be moving from the margin to the centre. The ITH has an important contribution to make to this new history which aims to rethink fate and fortune of labour across and within all world regions, including Europe.

Georges Haupt has once characterized not the First – 150 years old – but the Second International as “a giant with feet of clay”.⁶ The ITH has not been “a giant”, but a collective project which has intellectually and politically foregrounded labour and its history since half a century. My somewhat childish wish for its 50th birthday is that the “shaky material foundations”, from which the ITH is suffering today, would be turned within in less than no time into the steadiest and most shining ones.

⁵ Under the title “Globalizing Labour Historiography: The IISH Approach” this paper is available on the internet to the present day. <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/10/142.html>.

⁶ Georges Haupt, *Programm und Wirklichkeit. Die internationale Sozialdemokratie vor 1914*, Luchterhand 1970, 28. (Haupt puts the term in quotation marks.)