

Conference Report on the 55th ITH Conference

“Working on the Land: Actors, Societies and Environments”

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The 55th ITH Conference addressed the topic ‘Working on the Land: Actors, Societies and Environments’.

The conference focussed on agricultural work as co-production of society and nature, since this natural embeddedness, on the one hand, constitutes a specificity of agricultural production. On the other hand, the conference aimed at embedding rural labour relations in larger political and economic contexts. Thereby, commonalities and combinations with other labour relations should be uncovered in order to shine light on specific groups of actors, e.g. social movements, and other aspects such as class, power and property relations and mobility and migration. Furthermore, the conference intended to address historical developments interdisciplinary and globally, so that the contributions ranged across different disciplines and investigation periods and regions.

Following the welcome address of ITH President **Susan Zimmermann**, **Franz Molterer** (Chamber of Labour of Upper Austria) and **Ernst Langthaler** (Department of Social and Economic History, Johannes Kepler University Linz, and Institute of Rural History, St. Pölten) emphasized in their opening speeches that the global changes within the wake of climate change also require new thoughts on agricultural work. **Claudia Hahn** (City of Linz) on the other hand stressed the transformations in the world of work by progressing digitisation. Furthermore, Ernst Langthaler introduced different historiographic approaches towards agricultural work. Partly, agricultural work is being addressed as a special case of labour history by emphasizing its peculiarity due to its subjection to specific natural conditions. Other researchers accentuate the embeddedness of the history of rural labour in the history of labour by focussing on the interaction of agricultural and non-agricultural work.

In his keynote lecture, **Thijs Lambrecht** (Ghent University) examined the regulation of rural labour, with a focus on Western Europe from 1250-1900. After a historiographic overview, he outlined that laws regulating rural labour in the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period were in particular used by local and regional power elites and were only successful on a national level, if they were flexible enough to leave sufficient leeway. Furthermore, he underlined that the significance of legal measures did indeed decrease in the 19th century. However, informal forms of regulation increased and, thus, the wide-spread notion of free Western European agricultural workers is ‘historic fiction’.

The first panel on the second conference day focussed on state-led transformations of labour relations. **Holger Czitrich-Stahl** (Förderkreis Archive und Bibliotheken zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung, Berlin) gave a lecture on labour relations, agrarian question and organizational policy of the Prussian Social Democracy and trade union movement before 1918. He portrayed the development of different rural labour relations that, on the one hand, passed on feudal elements such as servitude and, on the other hand, created rural labourers with ‘free’ and ‘semi-free’ status. The Social Democratic Party was hardly able to gain a foothold in the countryside, among other reasons, because it failed to develop an independent rural programme. **Jessica Richter** (Institute of Rural History, St. Pölten) examined the state efforts to organise the labour market in interwar Austria. These efforts were conceived as measures against mass unemployment and should place unemployed Austrians to vacant agricultural jobs. However, they only had very limited success. The third paper of this panel addressed the Venezuelan Reforma Agraria and its impact by the example of the Wayúu. **Martin Schröder** (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg) introduced his work and described how the agrarian reform of 1960 emerged and how it attempted to react to the challenges posed by the rapid establishment of the oil industry for the formerly highly concentrated and at the same time highly fragmented Venezuelan agricultural sector. Schröder concluded that the state successfully pushed back traditional systems of ownership and regulation with these measures.

The second panel discussed labour markets. In the beginning, **Peter Woodley** (Australian National University, Canberra) outlined the changing labour relations in agriculture in South-Eastern Australia in 1880-1930. He illustrated that peasant farmers in the investigation period – given the choice to declare their solidarity with richer property owners or with agricultural labourers – more and more frequently chose the former. In her lecture, **Tina Bopp** (University of Basel) addressed the coloniality of power and work. With the help of decolonising methodology and the life course approach, she described the effects of the mass recruitment of seasonal workers by Western European agribusiness on the countries of origin by the example of Moldova and she analysed the inherent racism of these policies. In the third lecture of this panel, **Janina Puder** (Friedrich Schiller University Jena) discussed the consequences of the state-forced expansion of the palm oil production in Malaysia for migrant workers. These workers are excluded from prospects of socio-economic improvements that were associated with the national bioeconomy programme for palm oil production.

The papers of the following panel were discussed under the topic of commodity chains. **Rolf Bauer** (University of Vienna) gave a lecture on the production of poppy in Northern India that reached its peak in the second half of the 19th century. The poppy production was massively promoted and enforced by the colonial authorities and the local elites. The labour-intensive work was realised by peasant farmers. This enormously profitable business only paid off for the elites. **Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk** (Utrecht University) addressed the effects of the systematic economic exploitation of a colony on women and women's work by the example of Java from 1830-1870. The Crown of the Netherlands intended to increase the production of export goods (e.g. coffee and sugar) in order to increase the profitability of the colony. Thus, women and children were increasingly integrated into the colonial export production as well as subsistence agriculture in support of men. Thereby, Javanese women were for the first time also integrated into wage labour. In the last lecture of this panel, **Ernst Langthaler** (Johannes Kepler University Linz) examined soy cultivation in Manchuria from 1900-1930, in the US after World War II and in present-time Brazil. He outlined the shift from agro-ecological and labour-intensive forms of peasant cultivation to agro-industrial and capital-intensive forms of cultivation that characterized the developments in the examined period.

The fourth panel dealt with working bodies. The lecture of **Juri Auderset** (Archives of Rural History, Bern) focussed on the scientification of agricultural work in interwar Europe. Although there had been scattered scientific studies of agricultural work before World War I, a separate field of research only developed in the interwar period. Research was institutionalized and looked for possibilities for efficiency enhancement. However, these attempts repeatedly reached their limits since the dependence of agricultural work on nature obstructed harmonization with industrial work processes. In his lecture, **Peter Moser** (Archives of Rural History, Bern) investigated the importance of farm animals in the 19th and 20th century. Moser described the attempts to replace working animals by the employment of machinery and exemplarily addressed the work of Konrad von Meyenburg. However, working animals were used far longer than anticipated, because the relationship between agricultural workers and animals was more complex than models suggested. Moreover, the lecturer outlined that the social sciences have great difficulties to perceive animals as working actors, because their traditional view on industrial realities lacks the necessary terms and concepts. In her presentation, **Majda Černič Istenič** (University of Ljubljana) examined how peasant families deal with frequent occupational diseases and injuries in agriculture that receive little attention in the general public. In interviews realized in Slovenia, the lecturer assessed that these families do barely make use of public assistance in the case of a work accident or other vulnerabilities. Instead, attempts are made to solve such problems in traditional ways by the help of family members and neighbours.

The second conference day ended with a panel discussion on agricultural labour relations in present-day Austria and the role of migrant harvest workers. **Susi Haslinger** from the Austria trade union PRO-GE, **Lisa Bolyos** from the Sezionieri Campaign and **Karin Roller-Robbrecht** from migrare – Zentrum für MigrantInnen Oberösterreich discussed how the Sezionieri Campaign attempts to help these seasonal

workers to assert their legally entitled rights. The discussion – enriched by a lot of experience in political action – distinguished itself by profound expertise.

The last conference day started with a panel on preindustrial ruralities. **Erich Landsteiner** (University of Vienna) examined labour relations in Austrian Viticulture in the period from the 14th to the 17th century. He introduced his studies of the conditions in Krems and the Wachau valley. In contrast to the rest of Austria, in this region sharecropping – i.e. a type of labour relation, in which producers had a share in the yield – became widespread in the course of time. Landsteiner explained this phenomenon with the many absent landowners in this region that attempted to keep the costs for the control of the workers low. Moreover, the majority of the land belonged to church institutions that often concluded long-term tenancy agreements. In his lecture, **Klemens Kaps** (Johannes Kepler University Linz) talked about the proto-industrial production of glass and linen in the rural east of the Habsburg empire and its connections to transregional commodity chains. The labour relations developed very differently and varied between direct and indirect feudal coercion and wage labour. The third lecture of this panel by **Göran Rydén** (Uppsala University) dealt with agricultural work in the iron industry in 18th century Sweden, illustrated by the example of a bruk – a mix between an industrial and a rural village. By reference to a single villager, Rydén illuminated the complexity of labour relations between subsistence agriculture, working off debt and rent and actual wage labour. **Christiane Cheneaux-Berthelot** (Université Paris-Sorbonne/Paris IV) addressed the labour relations in the agrarian part of the Seine Department in the 19th century. She concluded that the proportion of propertied peasant farmers increased during the course of the second half of the 19th century. However, these peasant farmers partly did not only cultivate their own land, but also worked for other farmers.

The last conference panel offered three lectures that dealt with rural labour and power struggles. **Lisa Markowitz** (University of Louisville) outlined that the conditions in the production and marketing of alpaca wool in Southern Peru have changed since the emergence of industrial demand in the 1830s. Although new infrastructure strengthened access to the market, alpaca husbandry frequently remained with small-scale peasants. Among other factors, this can be explained by the spatial localization of the production zones and the dynamics of alpaca breeding. The last two lectures placed the investigation area into Northeast India. **Pheiga Amanda G.** (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai) focussed on the village of Longmai. On the one hand, the construction of an interstate highway and the involved sale of land have contributed to an increase of landlessness and, on the other hand, a certain kind of class division and class consciousness resting on property is emerging. In his lecture, **A. Lozaanba Khumbah** (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) addressed shifting agriculture in Northeast India. He outlined that agricultural transformations take place in a broader context and that, for instance, the expansion of infrastructure or the education system constitute factors that influence the development of local social relations. For his field of investigation, the greater proximity and accessibility of local markets has led to a transition from subsistence production to production for the market that does not only have impacts on labour relations by spreading wage labour, but also intervenes in the sensitive ecosystem.

The concluding discussion focussed on the relation of labour history to agricultural work and agricultural workers. The conference participants pointed to the similarities as well as the differences between agrarian work and other spheres of work such as industrial work that classically constitutes the main focus of labour historians. The immanent relatedness of agricultural work to nature and the associated impossibility of the absolute submission of the work process under the use of technology and human control is an important criterion of distinction. The question whether it is useful and even necessary to assign a special status to agricultural work in labour history was raised repeatedly. Furthermore, it was argued that the specific conditions under which working people live and work should be examined in a practice-oriented manner and researchers should be open to the specific characteristics of the different sectors and conditions. The status of agricultural work in labour history should be addressed and investigated by historical research and should not be answered a priori. The inclusion of rural labour into labour history is also important regarding connections to environmental history and also allows for a broader perspective on labour relations and labour history. The aspiration of the conference to investigate

and discuss agricultural work within the scope of labour history was constantly present during the conference. Also, the aim to work and discuss interdisciplinarily was realized, although it was noted during the concluding debate that many lectures referred to Europe and that the research area should be continuously expanded spatially.

Translated from German by Lukas Neissl