

**Report on the  
3<sup>rd</sup> European Labour History Conference  
Factory History Working Group Sessions  
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The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam hosted the 3<sup>rd</sup> European Labour History Conference. The event brought more than two hundred social scientists working on labour together. This conference is a special one; the program is made by working groups organized around a number of themes (for the list of the working groups see: <https://socialhistoryportal.org/elhn>). This bottom-up organizational structure not only produces highly coherent sessions; it also allows participants to engage in prolonged and deeper discussions along sessions and even conferences.

The Factory History Working Group has benefited from this structure immensely. Established at the founding meeting of the ELHN in 2013, the group has participated in all three Network conferences. The historical study of the factory with a renewed research agenda has been at the centre of the group's discussions. With each ELHN conference, as well as other network meetings, the group has probed further into what this agenda looks like. In Amsterdam, the group had four sessions and twelve presenters in total. Apart from a few familiar faces from previous meetings, the majority of the participants, including the audience, joined the group for the first time. This is a good sign of the continuing interest in factory level analysis as well as of the inclusive character of the group.

"Representing the Factory and its Workers: Texts, Images, Discourses" was the title of the first session that brought three papers on three different groups working in and on factories: workers, industrial photographers, and engineers. Yuan Yi's analysis of the definition and valorisation of skill at an early 20<sup>th</sup> century cotton mill in China was an example of how historical analysis on the factory level could be a fruitful intervention to national labour historiographies. In this particular case, Yi questioned Chinese labour historiography's categorization of cotton workers as unskilled labour. The arbitrary boundaries between "skilled" and "unskilled" were constructed on the bases of gender and education. Through using the perspective of "technology-in-use," Yi also presented examples of machine maintenance by workers not for securing the continuity of production but for pacing work. Her archival material included examples of factory folklore such as labour songs. One particular song mentioned rice cakes, staple food workers brought to factory to eat and sometimes to place between belts in order to decrease the looms' rotation speed. Skill and technology acquired new meanings in these stories.

Rick Halpern's paper on shop floor photography in the United States traced the intricate evolution of photographic form and the politics of workplace images. In the early twentieth century, cameras were used on the shop floor for surveillance, to document technological innovation, and to shape public perceptions of the corporations. After this initial phase as a tool of the management, reform-minded photographers used shop floor photography to expose the unhealthy conditions and depredations of the industrial workplace. Both waves depicted labour as object; a perspective that was not challenged until workers picked up the camera to document their experiences of industrial work and workplace in the 1930's. Halpern argued that this tradition, which reached matured form near the end of the twentieth century, deserves further exploration and study to understand the interplay between visual culture and the representation of work.

The last paper of the first session by Adelheid Voskuhl conceptualised the factory as the life-world of engineers; a professional group that owes its ascendance to the rise of the large factories. This paper traced how the work of influential "philosophers of the factory" such as Andre Ure, Charles Babbage, Karl Marx, Arnold Toynbee, Henry Ford, and Frederick Winslow Taylor inspired philosophical and

political reflection on the part of engineers in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. This was a time when engineers were also struggling to constitute themselves as a new professional and social group and elite. As part of this process, they developed increasing interest in philosophies of the factory and industrial production, and contributed to the popularization of such philosophies. These accounts influence to this day our utopias/dystopias of mass production and consumption. This paper analyses the production and consumption, as it were, of philosophies of the factory through regional, national, and international engineering periodicals, tracing engineers' practical and theoretical work in and of the factory in conjunction with their understandings of the factory as their "life-world."

The second session, "The Factory and its Aftermath: Transforming Spaces and Scales" addressed the spatial dynamics of factories from different angles. Elena Dinubila's paper analysed how the historical memory of a nuclear plant shapes the present politics of a quiet town in southern Italy. The question of the physical borders of factories have been a recurring one over the course of the years for the working group. Dinubila's research complicates this question by introducing the actual physical spilling effect in relation to environmental damage and public safety. Once regarded as a symbol of the developmental agenda, the fate of the nuclear plant and waste resulted in an international crisis of trust and lack of transparency that divides the residents of this small town along occupational and generational lines.

Sandra Lourenço's paper told the history and after-life of an almost 70-years old cotton mill in Hong Kong. Lourenço started with the political economic context of industrial and post-industrial development. Three of the six factories of the former Nan Fung Textile Ltd. were converted into a multipart space called "the Mills" after manufacturing ceased in 2008. The combination of a non-profit arts and cultural institution, a business incubator and a co-working space for start-ups and an ecostyle retail created a space where diverse modes of organization of production overlap. This congregation problematizes not only the temporal passing implied in the prefix of "post-industrialism," it also blurs the lines of distinction between binary categories of work such as material and immaterial, practical know-how and theoretical knowledge.

The concept of space lied at the centre of Zdenek Nebrensky's analysis. He gave a historical tour of the factory interior at the turn-of-the-century Bohemia and explained the influence of public authorities and social legislation. Following the discussions on factory hygiene at international sanitation congresses in the 1880s, the idea of the modern factory extended to the fulfilment of social demands. Improving worker safety and health increasingly occupied state authorities. The social facilities constructed in this period embodied the contradictions of industrial capitalism; Nebrensky discussed their ambivalent nature through the effects of disciplining and civilizing the workforce. The ensuing discussion brought forward another kind of ambivalence: the extent of legitimate societal and state interference in factories as private property.

The focus of the third session was the interaction between shop floor politics and the political economy of capitalism. Alexandru Lesanu traced the many transmutations of a sugar factory across different state and economic regimes in more than a hundred years of its existence. Between the micro-level of the shop floor and the macro-level of international politics (sugar being a commodity shaped by global trends in the market), Lesanu retraced the story of workers coped with different model of state intervention and factory organisation throughout a long period of time.

James Nealy further stimulated the discussion on the factory in the Soviet context by talking about the transformation of Soviet industrial relations at the Shchekino Chemical Combine. The experiment at this particular factory generated a wide debate about how to improve labour performance in the socialist world and whether such attempts represented concession to a capitalist mind-set. In reality, argues Nealy, such practices were widespread in the Soviet Union and their detailed study can reconfigure interpretation of industrial modernity by stressing similarities with the West.

Finally, Marianna Stoler has reconstructed the permutations of workers' collective political identity in the steel factories of Santa Rosa and La Matanza throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This was affected both by the relative place of workers in the production process (for instance, hot area and cold area) and to their participation to union politics, which in that context was characterised by a significant presence of shop stewards. Workers at Santa Rosa oscillated between forces of bonding and forces of fragmentation, so their collective identity was never stable. There was also a dynamic between the representative politics of the union and forms of direct and autonomous militancy in the plant, which enabled workers to score a victory in protracted industrial dispute with the employer in 1974. This was somewhat nullified by the onset of the dictatorship in 1976, which intervened heavily in curbing labour militancy in places such as Santa Rosa and La Matanza.

The fourth and last session was a plenary meeting where the two co-ordinators of the working group presented a summary of the group's discussions in the last four years in relation to the discussions participants had in Amsterdam. Görkem Akgöz presented an overview of the rise and demise of the factory both as an actual workplace and a modal of social organization in scholarship. The main question she raised was whether the factory's invisibility in both current and historical agendas is less an outright disappearance and more a matter of marginalisation and disqualification that has been shaped by the politics of our times.

In his talk, Nicola Pizzolato reiterated the main rationale of the working group: the need to look at the factory by incorporating different angles beyond the exclusive focus on labour relations. Pizzolato highlighted three methodological tensions (or "thematic horizons") that have emerged from this widened way to look at the factory, that in many ways go beyond labour history, but also change the fabric of labour history: the methodological tension revolved around the idea of the boundaries of the factory, the temporal dimension in the life course of the factory, and the factory as a site of construction of ideologies, imaginaries, and 'structures of feelings.'

Bridget Kenny explained the strands in South African labour history and sociology that came together to instigate a move away from the factory, or the workplace, and argued for its continuing traction. While South African sociology, with its tradition of labour process analyses, had once centred on the factory as a unit of analysis, in the more recent period, this focus has lost its grip due to the expansion of precarious labour and increasing unemployment. The global Southern critique of "waged work" emphasized the predominance instead of "wagelessness" rendering employment and the place of work obsolete in social analysis. Kenny argued for the continuing relevance of the factory through two different conceptualizations. The first one is based on the extension of the "factory" beyond an idea of a place-specific locale to symbolise relations in production that are spread widely, indeed globally. The idea of the "social factory" from the 1970s, for example, did exactly this by incorporating the reproductive sites in the definition. The second direction is to adhere to the spatial specificity of the idea of the place and study factories through the concrete constitution of relations *of and in* production.

Some key points of the discussion in this last session cut across many of the other papers of the network and can provide useful suggestion for the research agenda that is in the making. Firstly, the notion of the "secluded space of factory" where total control over the work process and workers is sought by the capital as the ideal setting of production. To some extent, the historiography of factory has also treated it as an isolated social organization. The suggestion from the group is reconceptualise the factory as an organization that transcends its physical premises. To this end, we need to incorporate space and scale as central elements into our analyses.

A second central suggestion of the group points towards the cross-fertilization between history and other disciplines, from anthropology to organisational studies, which have brought to the fore the

factory as a key place to understand the workings of capitalism. Interdisciplinarity in the factory-level analysis equips scholars to question the models of linear and uniform development of capitalism. We need to ask, first and foremost, to what extent the model of factory as the place where the real subsumption of labour is exhibited in Taylorist discipline represents factories in the past and present. Finally, we need to examine how factory work relates to forms of labour subsumed merely formally to capital such as putting-put work and varieties of debt-bound petty commodity production. The assumption of the Fordist factory as the place of standardized employment needs to be questioned. The renewed interest in factories within the discipline of industrial anthropology raises important questions for historians in this respect.

The working group will continue its activities in the future. Next on the agenda is to take advantage of digital humanities platforms to facilitate its work. The group is truly international and far-flung; it includes scholars at various stages in their respective careers and in a number of academic disciplines; it has assembled a solid library of working papers and primary materials; and it possesses an abundance of energy and vision. A robust digital platform can raise the network's visibility, facilitate off-site communication across multiple time zones, and provide a platform for collaborative research and writing. If you would like to receive news from the group, please send an email to one of the coordinators at [akgozgorkem@yahoo.com](mailto:akgozgorkem@yahoo.com) or [n.pizzolato@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:n.pizzolato@mdx.ac.uk).