

Call for papers of the working group “Workers, Labour and Labour History in Modern Central-East-Europe”

5th ELHN Conference 11-13 June 2024 in Uppsala

Unstable stability? Working class-life and the world of work in East-Central Europe after 1989-1990

The political regime changes of 1989/90 and the rapid restructuring of the planned economies, also referred to as “shock therapy” in the 1990s radically transformed not only the political, economic and social relations in Central and Eastern Europe, but also the structure and functioning of everyday life. While the state socialist countries were ruled by political dictatorships, the Communist regimes maintained not only universal employment but also a welfare state, which covered free education and health care, the generous support of high culture and community building and a wide range of state-run childcare institutions. These achievements were, of course, used to legitimize the rule of political dictatorships and were even regarded as a “compensation” for the loss of political freedom.

The system change fundamentally transformed the great structures of social life such as the political and economic spheres, the electoral systems and the distribution of wealth and property. The population became divided to the groups of “losers” and “winners”, and the 1990s also produced rapidly rising social inequalities alongside the dismantling of the “prematurely born” welfare state. The appearance of new industries driven by multinational capital and the creation of new capitalist classes were accompanied by processes of de-industrialization, the decline of traditional industries such as mining and metallurgy, the establishment of new social ghettos in the place of former factory towns and the experience of unemployment and new poverty.

The demise of the socialist working classes undoubtedly meant a lasting trauma in many families, who had neither the resources nor the opportunities to adapt to the requirements and challenges of the new, capitalist regimes. Indeed, critical anthropologies even called the workers in the region the “new subaltern class”, whose life circumstances and life chances were largely neglected in the new, “postsocialist” literature.

Labour in the Global South has attracted formidable interest in the recent decades. However, the Eastern European experience has remained an “uneasy” topic as the former Communist regimes still pose a theoretical and ideological challenge to many Western left-wing thinkers. East-Central Europe deploys many characteristics of the peripheral integration into the capitalist world economy (e. g. the outsourcing of whole industries to the East, intensive labour migration to the West), yet it is still seen as an “unstable” part of the European political and economic integration. It is

certainly not part of the Global South, but it still remains at the periphery of the Global North.

We invite papers, which engage with labour and working-class everyday life in post-1989 Eastern Europe, from a multifold perspective. We welcome contributions from the field of history, social and political anthropology, economic and gender studies. What rendered the Eastern European socialist experience specific in global history? How can we interpret the working-class experience of the “transition” years from a critical angle? How can historical anthropology assist critical theory in global labour history? Is there anything that we can learn from the state socialist past? How has the everyday life of workers changed in the decades following the regime change of 1989/90?

Open Call for Proposals – Deadline: September 30, 2023

How to submit proposals

Please send an abstract (max 300 words) and a short bio (max 100 words, including contact details and an indication of whether you plan to participate onsite or online) to the WG coordinators, by September 30, 2023.

WG coordinators:

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