

WORCK Conference 2 / ELHN Conference 4

From 30 August to 3 September, the joint conference of the COST Action “Worlds of Related Coercions in Work (WORCK)” and the European Labour History Network (ELHN) in Vienna brought together labour historians from two networks aiming to enable collaborative research amongst scholars from all over Europe and beyond. The European Labour History Network (ELHN) was founded in 2013 and has since hosted biennial conferences, structured around its Working Groups. The COST Action WORCK is an international network, which initially emerged out of the Working Group “Free and Unfree Labour” of the European Labour History Network. The conceptual goal of the network is to study labour and power relations in different time periods, world regions and social context through the analytical lens of coercion, in order to link the stories of work and production with those of violence, expropriation and marginalisation, and bridge the gaps between hitherto separate subfields in labour and social history.

The first three days (30 August to 1 September 2021) of the conference were dedicated to the activities and individual projects of the working groups of both networks, while the last one and a half days (2 to 3 September 2021) were devoted to a specific topic of the WORCK network: Under the title “Historicising the Concept of Europe in Global History”, WORCK invited for a discussion on the conceptual role of Europe in global labour history. The conference sought to provide an environment for a much-needed conversation on these fundamental topics in social, labour and global history, and was driven by the aim of contributing to a more differentiated view on Europe in debates on master narratives and inequalities in global history. In terms of its format, the conference was designed to foster exchange and conversation. This was notable especially on the fourth day, where rather than traditional panels, there were three thematic panels, each featuring input from invited speakers and discussants. In each roundtable, the plenary discussion was structured by key questions and key words, connecting the various inputs to the central theme of the conference. A reader collecting central texts selected by the invited speakers was circulated beforehand amongst the participants, in order to facilitate a more focused joint discussion.

The conference provided a rich and diverse programme, with up to nine different sessions taking place parallel. Overall, the event entailed 81 parallel sessions. 361 participants from 43 countries all over the world took part in the event, both onsite at the Campus of the University of Vienna, as well as online. The whole conference was realised in an innovative hybrid-setting, connecting around 100 participants onsite at the campus of the University of Vienna with more than 250 online participants. Digital tools were incorporated in the session themselves, but also used to enable the online participants to take part in social and networking activities, such as a virtual tour of Vienna, or daily virtual coffee breaks.

A large part of the conference was composed of panels organised by the fourteen Working Groups of the European Labour History Network, demonstrating its wide thematic scope: Central-East Europe, European Trade Unionism, Factory History, Feminist Labour History, Labour and Empire, Labour and Family Economy, Labour in Mining, Labour Migration History, Maritime Labour History, Military Labour, Memory and Deindustrialisation, Remuneration and Bargaining, Workers’ Education and The Cultural Production of Work. Those panels consisted of paper presentations by the Working Groups’ members, and allowed for discussions on recent research in each sub-field of Labour History. Apart from these sessions, the conference was framed a variety of different formats, which will be further explored in the following section:

The conference was opened by JULIANE SCHIEL (Vienna) and SILKE NEUNSINGER (Swedish Labour Movement’s Archive and History), representing the two hosting networks. After this introduction, JANINE DAHINDEN (Neuchâtel) gave a lecture on the concept of “entangled mobilities” in order to analyse the embeddedness of individual mobilities within asymmetrical power relations. In the

afternoon, with the opening of the exhibition “Stories of Work and Coercion: Scientific Contributions Depicted in Illustrations” by CORINNA PERES (Vienna) and ANAMARIJA BATISTA (Vienna), an innovative project which aims to bring scientific and artistic perspectives into dialogue by translating textual narratives about coercion in work into illustrations was presented. The vernissage provided space for discussion with both authors and illustrators. LÁSZLÓ ANDOR ended the first conference day with a keynote on “Social Rights in Europe and the East-West-Gap”, addressing the role of EU policies in battling social and economic inequalities within Europe.

The conference also sought to give room for training and reflection on methodological questions, with a two-part workshop by SILKE SCHWANDT (Bielefeld), PATRICK JENTSCH (Bielefeld) and TOBIAS HODEL (Bern) on the utilisation of digital humanities methods and tools for historical analysis. In this session, the possibilities and limitations of digital tools were debated, the workflow tool NOPAQUE, which enables text recognition and semantical analysis, was introduced, and the possibilities of publishing data on the WORCK Publication Platform (<http://data.worck.eu>) were discussed.

A roundtable on “Working Conditions under Covid-19” brought together activists, trade unionists and researchers to discuss the changes in global labour relations induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. JANHAVI DAVE (HomeNet International), FLAVIA MATEI (IG24 – Interest Group of 24h Care Givers) and WOLFGANG GREIF (Austrian Trade Union Federation / Trade Union GPA) talked about the challenges workers are facing in their respective sector of organising, while CATALINA BENAVENTE (Swedish Labour Movement Archives and Library) and TINA PLASIL-LASCHNER (Österreichische Mediathek) discussed challenges in documenting these working conditions to enable analysis not only for current social scientists, but also for future historians.

The topic of seasonal labour was a recurring theme during the conference: A screening of the film “Obrani Berači”, followed by a discussion with the film maker MILICA LUPŠOR (Roza) and historian GORAN MUSIĆ (Vienna) gave insight into the situation of seasonal workers in Vojvodina and the fight for women’s labour rights, and gave room to debate on the issues of the organisation of labour relations and social security.

After three days of a variety of parallel sessions, the fourth day was structured in a more compact manner, allowing for a focused plenary discussion on the main theme of the conference, “Historicising the Concept of Europe in Global History”. The objective of this discussion was to deconstruct and disentangle European history as the subject of all histories and suggest the possibility to write connected histories of the processes of social inequality and labour coercion that emerged from various parts of the world in distinct periods.

After a welcome address by the COST Action chairs JULIANE SCHIEL (Vienna) and JOHAN HEINSEN (Aalborg), who introduced the theme of “Historicising the concept of Europe”, MARGARETHE LANZIGER (Vienna) talked about how social inequalities are researched at the University of Vienna and gave insights into the interdisciplinary research group “Figurations of Inequality” at the University of Vienna.

Following, the first of the thematic panels offered a perspective on “Historical Perspectives on Social Inequality in Europe”. GUIDO ALFANI (Milan) talked about long-term trends in economic inequalities and the distribution of wealth in pre-modern Europe, followed by a comment by DIETLIND HÜCHTKER (Vienna). At the next panel, discussants MANUELA BOATCĂ (Freiburg) and DEVI SACCHETTO (Padua) raised questions of contemporary inequalities within Europe, aiming to connect historical perspectives to current debates within the social sciences, and especially post-colonial critiques. By introducing the idea of “Creolizing Europe”; Boatcă encouraged a conceptualisation of Europe that reflects its persistent entanglements with its colonial possessions. The third panel engaged with the issue of servitude and household service in both European and Global History, and brought together

contributions by MARIA ÅGREN (Uppsala), who presented her research on the intersection of gender and labour relations in rural Europe, and NITIN VARMA (Berlin), who problematised the label of “domestic service” as a coherent category.

A roundtable with activists from the initiative SEZONIERI, a campaign for the rights of agricultural workers in Austria, once again raised the issue of seasonal labour, and aimed at connecting academic debates on coerced labour to current issues of exploitation and social rights in labour relations.

The conference closed with a final discussion of the participants of the WORCK network, where the contributions of the preceding days were connected and reflected upon in regards to the overall aim of the network to write new histories of work through the lens of coercion. A focal point of the discussion surrounded current conceptual and methodological challenges in labour history, and the possibilities of exploring new ways of research through the establishment on a collaborative data base. Moreover, the further development of the network, which will conclude with a final conference in 2023, was discussed.

The WORCK Conference 2 / ELHN Conference 4 successfully provided a space for bringing together scholars studying labour relations across time and space. While there was a great diversity in different topics, the event was not limited to the discussion of current outcomes of research, but was able to facilitate more fundamental conceptual and methodological discussion surrounding the possibilities and challenges of researching labour and coercion from a global perspective. It also offered space for (self-)reflection on Eurocentrism within labour and social history, and tried to move towards conceptualising Europe differently. While the hybrid format certainly was challenging at times, it also succeeded in offering more scholars from all over the world the opportunity to participate, and made the conference even more diverse.