

Workshop Report on

Across the `Post-Industrial` Divide: Rearticulating the Factory as an Object of Study in History and Anthropology

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3rd May, 2018

re:work, Berlin

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Despite many calls to bring anthropology and history closer to each other in the past, interdisciplinary research symposia happen rarely. This workshop on “re-articulating the factory as an object of study” has addressed this paucity of interdisciplinary conversation, in the idea setting of re:work, which hosts scholars from different discipline. The workshop resulted in a productive, rare encounter between labour history and industrial anthropology, two fields that share similar objects of analysis, but are quite apart as for the methodologies and theoretical approaches they deploy. The workshop aimed at gathering state-of-the-art research focus on the factories, to discern the similarities and differences between the two disciplines in terms of research questions, conceptual vocabulary and methodological tools, and to evaluate the potential for collaborative research in the future.

The workshop started with two accounts of the ways in which history and anthropology have approached the factory. Nico Pizzolato tackled the demise of historical interest for the factory and its recent scattered resurgence. The `new labor history` paradigm had started with a focus on rank and files on the shopfloor, but when it expanded its scope to other categories of workers and to the global south it lost its interest in the factory. At the same time, historians became disillusioned with the political project of emancipation that was supposed to be centred in the factory. Noting the distance of our present day to that time in terms of the faith in the industrial working-class as the imagined epicentre of class struggle, Pizzolato argued that factory level analysis is still a fruitful vantage point for social inquiry along four directions: space; time and temporality; memory, commemoration and public history; and methodology.

As a scholar working on factories from both a historical and anthropological perspective, Alina-Sandra Cucu gave a more personal account of the difficulties she has encountered with the factory as a unit of analysis in her work on industrial Cluj. Noting that “nothing ever only happens on the shop floor,” Cucu problematized the questions of what are the boundaries of the “factory”; a point that was repeatedly raised in the discussion throughout the day. She has then directed the participants’ attention to the variety of ways the factory was conceptualized in the papers submitted showing how it could be used as a unit of analysis to study a variety of topics.

The first paper of the first roundtable by Adrian Grama, “Capital, the Factory-Form, and the East European periphery, 1930s-1980s” was, in his own words, a polemical one. Grama first and foremost criticized historians of Eastern Europe for, under the influence of the anthropological turn, moving away from structure to questions of agency around flagship concepts such as hidden transcripts and *Eigensinn* imported from anthropology. Both in their efforts to explain questions of collective action and regime stability, Grama argued that labor historians of Eastern Europe treated the factory-form as a mere background against which agency happens. Arguing for a move towards political economy as the general framework, Grama brought the notion of the *factory-form* - ‘the most common embodiment of capital that characterized the transition out of agrarian economies’ - to the discussion. He defined it as *factory as capital* and called for an analysis of capital’s movements of investment and de-investment especially in the structural context of the Eastern Europe, a region that remained a pool for cheap labor and a periphery regardless of the regime changes in the 20th century.

Marcia Schenck’s presentation “East German factories seen through the eyes of Angolan and Mozambican contract workers 1979-1990” on the experiences of Angolan and Mozambican contract workers in Eastern German factories in the 1980s started with an interesting observation on the relationship between our methods and contexts of research. In the case of modern African history, Schenck noted, oral history interviews and participant observation seems to be natural accompanists to archival research which is a fertile ground for a dialogue between history and anthropology. In Schenck’s study, the factory is first and foremost a site of consumption and identity formation the effects of which have continued long after. After 25 years of this short-lived migration story, the Angolan and Mozambican workers still consider themselves as blue-collar workers which testify to the persistence of industrial worker identity; a theme we also encounter in studies on workers’ structures of feeling with regards to de-industrialization. Her presentation of photographs from the shop floor, and poems written by workers about the shop floor brought the notion of ‘pride in industrial production’ to the discussion. As such, besides being the site of commodity production, the factory emerged as the site of production of workers and worker identities, a process the effects of which continue after the actual production ceases.

Hannah Ahlheim’s paper “Beyond the factory gate? How the bed became part of the workplace” walked the participants away from the factory side and into the spaces of exhibition where the effects of scientific management of labor beyond the workplace were presented. Problematizing the practices and the discourses around the night shift and worker productivity, Ahlheim brought two important questions to the discussion. The first concerned the question of the boundaries of factory; the extent to which what happens on the shop floor determines working-class life outside of it. Blurring the division between the public and the private by bringing the working-class home into the realm of scientific management of work, the night shift created a number of tensions around gender, family and leisure time. The second question spoke directly to the title of the workshop by problematizing the

divisions such as Fordist/post-Fordist and industrial/post-industrial around the concept of the working body and its managerial control.

In her presentation titled “Work-gangs and multiple-shifts: Workplace relations in the Bengal Jute Industry” Anna Sailer discussed the changes in work organisation in Bengal jute industry between 1870s and 1920s. She critically analyzed the perception of pre-modern, ‘ingrained’ cultural habits on the shop floor by colonial observers and the scholars of Indian labor who approached these observations critically. Behind this critique, Sailer argued, lied a very important similarity in the way the workplace is conceptualized by these observers and scholars. In both of these temporally and politically distinct moments, the workplace is treated as an unchanging, at times even a-historical site into which external developments entered freely. Contrary to the tendency to consider the production process as an abstract, Sailer took us to jute mills’ shop floor to discuss the modalities of work characterized by the practice of workgangs and substitute workers.

In the second roundtable, four anthropologists presented both their experience and empirical findings on the factory site. Michael Hoffmann’s paper “Searching for Common Ground: Industrial Labour in the History and Anthropology of Nepal” centred around the question of why Nepal’s industrial revolution has been slow and silent and neglected by scholars. Based on his experience of field work in Nepalese factories, Hoffman sought to bring a historical and anthropological perspective together to explain the political economic as well as social and cultural factors giving way to this result. In Hoffmann’s research, the factory level reveals a number of important relationships such as the relationship between macro political developments –Maoist revolution, in this specific example- and shop floor dynamics or the interactions between contract and company workers on the shop floor, a strong theme of research in industrial anthropology.

Dimitra Kofti’s paper “Historical shifts and multiple temporalities on the assembly line: discussions between anthropology and history” gave a rich historical and anthropological analysis of a Bulgarian factory that embodies multiple temporalities that are intertwined with hierarchies and power relations inside the factory. Kofti links these to the changes in patterns of ownership due to regime change on the one hand and to the restructuring of labor organisation from Fordism to post-Fordism on the other. Behind the common phenomena of the co-existence of different statuses and wage levels of workers on the shop floor, Kofti revealed a rather interesting story. Although the factory actually pays same wages, parts of the subcontracted workers’ wages are appropriated by the outsourcing company. The gain for the main company in this deal is giving the impression of fewer workers on the line and hence more productivity, implying an advanced technology. The production process, which is also supervised by cameras over the production line controlled by the main clients, thus becomes a site of market competition bringing different temporalities of production and circulation of commodities together in the factory.

André Weißenfels paper “Bureaucratic exploitation of labor and the promise of bureaucracy” focusses on the dynamics of bureaucratization on the shop floor in a Tunisia electronics factory which, as he formulates, is located at the intersections of different global projects. Contrary to the dominant narrative of contemporary capitalism as the rise of de-regulation, Weißenfels defines it as a moment of re-regulation the effects of which create the ‘bureaucratic everyday’ on the shop floor. Weißenfels’s story gets interesting at this point because it departs from the idea that the bureaucratization of the labor process is oppressive for workers, on the contrary he finds out that workers have a positive evaluation of this work environment; they contrast the factory as a space of order and mutual respect as opposed to their perception of the society they live in as chaotic and unpredictable.

Christian Strümpell started his presentation “Anthropology and History of an Eastern Indian Steel Town” with a critical review of the literature on factories and industrial labor in India with a reference to the impact of Subaltern Studies perspective on Indian labor history. The strong emphasis on communal identities and cultural specificities, Strümpell noted, has been criticized for reproducing colonial stereotypes and moving the analysis of what happens in the factory away from the framework of political economy. Indian historians, moreover, have not shown much interest in what has been happening in the factories and in the world of industrial labor after the Independence, which means a lack of historical studies for anthropologists to rely on. To understand the historical configurations behind the anthropological present, Strümpell argues in the case of Rourkela Steel Plant in India, requires paying attention to three processes: India’s economic liberalisation, the urbanisation process in Rourkela and the division between formal and informal workers. The inclusion of these historical processes in the analysis carries it beyond the scale of the local to recognize the social, political and economic embeddedness of the factory within a broader scale of analysis.

Emergent and recurrent themes in the discussion

The following themes and questions emerged in the plenary session of the workshop where the participants were asked to reflect on both the recurrent and missing aspects of factory-level analysis in the discussions.

The question of the boundaries of a factory has come up more than a few times in the discussions since the definition of and the interaction between the internal and the external of the factory was a common theme connecting a number of papers. The difficulty of delineating the boundaries of our unit of analysis concerns a number of methodological questions. The relationship between a factory as built environment to its physical surrounding, the political, social and cultural interaction between the workplace and the community it is embedded in, the location of the factory as a site of production within the broader framework of circulation of labor, capital and actual commodities are among the examples which illustrate this difficulty. The issue of temporal and disciplinary boundaries between history and anthropology should also be added here. The inclusion of historical

analysis in the anthropological study of an industrial workplace and the connections between the history and the present of industrial workplaces even after they cease their physical existence would enrich both fields of inquiry. With the changes in the geography of industrial production, the factory came to be a place of memory, commemoration and public history. Depending on the specific politics of deindustrialization, both the physical and the symbolic existence of the factory have become sites of contests over visions of the past, present and future. Thus, even after the end of productive aspect comes to an end, the history of the continues. It is the present of a factory site as history that sits at the crossroad between history and industrial anthropology.

Temporality also sparked considerable attention across various other dimensions. The most obvious of these is the challenge to the uniformity and linearity of the progress of industrial time and discipline on the shop floor brought by recent historical and anthropological studies of factory work. Other themes around temporality that came up in the discussions ranged from the relationship between changing technology and pace of work to different temporalities of socialist and capitalist process of production, from multiplicity of modalities of work on the shop floor determined by hierarchies of gender, ethnicity and precarity to the temporality or temporalities of capitalism which brings us to our next theme: change and continuity across the divisions of Fordism and post-Fordism, and industrial and post-industrial capitalism.

Another important analytical category that arose multiple times was space. There are two distinct ways the inclusion of space has changed the study of factories and industrial labor. The first and the most direct one has been the broadening the space of labor, for labor history this means a move away from its historical industrial heartlands to cover other parts of the world; for industrial anthropology it meant not a geographic shift for anthropology was already looking at the non-Western world, but a thematic shift with increasing attention to industrial contexts in that world. Both shifts brought new analytical questions to the study of factories such as communal as well as class identities, the socialist factory as a space of consumption as well as production, the factory and the social state, political participation, access to leisure and so on. The study of factory thus went beyond the study of the labor process and the labor movement on and around the shop floor.

Space also meant a new awareness in the ways the local, regional, national and global connect to each other; an awareness that requires to think of industrial analysis in wider frameworks of analysis. Perspectives such as the global commodity chain, global production networks and global assembly line testify to the increasing attention these connections receive. The movement of capital, labor and industrial commodities, however, are not only a phenomena of present day capitalism. They have been around for some time along with the transfer of skills and know-how of industrial production.

Arguably, the most important benefit of bringing labor historians and industrial anthropologists together has been the opportunity to discuss the continuities and changes in

the organization of industrial capital and labour. Certain characteristics of neoliberal labor regime such as flexibility and characterization appear to be older than we think, whereas the factory as not only a site of production but a product to be sold as we have seen in the privatization of previously state-owned factories

Participants seemed to agree on the lack of political economy in both historical and anthropological study of industrial labor. Added to the critique of insufficient attention to the labor process and workplace in general, the neglect of the capital side of the story has come up frequently. In labor history, the study of factories has been confined to the study of workers, with scant attention paid to management at times. In industrial anthropology, it has been noted, there is almost no interest in investment decisions or rates of profit. Furthermore, in neoliberal times, Kofiti has noted, the factory has become product in itself that can be bought, restructured and repurposed, and then sold again for a profit.

At a time when labor historians show an interest to return to the factory with new questions and a sophisticated methodological toolkit and industrial anthropologists are asking a number of important questions on social continuity and change around the topic of industrial work, this workshop has shown the potential of discussing the past and the present of this emblematic workplace of capitalism despite claims of its disappearance. As seen from the enthusiasm of the participants and the depth and richness of the discussions, this workshop has shown that similar encounters between labor historians and industrial anthropologists have the potential to benefit both fields.