

Trabajo y trabajadores: Congreso Latinoamericano y del Caribe
2-8 May 2017, La Paz, Bolivia

Christian G. De Vito

Between 2 and 8 May 2017, the Latin American and Caribbean Conference *Trabajo y Trabajadores* (“Work and Workers”) was held in La Paz, Bolivia (<http://ctt2017.cis.gob.bo/inicio>). Organized by Rossana Barragán (IISH, Amsterdam), Amaru Villanueva, and Cristina Machicado (Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, La Paz), it was a remarkable event, bringing together some eighty scholars from nearly all Latin American countries, a few colleagues from Europe, and a multifaceted audience of local researchers, students, and unionists. The conference highlighted major areas of interest in the labor history of colonial and post-Independence Latin America. It also provided a platform to confront distinct historiographies across the region, launch new research agendas and suggest potential collaborations across disciplinary and national boundaries. Moreover, the event resulted in the foundation of RELATT – *Red Latinoamericana de Trabajo y Trabajador@s* (the Latin American Labour History Network), a new academic infrastructure aimed at giving continuity to the discussions and exchanges started in La Paz through permanent working groups and the organization of academic meetings.

The conference program was very diverse. The opening roundtable featured a lecture by Andreas Eckert, director of re:work (Berlin); the testimony of Rosa Quete Castedo, a worker from the rural community of Santa Rosa in Bolivian Amazonia; and a speech by Héctor Hinojosa Rodríguez, the Bolivian Minister of Work, Employment and Welfare. Starting from 3 May, five sessions addressed the following themes respectively: 1. “Representations and interpretations of work” (organizers: Valeria Coronel, Maria Ulivarri, and David Mayer); 2. “Social conflicts and struggles across time” (organizers: Gabriela Scodeller, Lucas Poy, and Larissa Corrêa); 3. “Free and unfree labor, slaving and transitions” (organizers: Beatriz Mamigonian and Paola Revilla); 4. “Local and global migrations” (organizers: Alfonso Hinojosa and Cristina Vega); and 5. “Precariousness and unfree labor relations in the contemporary period” (organizer: Maurizio Atzeni). Three evening events completed the program: a roundtable on “The ILO and Latin America”, with the participation of the Regional Adjunct Director of the ILO, Gerardina González-Marroquín; a lecture on informal labor by Enrique de la Garza Toledo, with comments given by the Vice-President of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Álvaro García Linera; and a roundtable on labor historiography, with Willem van Schendel addressing the state of the art in India and South Africa, and other participants presenting the perspectives of three journals: *Archivos* (Gabriela Scodeller), *Journal of Latin American Studies* (Paulo Drinot), and the *International Review of Social History* (David Mayer).

The discussion was centered around three main perspectives, cutting across the programmed sessions.

1. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century working class and labor movement history

A considerable number of presentations highlighted the continued importance of a working-class and labor movement historiography in Latin American scholarship. Two papers (Juan Luiz Hernández, Buenos Aires, and Eugenia Bridikhina, La Paz) directly addressed the connection between working class movements, the Left, and the State, both focusing on twentieth-century Bolivia. The overview of the Argentinian labor historiography presented by Lucas Poy and Laura Caruso (both Buenos Aires) also suggested the continuity of a tradition which has gained renewed vitality since the country's crisis of 2001. More generally, as commentators Sergio Serulnikov (Buenos Aires) and Carlos Illades (Mexico City) observed, this is a labor history that prioritizes the analysis of the relationship between workers and the State through the mediation of political cultures and organizations, rather than the investigation of work-related conflicts. At the same time, one gets the impression that the heuristic potential of this stream within labor history increases when scholars distance themselves from abstract concepts and when they engage in transnational conversations, if not comparisons.

The extensive discussion that followed presentations by Gustavo Contreras (Mar del Plata) and Luciana Cadahia (Quito), for example, foregrounded the difficult integration of the concept of populism in labor history. On the one hand, the application of "populism" to multiple settings – within and beyond Latin America – runs the risk of imposing an abstract category onto a diverse range of historical experiences and of turning it into a concept of little actual analytical power. On the other hand, stressing populism's intrinsic polysemy can lead to any national case being interpreted as exceptional, and therefore reduces the margins for comparative and/or connected histories. Conversely, the ongoing dialogue on the role of workers and unions in the Latin American dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s, presented in Victoria Basualdo's (Buenos Aires) paper, highlighted the importance of transnational exchange. Here a broad network of scholars has developed over the last years: it currently focuses on the cases of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile but is poised to include further dictatorships, such as those of Paraguay and Bolivia, and even countries that didn't experience dictatorial regimes, such as Mexico. Another topic that lends itself to significant transnational exchanges concerns the role of "plebeian" groups during the nineteenth century. Four papers took this perspective in their analysis of distinct geographical sites: those presented by Pablo Ferreira (Montevideo) and Roger Mamani (La Paz) focused on the process of Latin American Independence in Uruguay and the colonial province of Charcas, while those by Julio Pinto (Santiago de Chile) and Valeria Coronel (Quito) addressed the post-colonial republics, with Julio Pinto presenting a broad comparison of the different trajectories of Argentina, Peru, and Chile.

Another set of papers took a more decidedly social historical perspective. It included Paulo Drinot's (London) study of the relationship between the workers and the Peruvian State in the 1920s (a state which exhibited a strong workerist ideology) through the perspective of the Ticapampa silver mine workforce. Renán Vega Cantor and Luz Núñez Espinel (Bogotá) dealt with the connection between the Colombian state and multinational companies through a detailed analysis of one of the vast *enclaves* conceded to the Tropical Oil Company (part of the Standard Oil Company), and the related processes of labor recruitment, violence, and spatial segregation along class, ethnic and gender lines. Finally, Huascar Rodríguez (Cochabamba) offered a fresco of the multifaceted practices of daily life and the resistance of Cochabamba's urban and rural subaltern groups – at a safe distance from both romanticizations of the *bandoleros* and Eric Hobsbawm's by now broadly contested concept of "primitive rebels".

2. The gender perspective

Gender was arguably the second key perspective during the La Paz conference. While it was not present “transversally” in all sessions, as the organizers had originally hoped, the opening session featured an outstanding cluster of papers on the issue, plus a related comment by Verena Stolcke (Barcelona).

Cristiana Schettini’s (Buenos Aires) and Diego Galeano’s (Rio de Janeiro) presentation told the trans-local histories of some “thieves dressed as women” who lived and worked in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo, and Santiago de Chile between 1900 and 1920. As in the best examples of social history and feminist de-constructivism, here the study of actors who transgressed social norms allowed the researchers to highlight the social construction of norms themselves. Indeed, these apparently marginal social characters shed light not only on a set of shifting notions of masculinity and femininity at the time, but also on the existence of an incipient labor market connected to entertainment, where the boundaries between cabaret and prostitution were as fluid as those between economics and culture. A similar destabilizing effect on standard views in labor history emerged from Valeria Pita’s research on women’s work in mid-nineteenth-century Buenos Aires. The author contended that recent studies in social history have undoubtedly acknowledged the role of women in the demographic transformation of the city between 1850 and 1880, but only for sectors where commodified and waged labor dominated (public works, dockyards, etc.). Conversely, Pita made another type of women’s work visible, namely those activities such as sewing, mending, and cooking that were related to the domestic sphere. The household then clearly emerges as a place of both reproduction and production, and the boundary between private and public not only becomes blurred in historiographical reconstruction but also contested by the historical actors themselves. More generally, the speaker insisted on the need to expand the concept of work itself, a point that was also echoed in the final session of the conference in Cristina Vega and Magali Marega’s (Quito) work on the “appropriation of urban space” by women employed in street selling in Quito. Meanwhile, Fernanda Wanderley’s (La Paz) historiographical overview foregrounded the impact of gender studies and feminist perspectives on labor historiography at large: Against the conflation of “remunerated labor” and “active labor” prevailing in statistical categorizations, an alternative conceptualization of work implies – the speaker argued – decentering wage labor and the market, and paying full attention to all types of work related to the production of “use value”. Rather than being a synonym for “market”, the economy should consequently be seen as an articulation between market (company), subsistence (household), redistribution (state), and reciprocity (networks and associations).

3. Free and unfree labor

The profound innovations of the gender and feminist views on work and labor stand in close relationship with the third perspective that marked the conference, namely the focus on the entanglements among free and unfree labor relations. Indeed, as it emerged from the papers, what is at stake here is not merely the visibility of specific coerced labor relations, such as slavery, convict labor, or indentured work; rather, studying free and unfree labor implies a dramatic broadening of the scope of labor history: from the history of wage labor to the connected history of all labor relations that have been part of human work at large. As such,

this is potentially an alternative foundation for labor history – an alternative that has been debated within the scope of Global Labor History for some years now, and which demands a rethinking of key concepts such as work, labor, modes of production, and the working class.

In La Paz this approach played a key role throughout the conference. It did not remain confined to the full day that was explicitly dedicated to the question of free and unfree labor; it repeatedly cropped up in other sessions on representations of work, social conflicts, migrations, and labor precariousness. Three aspects were especially addressed by speakers and discussants.

First, the importance of studying the combinations of labor relations in distinct contexts was highlighted in order to understand the polysemy of each labor relation. For instance, Raquel Gil Montero (Buenos Aires) pointed to the varying meanings and realities of the *yanaconas* in 17th-century Alto Peru, which eclipses the standard dictionary definition of the *yanacona* as a kind of “serf”. Similar effects of pluralizing established notions can be gained by comparing the composition of the workforce in distinct sites of production, such as presented by Paula Zagalsky (Jujuy) and Isabel Povea Moreno (Granada) in their paper on mining work in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Potosí and eighteenth-century Guanajuato. Numerous speakers proposed a dynamic conception of context, i.e. “context” not as an isolated site but as a site constructed by multiple and distinct connections with other places. Enrique Martino’s (Göttingen) presentation on contracts and coercion on the West African island of Fernando Pó during the 19th and early 20th centuries is a telling example here, as the author addressed the local labor regimes in close relation to other sites in the Atlantic and the Pacific. The diversity of labor relations, however, not only relates to what can be considered as “context” but also to individual actors. While the presence of multiple labor relations in one site of production is normally seen in terms of the co-existence of distinct groups of laborers, several labor relations could, as Rossana Barragán (Amsterdam) made clear, actually converge in the same individual. Thus, the different categories of workers in the iconic colonial mining center of Potosí, like *mitayos*, *mingas*, and *k’ajchas*, were, in fact, different work positions taken intermittently by the same worker, rather than different categories of workers.

Explaining shifts in combinations of labor relations was a second focus of the papers framed by the free/unfree perspective. Addressing rural labor in Aguascalientes, Mexico, Luis Benedicto Juárez Luévano (Santiago de Chile) explained the transition from a mainly enslaved workforce in the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century, when there was free native labor due to the growing importance of the mines in nearby Zacatecas. Proceeding in a different direction, Jaime Valenzuela (Santiago de Chile) and Charles Walker (Davis, CA) addressed the connection between abolitionism and shifts in labor relations beyond the standard framework of nineteenth-century slave abolition: While Valenzuela dealt with the “reconstitution” of the enslavement of the indigenous population in the Bio-Bio frontier (Chile) after its official abolition in 1674, Walker introduced a counterfactual perspective by considering the potential consequences on the *mita* if the legendary rebellion under Tupac Amaru II (1780-1782) had been successful. This chronological provincialization of 19th-century abolitionism was paralleled by the spatial provincialization of standard narratives of 19th-century “second slavery” suggested by Marcela Echeverri (Yale), who addressed slavery and abolition in the Republic of Colombia rather than in the classic plantation economies (Cuba, the southern US states, and Brazil). Further insights on shifts in labor relations during the post-independence era, including periods well into the twentieth century, were offered in

papers by Maria Luisa Soux (La Paz), Carmen Soliz (Charlotte, NC), and Ailynn Torres (Quito): Focusing on Bolivia and Ecuador, they questioned the standard assumption of a linear transition to free wage labor by looking at the persistent experiences of coercion that lie behind terms used to refer to agrarian laborers, such as *yanaconas*, *colonos*, and *pongos*.

In striking contrast to analogous debates in Europe, this conference clearly related the question of free/unfree labor to the issues of twenty-first century labor precariousness and migrations. In other words, in La Paz no clear-cut separation was made between the contemporary constellations beyond (or indeed “below”) the standard employment model and the long history of labor coercion. From this perspective, long-term continuities were highlighted in forced labor and coercive forms of wage contracts that are positioned along a continuum rather than belonging to distinct categories. From Maria Ayelén Arcos’ (Buenos Aires) work on sewing workshops in Buenos Aires to the presentation given by Alfonso Hinojosa and Juan Carlos Estrada Vásquez (Buenos Aires) on young Bolivian migrants in transnational labor markets, the structural link between labor precariousness and coercion was repeatedly highlighted. At the same time, several speakers questioned the concept of “modern slavery” as a category that constructs the workers as mere victims and therefore dis-acknowledges their agency. Indeed, Hinojosa and Estrada Vásquez provokingly asked whether “slaves can organize themselves”, and Nicolás Fernández Bravo (Buenos Aires) pointed to a new “transnational salvationism” behind the “anti-slavery” campaigns of some NGOs. Moreover, the importance of such a critical approach was involuntarily highlighted by the presentation given by the representative for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Ricardo Cordero (Buenos Aires), who proposed top-down “ordered and regulated labor mobility” as a way to “protect” the migrant workers: as many participants brought forward in the discussion, in this way workers’ agency is elided and the political and social effects of distinguishing between “legal” and “illegal” migrations are naturalized, including related practices of deportation and administrative detention.

Debates on contemporary labor therefore succeeded in connecting the question of the entanglements among different labor relations with the actual interaction among workers involved therein. However, such a fruitful encounter between these two dimensions – labor relation and workers’ agency – is less frequent when it comes to research on the past. The tendency there is to focus on one of the two – a reminder of the lack of communication that still exists between the free/unfree perspective and working class and labor movement history, something which was, despite the organizers’ intentions to the contrary in compiling their call, also evident in La Paz. *Trabajos y trabajadores*, however, also saw inspiring exceptions to this trend, such as Francisco Quiroz’ (Lima) paper on practices of interaction and mutual exclusion among native workers, free blacks, slaves, and Spanish artisans in the workshops of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Lima. More broadly, Paulo Cruz Terra and Fabiane Popingis’ (Rio de Janeiro) overview of Brazilian labor historiography pointed to the significant scholarship that in that country is increasingly bringing together the two aspects, and to the role that the working group *Mundos do Trabalho* has played in enhancing such integration.

Next steps

As the previous section shows, the new Latin American Labour History Network can build on solid empirical, theoretical, and methodological bases. In order to succeed – many participants

stressed – it will also have to connect with the multiple networks, working groups, and national associations involved in labor history that already exist throughout the continent. Integrating and eventually coordinating what is already out there will thus be an important task of the new Network. At the same time, RELATT can play a major role in stimulating transnational cooperation and a further expansion of Latin American labor history. Indeed, the La Paz conference has, apart from its impressive achievements, also made certain gaps evident, and addressing them might be a good point to start with. For example, although the conference aimed to include scholars from, and scholarship on, the Caribbean, no paper dealt with that region/area of research, and no researcher based in the Caribbean featured among the participants. Moreover, whereas the organizers succeeded in overcoming the traditional divide between scholars of the colonial period, the independence process, and post-independence Latin America, no paper addressed the pre-Hispanic period. Specific themes will also deserve deeper investigation in the future, such as the issue of “unemployment”, which, in this specific case, will take the insightful paper presented by Sabina Dimarco (Buenos Aires) as its starting point.

More generally, *Trabajo y trabajadores* was a Latin American conference on Latin American labor history, largely based on historiographic perspectives rooted within Latin America itself. While this proved a healthy exercise in order to strengthen continental exchanges and reject ethnocentric perspectives stemming from the Global North, opening up the debate more systematically to historiographical inputs from other continents and engaging directly in comparative research on labor in other parts of the world might bring extra-dimensions to both individual scholars and to the new Network as a whole. As Willem van Schendel (Amsterdam) reminded participants, South-South collaborations have played a key role in the emergence of new labor historiographies in India and South Africa, with exchanges of scholars, multi-directional translations, and the publication of special issues functioning as significant initial steps to that end. Meanwhile, as the debate during the roundtable on the journals made clear, South-North relationships remain problematic in several ways, hampered by different institutional priorities and by the uneven distribution of power and resources. Full awareness of such inequalities is, therefore, an essential requisite for good cooperation. For example, the use of English as the academic *lingua franca*, somehow naturalized in North-Western European debates, cannot be taken for granted from a Latin American perspective: not merely because of the more limited diffusion of English among Latin American scholars, but also because writing in English means accepting different narrative standards and addressing a different, and not necessarily more relevant, audience. Moreover, collaboration requires reciprocity, and the fact that there is a small number of European and US scholars currently publishing in Spanish and Portuguese, while Latin American scholars are expected to publish in English in “international” journals, is a clear sign of the pernicious impact of the “politics of language” in academia. More broadly, “Northern” scholars should also engage more consistently in reading, quoting, and thinking about the rich scholarship produced in Latin America.

Concluding on a more positive note, however, in La Paz, Spanish and Portuguese were used by Latin American, European, and US scholars alike. More importantly, horizontal collaborations are certainly possible between researchers from Latin America and “the North”, especially in bottom-up networks like the European Labour History Network (ELHN), founded in 2013, where working groups (on Gender, Military Labor, Free and Unfree Labor, etc.) play

a central role. Broader collaborations can also be envisaged in the framework of the Global Labour History Network (GLHN), which held its first conference in Noida, India, just a few weeks before the La Paz conference.