

NEW TRENDS IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF LABOUR MOVEMENTS. NOTES FOR THE 51ST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL AND LABOUR HISTORY BERLIN – 17-19 SEPTEMBER 2015

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Among the variety of effects of the transformation set in motion by the changes arriving in the late 1990's on the level of political and social equilibrium-with the end of the bipolar balance and the advent of the global economy- the passing of an arrangement of the relationships of production and labour hinging on the centrality of the factory and the industrial proletariat seems without doubt to be one of the most evident. The affirmation of a production structure characterized by a high level of technological specialization, the increasingly complex interrelations between the different areas of the globe, the definition of an exchange market made evermore instantaneous by the growing role of communication devices, seem to have confined, in an extraordinarily rapid timeframe, the classic paradigm of 20th century industrialism to an increasingly marginal position. At the same time, the eclipse of industrialism was both cause and effect of the prevalence of new attempts to define a developmental model linked rather to environmental sustainability, to rational usage of resources, to the idea of a "civil economy" linked to new and diverse investment sectors. The 20th century world of work, linked to European economic predominance, thus seems the terrain not only of a "destructuralization" of the traditional historical and sociological categories, but also a continual problematization of the "geography of labour" that belonged to the 20th century: whereby towards the passing of the centrality first of Europe and then of America, a counterweight is found in the emergence of countries gifted with a highly competitive capacity, thanks to an increasingly competitive technological specialization (such as India) or an apparently unlimited supply of low-cost labour which positions them as the "new global factories" (such as China)

It is an evident consequence of these profound changes that for over twenty years a debate has raged in Historiography in the attempt to define new paradigms of comprehension and investigation in light of the passing of several of the interpretations which sustained research during the course of the 20th century. In this debate, the part related to labour history appears as one of the most complex and fertile areas: in this field, more than elsewhere, are visible the multiform, differentiated implications determined by the aforementioned transformations. And the growing renewed interest in the topic- shown repeatedly by the stratification of contributions and the involvement of research teams, proves the import but at the same time, the difficulty of juxtaposition. Proof of this dynamic was the discussion undertaken during the proceedings of the 51st International Conference of Social and Labour History, which took place this year at the Centre for Social Science in Berlin, while waiting to return to the traditional setting of the Jagermayrhof of the ArbeiterKammer in Linz, also symbolically coherent with the lengthy history of this scientific partnership, and dedicated to the relationship between *Labour and non labour*. As underlined by new Conference President Susan Zimmermann, this year's gathering comes "without exaggeration" in an extraordinary historical moment, characterized by the growth of violence at a global level, and by the decomposition of the rules of civil coexistence in a manner and dimension previously unknown in postwar Europe. This historical moment-which questions the European conscience in regards to the risks of a sudden

transformation of capitalism and a new class struggle under a different guise- also imposes on the history of labour an effort of comprehension of the new ways in which capitalism acts and the new relations between inequality and violence in different periods and zones. The Conference - founded in 1965 as a meeting point for historians of the West and East during the Cold War- has itself undergone a profound thematic modification, now promoting-in the words of Zimmerman herself-"a shift towards global perspectives [of research, author's note] on the past and the present of work." The growth of the "global history of work" has been both the reaction to the "evaporation of the old working class" produced by historical changes taking place, and the tool through which an attempt has been made to construct a new interpretative paradigm of the world.

The new "global history of work"-affirmed Zimmerman during the conference opening- has constituted, in other words, the response to the new conditions of the "Post Cold War", of a new era of unstable, unequal globalization, caused by the end of the Cold War, generating forms of reflection and debate integrated around the world of work and which can contribute to the "search for an alternative".

Further confirmation of this message was the choice to dedicate the proceedings to the relationship between the dimension of work and of non-work, concluding a journey that in recent years has led the Conference of Linz to question itself and reflect on the new dimensions and new boundaries of the very concept of work itself. The topic-as underlined in the thematic guidelines by Andreas Eckert, of Berlin's Humboldt University- appears particularly relevant in the current scenario of the economy of work precisely for the difficulty to distinguish, in the transformations having taken place, what exactly constitutes work and what is excluded from work; this distinction comes both at the level of scientific debate and in terms of organizational practices and political choices.

Thus, the boundary between legal work and illegal life practices, work and criminality, but also between paid and unpaid labour, all seem worthy of consideration in light of the difficulty in setting clear limits to the characteristics of the vocational sphere. It is a boundary which above all is complex and which generates new questions regarding areas apparently also quite distant from the traditional categories of interpretation of work: such as-in the examples proposed by Eckert- the relationship between "hard labour" and all those forms of activity that link enjoyment to a rigorous discipline aimed at precise objectives (such as sport); or, the relationship between work and vagrancy, or those particular forms of work linked to environmental dimensions quite different from the typical vocational sphere and to incentives that are not at all reached through the monetization of a salary: for example, housework. Nor less relevant is the impact of a certain professional attitude in the organization of daily life, both on a personal level and in the family circle or in our social groups.

If the question at the base of the Berlin meeting was thus related to a long-term trend which would allow for tracing issues and phenomena similar to those indicated as far back as the era of advanced industrial capitalism and even, in some cases, in the economy which undergirded modern society

between the 14th and 15th centuries, a more careful attention-we believe- merits the evaluation of the results offered by the debate. In which, in the first place, along with presentations strictly projected towards a historical dimension, in the search for the roots of phenomena of contamination of the concept of work, there were others much less bound to a proper historiographical framework, and geared instead to respond to needs for definitions of sociological categories certainly useful for historical investigation but only when applied towards this end. Thus, for example, if in the first session, dedicated to *The Making of Real Work?* - that is, to the construction of a professional conscience - the relation of Sabine Rutar exemplified in a precise way the difficulties faced by the working class in the shipyards along the Italian-Yugoslav border during the Cold War, with a fascinating reconstruction of the environment; if Stefano Petrungraro proposed - in the session dedicated to *Transgressive Practices at Work*- a problematization of extreme interest in a zone considered "marginal" like prostitution, during the period between WWI and WWII in Yugoslavia; many other presentations offered reflections of significant momentum for the overall comprehension of the questions posed by the conference. And this was both because it seems difficult to comprehend in a single overall framework-even in admitting the usefulness of comparison- situations and dimensions quite different from the European context, such as that of the Samoan Islands or the German colonies in Java (the latter furthermore linked to an additional element of complexity in the relationship with the colonial regime); but also because it seems perhaps worthy to consider further the relationship between certain professional categories: What connections are able to be drawn among textile workers, industrial proletariat of the shipyards, and intellectual professions such as engineers, about whom spoke Andrew Urban in regards to the United States, or even about mathematicians, about whom Milena Kremakova spoke? Then, in some cases, work seems tied to a wide range of motives and elements of self-representation, as emerged in the various presentations about housework-a highly relevant phenomenon in the job market, located in a grey zone between regulation and the absence of rules- in which the professional incentives are far from mere retribution, and include elements of personal relationships and even emotional bonds that a legislator would have difficulty in grasping. To say nothing then of the extremely complicated relationship with the world and with the very nature of work which certain ethno-linguistic groups continue to maintain in fueling among themselves an awareness and highly positive view of marginal, and even illegal activities, such as vagrancy and mendicity, such as the case of the Rom and Gitano communities, about whom an entire, interesting session was dedicated.

But more in general the problem that emerged as central in the workings of the Berlin Conference was that of comprehending and redefining scientific paradigms and statutes of the history of work. With the extreme limit of having carried the debate to the terrain of the sociology of work-in search of the definition of categories or identification of differences of a descriptive nature, such as in the presentation of Adele Souralova, dedicated to the topic of the role and awareness of domestic workers; or that of Amy Watson on the debate around unemployment and new job seekers among youth in the Czech Republic- the discussion this year in fact evidenced a double trend which marks

the distance from the original nature and objectives and the profound changes which have now taken place. On the one hand, there has been an almost total abandonment of the political dimension, which appeared almost completely absent in the presentations- and this both in the most classic dimension of the history of labour movements as a history of organizations which express the maturation of class consciousness, and in the more contemporary dimensions of the new forms of representation- in which the debate often seemed tied to considerations of great phenomena of social change that revolve around the issue of work or which intersect it, but lacking the capacity, or perhaps the intention, to underline the emergence of subjectivities which shift from social to political. On the other hand, the continuous efforts to link historical investigation to the understanding of, and possibly, action on, the present: a laudable attempt to create historical questions from current problems, but perhaps too geared towards responding to the disorientation which marks the present age.

If today the history of labour movements appears almost completely finished as a seam, belonging to a classically 20th century season of historiography and politics, and the quite engaging presentation of Jurgen Kocka testified to the importance of efforts by a generation of historians in overcoming an ethical-political framework of the history of labour movements in favour instead of attention to a social history of the world of work, the problem which remains at the heart of the reflection is related to the identification of new paradigms and new thematic and methodological choices to open the history of work towards new, fertile trajectories. Without doubt, the use of sociological, or even anthropological categories, will notably contribute to the expansion of tools for comprehension. But until these tools are more precisely defined, the concern for those who follow the debate is that the field may remain suspended in a continual oscillation between nostalgia for the past and uncertainty for the future.

