

Labor and Spatiality

Research Area D takes up debates that have recently emerged at the intersection between slavery studies and comparative dependency studies on the one hand and Global Labor History and a new economic and social history on the other. Here, at the crossroad of these debates, a new and expanding field of research has emerged that advocates a systematic expansion of the traditional concept of labor and a revision of the master narratives of Western modernity (Brass/van der Linden 1997; Lucassen 2008; van der Linden 2008 and 2010; van der Linden/Rodríguez García 2016; Eckert 2016).

Instead of starting with the Industrial Revolution and thus adopting European free wage labor as the standard labor relation of modernity, all forms of labor will need to be taken into account in equal measure: "free" and "unfree" forms of labor, productive and reproductive labor, capitalist and non-capitalist labor relations – in both Western and non-Western societies, from within and beyond European (colonial) history (Bernet/Tanner 2015; Bernet/Schiel/Tanner 2016; Beckert 2014; Zeuske 2017).

In that sense, slave labor is now conceptualized as one form of coerced labor alongside convict labor, debt bondage, serfdom or servitude. This approach has brought to the fore the many grey areas, overlaps and contradictions between (purely formal-legalistically and terminologically speaking) distinct forms of 'unfree' labor and personal dependency relations. The Bonn Cluster of Excellence's focus on societies and areas outside the realm of Western colonization and on pre-modern European phenomena can contribute to this debate by challenging present distinctions between "free" and "unfree" labor relations and helping to re-conceptualize long-term socio-economic shifts and trends beyond the European master narrative of the rise of the West.

Transculturally and diachronically comparative studies have shown that unfree labor relations are not necessarily associated with despotic regimes and that the development of markets and economic growth is not always tied to the emergence of a capitalist economic system (apart from Williams 1944 now esp. Heers 2012; Kocka 2013; Stanziani 2014; Beckert 2014; Varma 2017). Similarly, the idea that human history can be written teleologically, as a long-term development from unfree to free forms of labor organization, is considered disproved (Lichtenstein 1996; Bush 2000; Zeuske 2013; Damir-Geilsdorf et al. 2016). What is still missing, however, is a dialogue between socio-economic historians working on earlier periods and global labor historians focusing on the time from 1500 up to the present.

Goals

As its first objective the fourth research area will therefore advocate a temporal extension of the field. While Global Labor History has understood its extension of traditional labor history mainly in spatial terms, it is high time to link this research with earlier periods.

In order to move beyond the Western/modern dichotomies of "free" and "unfree" labor relations as well as capitalist and feudalistic economic systems and to overcome facile labels of "modernity" and 'pre-modernity', we only need to look at modern conditions inside and outside the West, but also to combine this research with studies of the so-called "premodern era" both within and outside of Europe. What is called for is a strategic alliance between Europe-centered pre-modernity studies and the diachronically oriented area studies in the field of labor.

The traditional image of the worker must be challenged by the figure of the unskilled ancilla in late medieval Europe just as much as by today's textile worker in Bangladesh or the outsourced worker in a call center in Western Europe. Only through such a transculturally and diachronically comparative perspective on servitude relations is it possible to examine conjunctures of slavery beyond the modern/Western conception of history. While existing pre-modern studies on the history of labor have remained largely separate from the debates of Global Labor History (e.g. Postel 2006; Arnoux 2012; Temin 2013; Moreno García 2016; Groen-Vallinga 2017), the research area within the cluster of excellence aims to establish a connection between the two and thus to act as a productive spur to current discussions.

Second, the research area targets the spatial dimension of asymmetrical dependencies. The history of labor cannot be told without taking into consideration the history of migration. It is not by chance that migration, coercion and labor precariousness have become keywords for a new research agenda of Global Labor History. Most forms of dependent labor are closely entangled with the history of forced migration and small-scale or large-scale work migration between town and countryside, metropolis and periphery, economically strong and weak regions as well as with the history of hunting and trafficking humans in times of military conflict or through piracy and smuggling rings and with the history of slave trade between cultural spaces and continents.

At the same time, processes of immobilization (i.e., the serf bound to the soil, or a convict tied to a prison, a camp or a remote plantation) are equally crucial for understanding the "logic of deployment" of the workforce by an employer. Spatial mobility therefore must include short-, medium- and long-distance migration as well as voluntary and coerced forms of mobility. What needs to be studied here, therefore, is the dialectics between the spatial mobilization and immobilization of the workforce. In order to study both processes simultaneously, we will above all address the question of how mobilization and immobilization are entangled in specific sites and institutions of dependency (e.g. the plantation, the household, the military, etc.).

Thirdly, this research area explores workers' practices for coping with dependency, reducing the degree of coercion and expanding their own autonomy. By looking at (a) individual and collective everyday practices, (b) organizations, (c) relationships with institutions (e.g. the use of laws and norms), and (d) anti-systemic practices, this research area will make it possible to map dependency on an alternative scale, between autonomy and coercion, and to increase the awareness of the dependents' scope of action and their options for social mobility.