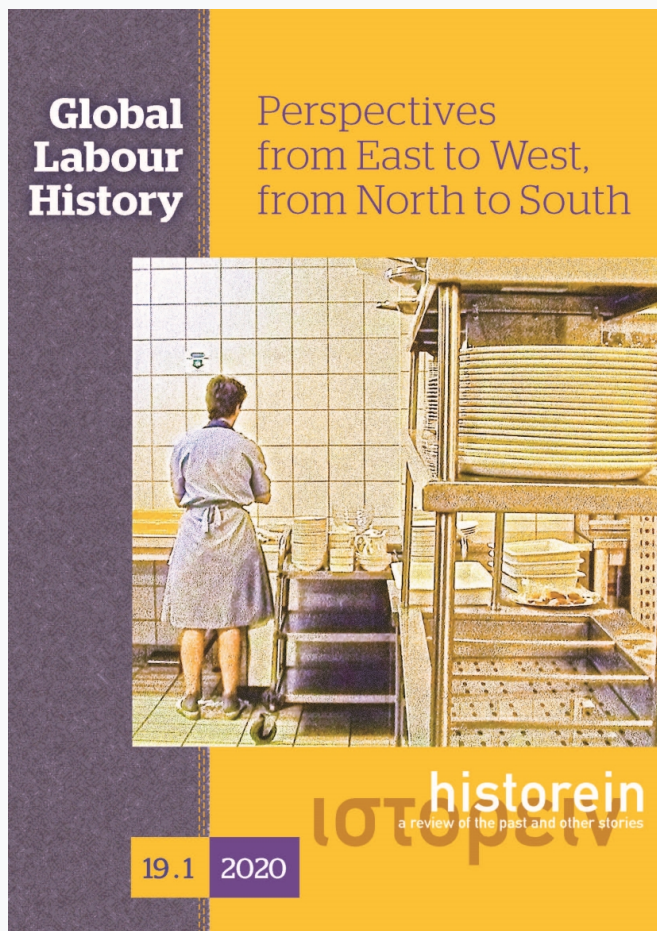


## Historein

Vol 19, No 1 (2020)

Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South



### For a New Global Labour History: A View from Eastern Europe

*Alina-Sandra Cucu*

doi: [10.12681/historein.19421](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.19421)

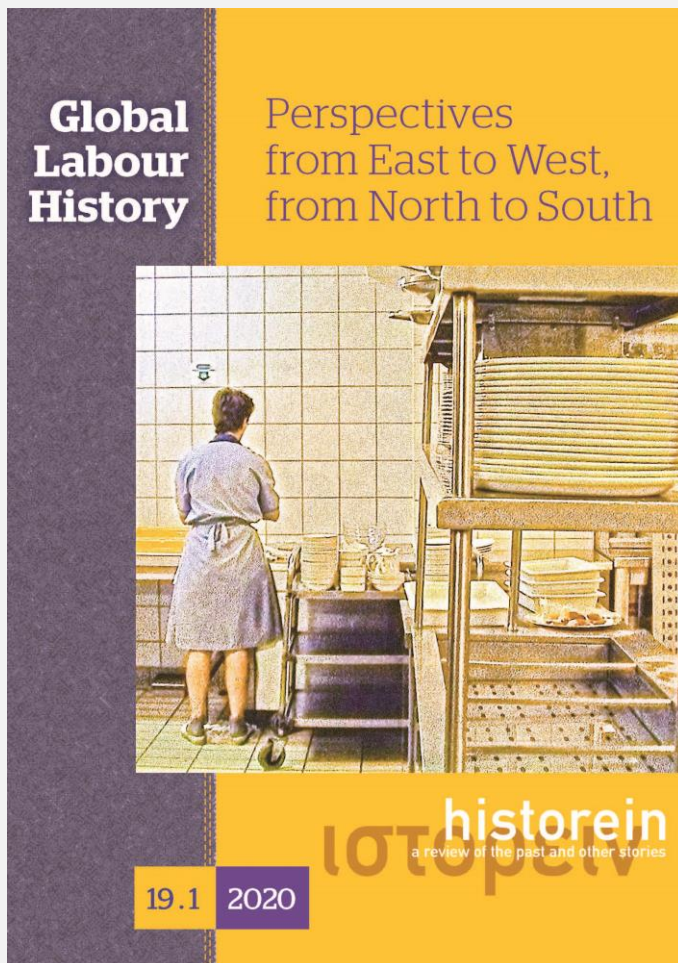
Copyright © 2020, Alina-Sandra Cucu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Cucu, A.-S. (2020). For a New Global Labour History: A View from Eastern Europe. *Historein*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.19421>



**For a New Global Labour  
History:  
A View from Eastern Europe**

***Alina-Sandra Cucu***  
**doi: 10.12681/historein.19421**

**To cite this article:**

Cucu, Alina-Sandra. 2020. "For a New Global Labour History: A View from Eastern Europe". *Historein* 19 (1).  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.19421>.

# For a New Global Labour History: A View from Eastern Europe

Alina-Sandra Cucu

Goldsmiths, University of London

The last two decades have stood witnesses to an increasing interest in the fate of industrial labour in Eastern Europe. The socialist period has especially become a major concern for contemporary historians. Several key books and articles, a forthcoming book series, a string of workshops and conferences, and a shift in the topics covered by recent doctoral and master's dissertations constitute welcome milestones of an intellectual landscape that was starving for accounts of the role of industrial workers in the recent history of the region. They have been documenting the part labourers played in the post-Second World War reconstruction; their place in the modernisation projects unfolding behind the Iron Curtain; their support of, complicity in or resistance to the socialist regimes; and their passivity or mobilisation when faced with the experience of loss that accompanied the industrial collapse of the "postsocialist transition".<sup>1</sup>

Lately, this constellation of knowledge production efforts emerged from an explicit call to integrate Eastern Europe in the new global labour history. While the intuition behind this call is certainly correct, it has never gone beyond the endeavour of uncovering disparate local histories that could then (maybe) be integrated into a regional narrative. Up to this point, the efforts behind this integration seem to have remained at the level of "adding up" cases and "knowing more", and there has been no concrete attempt to formalise this hunger for information into a coherent and effective intellectual programme. In this article, I argue that integrating Eastern Europe in global labour history must go beyond a geographical and temporal correction of our previously skewed historical accounts. Instead, we need a deeper and more structured understanding of what this merger represents for our global narratives and for our political commitments. In other words, I argue that putting Eastern European labour on the map is not enough; we need to treat it as an epistemological object in its own right.

The microhistories of labour in Eastern Europe produced in the last decades represented a necessary step for the possibility of regional and global comparisons. The article does indeed propose that integrating Eastern Europe in global labour history can lead to a rethinking of two historiographic pillars: the thorny question of global comparisons, and the issue of periodisation in contemporary history.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that

these efforts need to be pursued further, towards a processual analysis of how labour in this part of the world became an integral part of global commodity production through the creation of regional structures of capital accumulation.

The article represents a preliminary attempt to bring together some concerns that have been accompanying my work on socialist labour relations for the last decade. It draws freely on secondary literature on workers in “workers’ states”, as well as on examples from two interconnected undertakings: the findings of my book on planning labour for primitive socialist accumulation in 1950s Romania; and the initial efforts of thinking through the stakes of my current project, an analysis of the integration of the Romanian car industry in global commodity chains since the 1960s.

Instead of simply recovering more cases for global comparisons, here I follow the lead of a scholarly literature that emphasises the need to put transnational conflicts and interdependencies at the centre of labour analysis, as well as recent calls to understand “the global” not simply through an upscaling of our analysis, but through investigations of structured connections, dynamics and forms of integration that have shaped past and present processes locally, nationally and across the world.<sup>3</sup> With the global turn in labour history, we witnessed a critical review of our conceptual vocabulary. The supposed linearity and teleological assumptions of Western models of industrialisation came under attack, which lately led to a heightened awareness of social reproductive work. In addition, increasing attention has been given to categories of workers previously ignored in the academic literature, from agrarian labourers to seafarers, and from domestic servants to sex workers.

From the beginning, some topics have been more easily integrated into this initiative than others. The internationalism of the labour movement, the transnational migration flows, the colonial and postcolonial labour regimes, the linkages between the Global North and the Global South, and a new emphasis on understanding the history of the first with the help of the latter represented the focus of the early attempts to formulate a new way of doing labour history. The efforts to articulate a global history of labour were initially rooted in the institutional environment of the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, which means they were in practical terms organised around a generous archive. The archival collection of the IISH was temporally and geographically far-reaching, and has since increasingly gathered not only documents but also visual materials and oral histories. It is telling that in spite of the global coverage ambitions, none of the foundational texts in the field mentioned Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Although the ethos of reinventing labour history as a non-Eurocentric effort was explicit, the continental perspective that had to be transcended did not include Eastern Europe.

The first seeds of theorising the place of the region in the new global labour history emerged only recently, with scholars rightfully decrying the mutual ignorance between the

new global labour history and the nationally encased, self-referential literature on Eastern Europe, despite the wealth of communist archives and the tricky, openly politicised, but informative national historiography produced in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Drawing parallels with the uneasy theoretical integration of feminist and subaltern studies into the flourishing field of global labour history, some authors have advocated that the dissemination and hybridisation of managerial practices that accompanied labour commodification on both sides of the Iron Curtain, as well as a rethinking of Eastern Europe as part of the global patterns of organising production and life along Fordist lines, would offer the first solid chords for tying local, national and global narratives together.<sup>6</sup>

I suggest that the two linkages recommended so far – a reassessment of state socialist countries as Fordist regimes, and their integration in a global history of commodification – can be easily subsumed under my proposal to bring together the history of labour with the history of capital formation in the region. This is an interdisciplinary synthesis par excellence, one that combines existing social and labour history in workers' states and beyond with political economy and insights coming from the sociology of knowledge to explore the encounters between various logics of capital accumulation in state socialism. The endeavour of articulating a truly global labour history from a specifically Eastern European angle requires us to reconsider the scale(s) at which we construct our narratives, and to move away from an epistemological perspective that favours eventful fractures, and towards a processual analysis of labour in the region. This move would represent a necessary first step to formulate an intellectual agenda that would place Eastern European labour on the global map, but in its own analytical terms.

### *Labour commodification and central planning in Eastern Europe*

In what follows, I propose that a programme for a global history of labour from an Eastern European angle should start from the unification of labour history with the history of capital formation in the region. I suggest labour historians start taking the political economy of the state socialist countries seriously, by investigating two dimensions of their structural transformation since the Second World War: the mechanisms of central economic planning as a device that made socialist accumulation possible; and the history of global capital penetrating the region around the oil crises of the 1970s and beyond.

The theoretical underpinning of the vast majority of socialist and postsocialist studies rests on a rather rudimentary conceptualisation of central economic planning in the Eastern bloc. "The plan" came to be taken for granted as a bureaucratic way of coordinating supply and demand in socialist economies, basically holding the same function as the market in an equally crude economistic view of capitalism.<sup>7</sup> The functional equivalence between the plan and the market has not been questioned methodically, and the preference for one coordination mechanism over the other has been relegated to the realm of politics, becoming constitutive to the analytical distinction between capitalism and Eastern

European socialism. The idea of a “planned economy” reified socialism and capitalism not only as different and separate, but also as ontologically opposite. As Michael Burawoy remarked, socialism came to be defined simply as capitalism’s Other, and was integrated in our scholarly imaginary as everything capitalism was not.<sup>8</sup>

For our discussion here, it is essential to note that the history of labour in the region played its part in the production of an ahistorical understanding of what the plan did on the shop floor and beyond. Although on the shop floor, in the urban centres and in the villages the relationship between workers and the state was often politically troublesome, in the plan figures, labour appeared as a commodity, and it was no less at the root of capital accumulation than in capitalism. However, taking the political economy of socialism seriously also means that labour cannot be considered as just another economic resource that can be planned. Elsewhere, I consider the specificity of labour as a foundation for primitive socialist accumulation in postwar Romania, and I show that the plan embodied all the contradictions rooted in the multidimensional nature of labour: as a creator of value, as living labour and as a political subject/object, all being constitutive both to the ways in which labour was commodified in state socialism and to the limits of this commodification.<sup>9</sup>

It is important, thus, to reimagine the histories of workers in workers’ states as local unfoldings of broader historical processes through which work as a generic human activity has been gradually transformed into labour as a category of political economy. This step requires a reconnection of the history of workers in the workers’ states to the global history of labour commodification and its accompanying technologies of exploitation. While work “includes any human effort adding use value to goods and services”,<sup>10</sup> the transformation of labour into a commodity ensures that human activity is transformed into capital-positing labour. Historically, this transformation has entailed three dimensions: first, it presupposed a globally uneven and forever incomplete process of depeasantisation and proletarianisation; second, it established the decommodification of labour at the core of welfare state systems, as well as at the foundation of the varieties of industrial paternalism emerging in the twentieth century; and third, as labour power entered the calculation of profits, it pushed forward the rationalisation of the production process and an ever intensifying struggle to control workers.<sup>11</sup>

The commodification of labour had social implications that went way beyond concrete processes of valuation. The socialist states functioned according to paternalist principles, with the factories becoming not only its productive but also its redistributive arms. Politics of wages, scientific norms, consumption baskets, daily calorie intakes, time and family budgets were fundamentally linked to the workplace, and became part and parcel of increasingly complex ideas about how much labour should cost, what dimensions of social reproduction should be taken over by the state budget, by the factories, or by the workers themselves. The idea that national welfare regimes can be analytically dissected

according to the degree to which they decommodify labour – read here as the extent to which they make possible for a person to maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market”<sup>12</sup> – has become a commonplace in social sciences. It is easy to see that, as far as labour commodification is concerned, socialist regimes were ultimately structured along the same lines of force as many European capitalist configurations during Les Trente Glorieuses.

Consequently, the almost 50 years of state socialism in Eastern Europe could become a strategic case for questioning the existence of functional free markets as a necessary condition for the advance of labour commodification. Based on her research on Hungary, Martha Lampland argued that “the process of commodifying labor has been fully realized under socialism in conditions thought to be inimical to capitalist development generally, and to commodification in particular”.<sup>13</sup> The end result was a specific type of subjecthood, centred around individualist, calculative and utilitarianist values, very far from the agitprop collectivist tropes. In her subsequent work, Lampland reveals how the commodification of labour was supported through state policy, and carried forward by local economic executives, scientists and agricultural and industrial managers, who ensured that the formulas according to which the price of labour was calculated acquired a fully-fledged social life.

Of course, there is a crucial distinction between the commodification of labour in state socialism and in neoliberalism, which should be constitutive to any conversation about labour control. More concretely, there is an essential, almost ontological difference, between labour control on a labour market predicated on universal employment and one in which livelihoods are threatened by jobs evaporating at any time. While it is true that the competition between the industrial units on the informal labour market in socialism was fierce, it was also one that gave workers the upper hand, not only due to a systemic labour shortage, but also because with job security guaranteed, individual labourers could never fall outside this market.

This new way of looking at the commodification of labour also leaves deep indents in the way we understand proletarianisation in the region. By now, labour historians of the capitalist peripheries have systematically dismantled the classical vision of proletarianisation as a linear process. Literature on the topic has repeatedly shown that the dispossession and disenfranchisement in which the commodification of labour has been historically embedded have produced local trajectories of class formation through proletarianisation, deproletarianisation or reproletarianisation as well as through depeasantisation and repeasantisation.<sup>14</sup> This deconstructive effort yields similar results for socialist Eastern Europe. A solid tradition of research on double dwelling and on local strategies of survival showed that, although socialist industrialisation and urbanisation proceeded at a fast pace, the peasant-worker was an essential pillar of the region’s industries, and wage labour continued to combine with other household resources for the whole socialist period. This workforce was built around the idea that workers and their

families would support a part of their living costs, in a strategy marked by a class logic that compelled peasants to reproduce themselves as peasants, even in an industrialising environment. It also set serious constraints on the socialist commodification of labour across the region.

This postwar structure of the labour force proved resilient.<sup>15</sup> After approximately one decade, it helped the socialist regimes to keep the price of labour comparatively low, to treat labour as a highly mobile resource, and to play around with the territorial distribution of productive forces in advantageous ways. This possibility also represented an important incentive for companies from Western Europe to start doing business with the socialist governments. From the perspective of Western companies, the advance of flexible capitalism outside the capitalist core involved a strategy of appropriating a reservoir of a stable, controlled, fixed-price and relatively cheap labour force, which was precisely what Eastern Europe (and increasingly China) could provide at the time. While global economy was undergoing fundamental structural transformations with the advance of the neoliberal order, companies in the capitalist core started to find more convenient production sites as well as to strongly push for new forms of rationalising the labour process in the old manufacturing centres. A conversation on the ways in which Eastern European workers became part of the New International Division of Labour since the 1970s awaits to happen.<sup>16</sup> From this angle, the transition to flexible production predicated by David Harvey or the regulation school involved a move towards the integration of Eastern European labour as a pocket of industrial production that continued to be organised along a specific variety of Fordist principles, and crucially, *by someone else*. And this is what the next section will discuss.

### *Taking political economy seriously: Labour history and capital formation*

Surpassing the methodological nationalism and the localism of much of the scholarship on socialist labour does not mean that the global should automatically become the scale of our analysis. None of these scales of analysis – local, national, regional or global – should be simply taken for granted. They should emerge as we follow factory workers being caught biographically in productive contexts that move beyond locality, to be regionally or nationally integrated, or to participate in global (or globally aspiring) value chains. This section will illustrate this approach by looking at how the historical move of capital from the capitalist core in the 1970s encountered regional and national logics of accumulation, an encounter that further produced multiscaled entanglements between seemingly disparate worlds of labour.

Starting with the mid-1960s, the socialist governments increasingly oriented their economies towards the world market. International economic collaborations took different



forms, from patent acquisition to joint ventures, and were broadly structured along three axes of exchange: within the socialist bloc; with the capitalist core; and with the developing world. Among Eastern European countries, Romania stood apart in the crowd. The Romanian hunger for technology, know-how and capital started to manifest strongly around mid-1960s, thus chronologically preceding both the turmoil of 1968 and the oil crisis of 1973. Alongside Yugoslavia, the Romanian government was probably the most active pursuer cooperation with the West among the Comecon countries. Closing the technological gap between Romania and the advanced capitalist world came to be seen as one of the main goals of the five-year plans between 1966 and 1989 and one of the crucial instruments for addressing the long-term effects of uneven and combined development and peripheralisation in the trajectory of the country. By 1974, Romania's trade with advanced capitalist economies had exceeded that with the socialist countries. In addition, new markets outside the Comecon were opened each year in non-European developing countries, with an almost complete disregard for their communist or capitalist leaning.

By the end of the 1970s, the Romanian factories became part of the production chains that moved beyond the foggy conflictual politics of the Cold War. These chains incorporated the Romanian productive capacities in branches as different as textiles, chemicals, timber, engineering and the automotive industry, and proposed new ideologies of profitability and financial accountability. While socialist labour was not necessarily cheap when compared to the Global South, wages were decided at governmental level, which enabled the possibility to maintain production costs stable for long periods of time. In the aftermath of 1968 and 1973, the socialist states had the competitive advantage of a relatively cheap, highly skilled and controlled workforce, which allowed transnational companies from Germany, the US, France or Italy to create pockets of predictability in turbulent times.

This predictability was rooted both in the possibility of geographically displacing industrial conflict and its associated political risks, and in the solid politics of calculation that a wage-by-law employment regime allowed for. Although Romanian factories had been increasingly caught up in commodity chains that went beyond the Iron Curtain, joint ventures represented a step forward to the politics of integration in the world economy. They also constituted explicit institutional settings in which the Romanian labourers were made into an active part of the global labour market. Moreover, as I show elsewhere, the move towards export-oriented manufacturing produced fundamental tensions at the heart of planning, by engaging industrial managers and governmental officials in bitter struggles over contradictory necessities: the decentralisation and rescaling of decision-making, the flexibilisation of production and the financialisation of exchanges, on the one hand, and an increasingly effective grip of the state over the economy, on the other. All these processes were part of the global transformations of the 1970s, but took different forms than in Western Europe or in the Global South.<sup>17</sup>

Recently, the “odd convergence of interests” between multinational corporations and

socialist states started to spark the curiosity of scholars of the region.<sup>18</sup> Their contributions offered the promise of opening “the black box of business negotiations, reconstructing parts of the decision-making process and illustrating the peculiar rules of the game that governed East–West partnerships”.<sup>19</sup> However, they fell short in addressing this “convergence of interests” precisely due to the epistemic difficulty of understanding state socialism as a historical configuration that stood primarily for an accumulation regime, in many ways not so different from the capitalist ones. From this perspective, the meeting of interests seems less peculiar. It relates to the necessity of transcending the postwar structure of accumulation and its corresponding global division of labour through an expansion of scale and scope, coming almost simultaneously from the capitalist core and from the socialist semi-periphery. How this simultaneity came into being and how it has deeply shaped the history of labour globally remains an open question.

The need to secure industrial peace (on and off the shop floor) stood at the core of these encounters and shaped wide fields of political and economic action globally. Connecting the dots between these various historical configurations allows us to transcend nominalist perspectives as we try to understand what the pursuit of industrial peace can reveal about the nature of power in the socialist regimes and, simultaneously, about the non-liberal dimensions of Western capitalism itself. Thus, we need to move our attention from the supposed exceptionality of labour in socialism to the moist social, political, and economic humus from which it emerged and to the ways in which it has been caught up in rival (but not necessarily different) accumulation structures and mechanisms once integrated into global commodity production.

The collaborations of the Romanian state with two of the most important French car manufacturers are used here as a schematic illustration of the evolution from a simple logic of developing markets towards a logic of expanding the production chains in Eastern Europe, because of the pressures of industrial conflict in the capitalist core.<sup>20</sup> In the 1970s, labour conflicts in France and the oil crisis pushed companies like Renault and Citroën to relocate their productive capacities to Eastern Europe. The association with Renault in the 1960s was limited to acquiring the license and contracting the French manufacturer to execute a turnkey industrial unit in Mioveni, a small town in southern Romania that owed its development to the car factory. In the later case of *Citroën*, the Romanian state established a full partnership with the French manufacturer.<sup>21</sup> The negotiations started in the early 1970s, and coincided with a period of crisis in the history of Citroën, which included bad strategic decisions regarding the manufactured models, financial problems, the oil crisis, the takeover by Peugeot, and, of course, the post-1968 failures to achieve a solid industrial peace in French companies.<sup>22</sup> Citroën’s capital participation was 36 percent and they brought the fabrication line, the technology, the expertise and the promise to export 40 percent of the annual production. The Romanian part was going to provide the space for

the factory buildings, openings to markets in the socialist bloc and developing countries under Soviet influence, and, most importantly, a cheap, skilled and controlled labour force. While on the one hand this move left many French industrial workers without jobs, it gave an impetus to the service sector, creating more than 5,000 administrative and technical jobs in the car industry between 1972 and 1978. The move to the East<sup>23</sup> simultaneously produced pockets of highly skilled and better paid industrial workers in Romania, making obvious the fact that our understanding of the industrialisation waves of late socialism is seriously flawed if we imagine them to be outside the emergence of what Richard Sennett called the “economy of impermanence” in Western Europe.<sup>24</sup>

Fast forward to the 1990s, the radically different decisions of the two French manufacturers related to continuing their activity in Romania fundamentally shaped the trajectories of two cities, at least two generations of workers, local politics of production and trade union strength. In 1999, Renault bought the Romanian factory in Mioveni and radically transformed its technological lines and marketing strategies. The industrial unit would become part of a multinational company, with cities, states and unions competing at a global level for a privileged position of their factory in the hierarchy of the Renault production chain. Citroën, on the other hand, decided to withdraw from their partnership with the Romanian state in 1990. Fully in the hands of the state, the second automotive factory in Romania slowed down production and its workers lived through two years of technical unemployment and uncertainty. The city survived for a good part of the 1990s due to a flourishing informal economy around car dismembering, selling car parts and repairing automobiles brought from Western Europe. In 1992, the former Citroën factory was taken over by the South Korean conglomerate Daewoo, which was soon producing car models that were very successful on the Romanian domestic market for more than a decade. Ten years later, in 2002, Daewoo became a part of General Motors, whose managers decided to give up the entire Eastern European division of the company (factories in Romania, Poland, Ukraine and Uzbekistan). The factory’s fate seemed uncertain once again. Also, the informal market for car parts and used cars, which supported the workers’ livelihoods in the 1990s, began to be suffocated by the relentless advance of imports. Production resumed in 2007, when Ford became the factory’s main stakeholder, and has expanded since then. Recently, Ford started to produce an SUV, EcoSport, through an investment of €200 million. As a consequence, more than 3,000 industrial jobs have been advertised in recent years. This means somewhere else in the world, a Ford plant will reduce its personnel, this time most probably in Chennai, India, and according to the latest developments, in the company’s homeland, the US.

The world of capitalist production underwent extensive transformations in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond.<sup>25</sup> It has spread and contracted, it has become ever more differentiated, and it reconfigured spaces of production and distribution, as well as centres of accumulation and control, along increasingly long production and supply chains. The term “commodity chains” was first coined as a theoretical and methodological

approach in the world-system tradition,<sup>26</sup> but also made a career in development studies, new economic sociology and institutional economics. As an interdisciplinary tool par excellence, commodity chain analysis was used to address interfirm linkages, sectoral competition, industrial upgrading<sup>27</sup> or the relationship between global structures of accumulation and uneven development. With few exceptions addressing the transformations of the labour process,<sup>28</sup> these endeavours focused on the flow and movement of commodities from the perspective of added value and diminishing transaction costs,<sup>29</sup> but often left out how, in the trail of their geographical expansion, global commodity chains produced new hierarchies of labour and capital, as well as new forms of exploitation and dispossession. Ideally, the vision I propose for the new global labour history would fill this gap by reconsidering the role of class relations in the geographical expansion of production towards Eastern Europe, and by focusing on the social worlds that are materialised and disintegrated on the ground, when capital moves and when commodity chains emerge, expand or contract.

It is clear that the fate of the Eastern European workers cannot be analytically disentangled from the fate of their global counterparts, and the epistemological consequences of overlooking these historical connections in our understanding of state socialism and postsocialism must be unpacked. Understanding the mechanisms of central planning in their historical unfolding becomes even more important when attempting to account for the profound reconfigurations of industrial relations in the 1970s and beyond. It is my contention that these reconfigurations happened at a critical junction between the shifting logics of capital accumulation in the socialist countries, and the dynamics of capital formation in the capitalist core, as well as in other peripheral and semiperipheral parts of the world. I thus suggest that the narratives of industrial labour in Eastern Europe should be placed within and alongside the convergences, divergences and mutual feeding between the temporal and geographical hierarchies (re)produced by uneven and combined development all over the globe.<sup>30</sup>

### *Global labour history from a different corner*

In this article, I proposed a first step that would allow scholars of the region to fruitfully engage the history of labour in Eastern Europe from a global perspective. I argued that it is high time to move beyond adding up local narratives of workers in workers' states by engaging in a systematic endeavour for the reunification of labour history with the history of capital formation in the region. I further suggested that this move requires, first of all, a reconceptualisation of planned economies as accumulation regimes and, second, heightened attention to the ways in which increasingly globalised processes of capital formation pierced the Iron Curtain and even put the Cold War configuration to use.

The implications of this effort are far-reaching. An exploration of the integration of the Eastern European industries in global commodity production offers a valuable angle from which we can better apprehend alternative paths to neoliberal globalisation. It also makes the cut for a global take on the history of labour in the region, which would allow us to comprehend how the reproduction, expansion and control of labour in countries like Romania, Hungary or Bulgaria was connected to global trends in management, to new ideas of “flexibility”, to ideals and practices of housing, education, health or leisure. This is obviously a perspective that connects social history to political economy and treats their intersection as a fundamental dimension of global historical processes that have travelled across spatial and temporal scales since the Great Depression era to contemporary times.<sup>31</sup>

Bringing socialist Eastern Europe into the analysis of commodity chains is fundamental to understanding how global transformations of production embed communities in specific mechanisms of surplus extraction, appropriation and redistribution. The fields of forces in which this happens can be global, but their unfolding is always multiscaled and their materialisation is always local. On the ground, the articulation of global commodity chains produces new institutional arrangements, impacts systems of provisioning, reconfigures family arrangements, households and livelihoods, reshapes labour processes, and sparks new forms of resistance on the shop floor and beyond.

Thus, the programme for a new global labour history that can be articulated from an Eastern European corner reveals the tensions that go beyond normally accepted historical periodisations of neoliberalism, state socialism or welfare capitalism. On the one hand, it implodes the working assumption that “the temporality of the ‘core region’ determines the periodisation of developments in the rest of the world”<sup>32</sup> and helps us question the advance of flexible capitalism from an unlikely corner. On the other hand, it denounces the artificiality of “turning points” like 1989 and places the “transition” to capitalism in Eastern Europe at a much earlier moment in history.

Bringing together labour history with the history of capital in the region helps us analyse processes of valuation as the encounter between conflicting notions and mechanisms of capital accumulation, which are always classed, ethnicised and gendered. We can thus make visible how livelihoods, systems of provisioning, and shop floor politics are made possible or threatened by new articulations of global commodity chains, technology transfers and the apparent shrinking of the world. We can further explore the “untimely coincidences”<sup>33</sup> of policies and deep social transformations brought about by the increasing differentiation of production and problematise taken for granted notions of “flows”, “networks”, “movement” and “mobilities” in the realm of commodity production.

And finally, this epistemological move allows us to investigate how places become (or fail to become) “growth machines”<sup>34</sup> in global processes of valuation, and how they are caught (and left out) in the dynamics of contemporary capitalism. Thus, instead of simple comparisons between capitalist and socialist factories, between the Fordist and the flexible organisation of production, or between market and centrally planned economies, we have

the opportunity to bear witness to broader historical processes from within, while simultaneously accounting for our own intellectual vocabularies and for the political tensions they make explicit or silence. From this perspective, Eastern Europe becomes both a place from which these processes are made visible and a lens that shapes our scholarly vision in specific ways. The effort might be daunting; but it is well worth it.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> See Mark Pittaway, *The Workers' State: Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944–1958* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Mark Pittaway, *From the Vanguard to the Margins: Workers in Hungary, 1939 to the Present. Selected essays by Mark Pittaway*, ed. Adam Fabry (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Rory Archer and Goran Musić, “Approaching the Socialist Factory and Its Workforce: Considerations from Fieldwork in (Former) Yugoslavia,” *Labor History* 58, no. 1 (2017): 44–66.
- <sup>2</sup> See the proceedings of the conference “Ruptures, Consolidations, Continuities. Reconsidering Global Economic Processes since 1945,” organised by Robert Heinze and Patrick Neveling, Bern, 28–30 June 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen, *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History* (Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1999); Marcel van der Linden, “Labour History: The Old, the New and the Global,” *African Studies* 66, nos. 2–3 (2007): 169–80; Marcel van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (2012): 57–76.
- <sup>5</sup> Adrian Grama and Susan Zimmermann, “The Art of Link-Making in Global Labour History: Subaltern, Feminist and Eastern European Contributions,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 25, no. 1 (2018): 1–20; Alexandra Ghiț, “Professionals’ and Amateurs’ Pasts: A Decolonizing Reading of Post-War Romanian Histories of Gendered Interwar Activism,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 25, no. 1 (2018): 21–44.
- <sup>6</sup> Johanna Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> Michael Ellman, *Socialist Planning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism* (London: Verso, 1985).
- <sup>9</sup> Alina-Sandra Cucu, *Planning Labour: Time and the Foundations of Socialist Industrialism in Romania* (New York: Berghahn, 2019).
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Tilly and Chris Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).
- <sup>11</sup> See Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Alina-Sandra Cucu, “Why Hegemony Was Not Born in the Factory: Twentieth-Century Sciences of Labour from a Gramscian Angle,” in *Cultural Hegemony in a Scientific World: Gramscian Concepts for the History of Science*, vol. 1, ed. Massimiliano Badino and Pietro Omodeo (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).
- <sup>12</sup> Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 22.
- <sup>13</sup> Martha Lampland, *The Object of Labor: Commodification in Socialist Hungary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1; Martha Lampland, *The Value of Labor: The Science of Commodification in Hungary, 1920–1956* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

- <sup>14</sup> William Roseberry, *Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in Culture, History, and Political Economy* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Tom Brass, *Labour Regime Change in the Twenty-First Century: Unfreedom, Capitalism and Primitive Accumulation* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), and the entire tradition he built around *The Journal of Peasant Studies*.
- <sup>15</sup> György Konrád and Ivan Szelenyi, "Social Conflicts of Underurbanization," in *Captive Cities: Studies in the Political Economy of Cities and Regions*, ed. Michael Harloe (London: Wiley, 1977), 157–74; Cucu, *Planning Labour*.
- <sup>16</sup> Originally, the thesis of a shift towards a New International Division of Labour between the North and the Global South was proposed by Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs and Otto Kreye in the 1980s. Since then, it has lost its universalising appeal. Here, I use the notion as a crutch for thinking through the successive changes in the location of productive facilities and their impact on workers' lives since the 1970s.
- <sup>17</sup> Alina-Sandra Cucu, "Go West: Industrial Production between Socialist Flexibility and the Capitalist Dynamics of the 1970s," under review with the *Journal of Global History*.
- <sup>18</sup> Valentina Fava and Luminița Gătejel, "East–West Cooperation in the Automotive Industry: Enterprises, Mobility, Production," *The Journal of Transport History* 38, no. 1 (2017), doi:10.1177/0022526617698157.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.
- <sup>20</sup> The car industry has been used as a showcase both for the process of transition from Fordism to flexible capitalism from the 1970s onwards and for the relationship between sectoral interests and labour mobilisation. See the by now classical account of Beverly Silver in *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Nevertheless, little attention has been given to how (and when) this transition unfolded in Eastern Europe.
- <sup>21</sup> Luminița Gătejel, "A Socialist–Capitalist Joint Venture: Citroën in Romania during the 1980s," *The Journal of Transport History* 38, no. 1 (2017), doi:10.1177/0022526617698150.
- <sup>22</sup> Jean Fremontier, *La Forteresse ouvrière: Renault* (Paris: Fayard, 1971).
- <sup>23</sup> In car industry, starting with the mid-1960s, all socialist governments became increasingly open to the idea of doing business with the West, which translated in a range of future developments – stable import-export contracts, licensing agreements, patent acquisition, long-term technological cooperation, direct financial investment and loans, turnkey plants (in which the Western companies delivered process technology, continuous technical assistance and training of technical personnel and workers, like in the case of Fiat in Yugoslavia and Poland or Renault in Romania) and finally joint ventures (like the case of Citroën in Romania). The car industry became the epitome of this opening towards the West.
- <sup>24</sup> Richard Sennett, "Capitalism and the City: Globalization, Flexibility, and Indifference," in *Cities of Europe: Changing Contexts, Local Arrangements, and the Challenge to Urban Cohesion*, ed. Yuri Kazepov (London: Blackwell, 2005).
- <sup>25</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (London: Wiley–Blackwell, 1991).
- <sup>26</sup> Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, "Patterns of Development of the Modern World-System," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 1, no. 2 (1977): 111–45.
- <sup>27</sup> Jennifer Bair, "Global Capitalism and Commodity Chains: Looking Back, Going Forward," *Competition & Change* 9, no. 2 (2005): 153–80.
- <sup>28</sup> Kirsty Newsome, Philip Taylor, Jennifer Bair and Al Rainnie, *Putting Labour in Its Place: Labour Process Analysis and Global Commodity Chains* (London: Palgrave, 2015).
- <sup>29</sup> See also Jennifer Bair, ed., *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

- <sup>30</sup> The last decade also stood witness to the resurgence of the Trotskyist concept of uneven and combined development, especially through the work of the scholars gathered around the working-group and Sussex University. See Michael Dunford and Weidong Liu, "Uneven and Combined Development," *Regional Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 69–85.
- <sup>31</sup> See, in contrast, the most recent edited volume that puts together a global perspective on labour relations in the automobile industry. The comparison never addresses the implications of how car production as a global process instantiates in specific employment relations within particular local-global junctions. Roger Blanpain, ed., *Globalization and Employment Relations in the Auto Assembly Industry: A Study of Seven Countries* (Austin: Wolters Kluwer, 2008).
- <sup>32</sup> Marcel Van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
- <sup>33</sup> Patrick Neveling, "Structural Contingencies and Untimely Coincidences in the Making of Neoliberal India: The Kandla Free Trade Zone, 1965–91," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 48, no. 1 (2014): 18.
- <sup>34</sup> Harvey Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 2 (1976): 309–32.