

## Historein

Vol 19, No 1 (2020)

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



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

*Dimitra Lampropoulou, Leda Papastefanaki*

doi: [10.12681/historein.22456](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.22456)

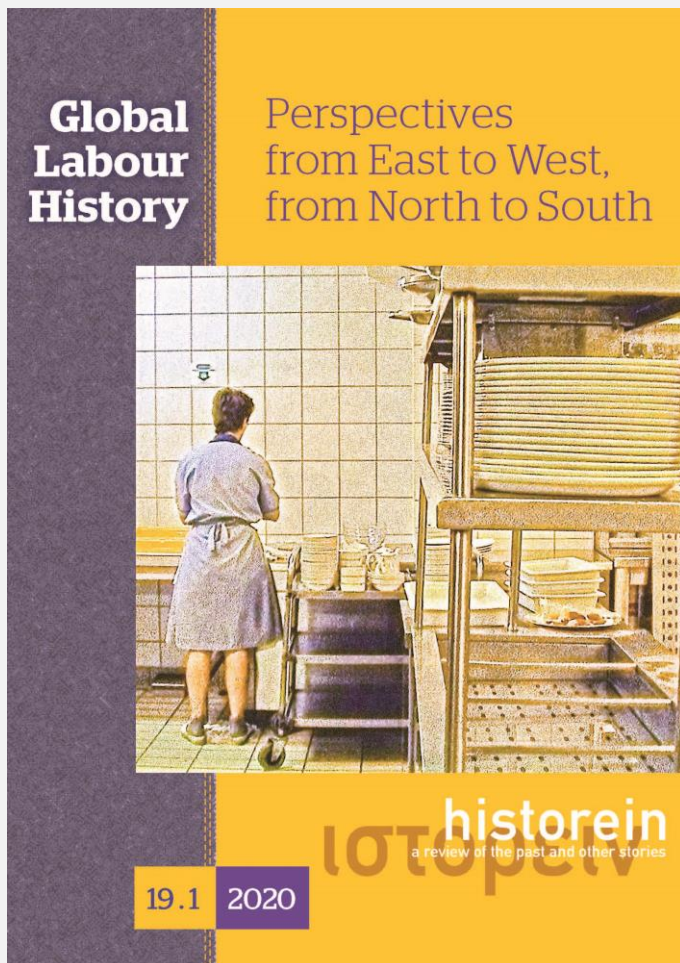
Copyright © 2020, LEDA PAPASTEFANAKI, DIMITRA LAMPROPOULOU



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:

Lampropoulou, D., & Papastefanaki, L. (2020). Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South. *Historein*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.22456>



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

***Dimitra Lampropoulou  
Leda Papastefanaki***

**doi: 10.12681/historein.22456**

**To cite this article:**

Lampropoulou, Dimitra, and Leda Papastefanaki. 2020. "Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South". *Historein* 19 (1).  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.22456>.

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

Dimitra Lampropoulou  
Leda Papastefanaki

The last three decades have seen increasing interest in *global labour history*. Several edited volumes, monographs and articles, book series, conferences, research projects and university seminars form this research area. The contribution of global labour history invigorated a new social and labour history, helping the fields emerge from the crisis they had entered in the 1980s. The conceptual framework of global labour history, as it has been elaborated since the 1990s, stresses the need for transnational, transcontinental and diachronic comparisons, challenging Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism. Recent historiographical trends seek to connect labour history studies within the field of global labour history, beyond the frameworks of individual nation-states. This means, to quote Andreas Eckert, writing “a history of labour and work infused with both specificity and comparison, which sees shared entanglements as bi- or multi-directional rather than unidirectional, and that does not impose a model from one period, nation, or region onto another”.<sup>1</sup>

In this theoretical context, three main concerns should be emphasised. First, that the study of labour and labour relations extends beyond the limits of wage labour; it encompasses both free and unfree labour, paid and unpaid, formal and informal, domestic, “reproductive”, and the various forms of subsistence and cooperative labour, the individual worker and his/her family, formal organisations and informal activities. Second, following on from the previous one, that the notions of “work” and “labour” are reevaluated, defined and contextualised in more complex ways. And, third, that not only subaltern groups of people but also subaltern zones of the globe must be systematically integrated into labour historiography. Global labour history consists, then, a broad interdisciplinary field, one that combines perceptions from history, social sciences and humanities, and draws on a wide range of historiographical traditions, besides labour history, such as the history of imperialism and colonialism, postcolonial studies, feminist history and migration history.<sup>2</sup>

The flourishing research on global labour history is characterised by, first, a spatial expansion beyond the North Atlantic zones to Asia, Africa, Latin America, Russia/Soviet Union, Mediterranean, Ottoman Empire, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, and, hence, new ways of rendering visible these parts of the world; second, a wider chronological frame that includes periods before the sixteenth century;<sup>3</sup> third, a confluence of new

methodological choices that address the spatial dimensions in the construction of history, the temporal construction of spatiality and the importance of the microhistorical approach, without discarding the insights of macrohistorical analysis that global labour history has produced so far;<sup>4</sup> and, fourth, the systematic study of several key issues: migration and the formation of labour markets, the role of free and unfree labour relations in the process of labour commodification,<sup>5</sup> forms of paid and unpaid labour, domestic and caregiving work,<sup>6</sup> precarious and informal work, international organisations – like ILO – that have shaped labour globally,<sup>7</sup> the conceptualisation of global labour relations in terms of a Marxist critique of political economy in the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup> The geographical expansion, the extension of the chronological frame before 1500 and the elaboration of new methodological and analytical tools have contributed to challenging Eurocentrism in labour history, questioning hegemonic assumptions about “modernity” and deconstructing teleological conceptions of “globalisation”. The systematic comparisons in transnational/transcontinental, entangled or global approaches in the context of multiethnic states, such as the Ottoman Empire, focusing on the reciprocal transfers between nations, cultures, regions as well as emphasising interconnections, mutual influences and reception mechanisms also tend to surpass methodological nationalism in labour history.<sup>9</sup>

If a radical reappraisal of labour history was brought about through the perspective of global labour history, it was precisely due to the awareness that global processes and connectivity entail contradictions, unevenness and asymmetries, in other words, questions of power and conflict. The very concept of “global”, as Jürgen Kocka has put it, is of a relational quality: the definition of global history “presupposes the notion and the definition of smaller units of analysis, like nations or regions, that should become more interconnected or less limiting”.<sup>10</sup> But who gets to do “global history” and who gets to define the “global”<sup>11</sup> are questions of paramount importance for the practice and the subject matters of global labour history, as they are related to both the (asymmetrical) spatial locations of historians and the spatial perceptions of people in past times.

The historical reflection on the promises, risks and limitations of global perspective in labour history has led to a new synthesis of theory and empirical research. With this special issue on “Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South”, *Historein* wishes to participate in the dynamic discussion on the concepts, methodologies and themes in this research area. The five articles presented here are connected to global labour history in various ways: either they refer to theoretical conceptualisations or historiographical questions or they offer new empirical research.

In her article “State, Policy and Gender at the Workplace in India: A Comparison Over Time”, M.V. Shobhana Warriar makes an important contribution to the field of gender labour history by comparing gendered perceptions of labour in the cotton mills of early twentieth-century colonial India and in the highly mechanised fish processing industry

towards the end of the twentieth century, to identify continuity and change in the gendered nature of work during the twentieth century, before and after Indian independence. The article considers women workers' entry and exit, informal work, the impact of women-specific labour standards, unionisation, workplace culture and women's agency. It displays a command of a wide range of material from historical and contemporary sources and fieldwork. Warriar's research takes into account the demand for cloth and yarn of the global market shaped by the British Empire in the case of the cotton mills in Tamil Nadu, and the fish processing industry in the Kerala region as a totally globalised industry in which market forces press for the lowest production costs in an informal setting. Informality in the workplace, Warriar argues, is mediated by gender, while the connection between law enforcement and the expansion of work opportunities for women is contingent on local dynamics, networks of mobility that function in different levels, and political stakes that are, more often than not, of global interest.

Many workers in contemporary Brazil are forced to contend with conditions similar to nineteenth-century slavery, as they are bonded by debt.<sup>12</sup> Julia Harnoncourt's article, "Forms of Unfree Labour in Brazil: Dealing with Racism and Racialisation in Amazonian Agriculture," examines the complex issue of racism and racialisation in connection to labour relations. Drawing on the history of slavery, the history of racial ideologies, and class formation theories, Harnoncourt detects the vicious circle formed by "unfree" and "slave" labour in Brazil. Her research is mostly based on interviews with members of institutions and political organisations involved in fighting unfree labour in Brazil and organisations dealing with racism. The author makes the important point that racialisation is a key process in both the creation and the maintenance of a system of slave labour (*trabalho escravo*) in contemporary agriculture in the state of Pará (northern Brazil), where the nonwhite population comprises the main pool for slave labour.

Maria Damilakou, in her article on "Labour Policy and Diplomacy: Argentina's Labour Attachés under Peronism," offers a tidy assessment of Argentina's "labour attachés" from 1946 to 1955. The programme was established by populist President Juan Perón to spread abroad some of the ideas of social justice and antiimperialism that were prevalent at national level in the immediate postwar years. The article, based on new material from the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Argentina, focuses on Perón's labour diplomacy – a combination of state policies and state-controlled labour activism, in the context of the Cold War. But the Cold War, though an overarching political condition, is not overemphasised as a homogeneous process; the Peronist attachés, even for a limited period of time, represented an alternative handling of what a world perspective might mean, especially in the South American context. Damilakou turns our attention to the potential global dimensions of national reform projects of working-class integration and brings into discussion the issue of how institutions may become a field of global labour history.

In her article "For a New Global Labour History: A View from Eastern Europe", Alina Sandra Cucu offers a thorough survey of the recent attempts to integrate Eastern Europe in



global labour history. She argues that for this integration to global labour history, Eastern European labour should be treated as an “epistemological object in its own right” while proposing a research agenda – a methodical expedition for the reunification of labour history with the history of capital formation in the region. Using as an example the expansion of the production chains of Western car industries in Eastern Europe – specifically, Romania – in the aftermath of 1968 and 1973, she unsettles the notion of a free market as an absolute prerequisite for the commodification of labour, and analyses socialist planned economies as tools for capital accumulation that were used within global transformations of industrial conflict and capital flexibility. Cucu contributes to global labour history discussions on the different ways of labour commodification by adding the case of the plan and the state socialist regimes.

Finally Aristotle Tympas’ contribution, “From the Display of a Digital-Masculine Machine to the Concealed Analog-Feminine Labour: The Passage from the History of Technology to Labour and Gender History,” concerns a significant topic in labour history and history of technology: the ways in which human labour tends to be overlooked in histories and historiography of information technology, and more broadly in the historiography on technology, mechanisation and automation. The topic is central to global labour history as well because it problematises a type of work that, structural as it may be for global networking, is rarely dealt with from the point of view of class and gender relations. Analysing the concealment of labour, especially female labour, in the historiography of mechanisation and information technology, Tympas provides an overview of the abundant recent historiography on the topic, published especially since 2000.<sup>13</sup> His central aim is to create useful analytical passages from the history of technology to labour and gender history. To pursue this aim, he demonstrates how the highly ideological dichotomies of “analog” vs “digital” and “computation” vs “calculation” were created. At the same time, he highlights the issue of gender in the history of computing by systematically unveiling the omitted labour of women in a supposedly superior digital computing system and of men in a supposedly inferior analog one.

---

\* The articles presented in this issue are elaborated versions of the papers presented at the 3rd International Conference in Economic and Social History, under the title “Labour History: Production, Markets, Relations, Policies (from the Late Middle Ages to the Early 21st Century)”, which was held at the University of Ioannina from 24 to 27 May 2017, organised by the Greek Economic History Association and the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Ioannina. The publication of this issue on “Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South” was sponsored by National Bank of Greece.

<sup>1</sup> Andreas Eckert, “Why all the Fuss about Global Labour History?” in *Global Histories of Work*, ed. Andreas Eckert (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 7.

<sup>2</sup> From the abundant bibliography, see Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen, *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History* (Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1999); Van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1–14; Lucassen, ed., *Global Labour*

*History: A State of the Art* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008); Lucassen, "Working Together: New Directions in Global Labour History," *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 1 (2016): 66–87; Eckert, ed., *Global Histories of Work*.

<sup>3</sup> Christian G. De Vito, "New Perspectives on Global Labour History: Introduction," *Workers of the World: International Journal of Strikes and Social Conflict* 1, no. 3 (2013): 7–29.

<sup>4</sup> Henrique Espada Lima, "What Can we Find in Augusto's Trunk? About Little Things and Global Labor History," *Workers of the World: International Journal of Strikes and Social Conflict* 1, no. 3 (2013): 139–57; Christian G. De Vito and Anne Gerritsen, eds., *Micro-spatial Histories of Global Labour* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See, among others, Christian G. De Vito and Alex Lichtenstein, *Global Convict Labour* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Dirk Hoerder and Silke Neunsinger, eds., *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Care Workers* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). More generally, see Raffaella Sarti, Anna Bellavitis, and Manuela Martini, eds., *What is Work? Gender at the Crossroads of Home, Family, and Business from the Early Modern Era to the Present* (New York: Berghahn, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> See, among others, Susan Zimmermann, "Night Work for White Women, Bonded Labour for 'Native' Women? Contentious Traditions and the Globalization of Gender-Specific Labour Protection and Legal Equality Politics, 1926 to 1939," in *New Perspectives on European Women's Legal History*, ed. Sara L. Kimble and Marion Röwekamp (New York: Routledge, 2016), 394–427; Eileen Boris, *Making the Woman Worker: Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919–2019* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Stefano Bellucci and Holger Weiss, eds., *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question: Ideological Antagonism, Workers' Movements and the ILO since 1919* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth, eds., *Beyond Marx: Theorising the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Leda Papastefanaki and M. Erdem Kabadayı, eds., *Working in Greece and Turkey: A Comparative Labour History from Empires to Nation States, 1840–1940* (New York: Berghahn, forthcoming, July 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Kocka, "Reviving Labor History on a Global Scale: Some Comments to Marcel van der Linden," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (2012): 93.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, "The Promise and Peril of the New Global Labor History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (2012): 99–107.

<sup>12</sup> For a connection between contemporary slavery and nineteenth-century forms of unfree labour in Brazil, see Henrique Espada Lima, "Unpayable Debt: Reinventing Labour Bonds through Legal Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Brazil," in *Debt and Slavery in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Worlds*, ed. Gwyn Campbell and Alessandro Stanziani (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), 123–31.

<sup>13</sup> Among the related bibliography on the topic, see the important contributions in Aad Blok and Greg Downey, eds., "Uncovering Labour in Information Revolutions, 1750–2000," special issue, *International Review of Social History* 48, no. S11 (2003).