

The World of Labor and Workers in Modern East Central Europe: Introduction to the Thematic Issue

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The world of labor and the discourse about it has changed again and again in modern East Central Europe. Since the given framework of the introduction to the thematic issue does not allow me to provide a complete overview of the literature of contemporary East Central European labor history (see, for example, van der Linden 2008; Zimmerman 2017), here I am going to focus on answering the following questions:

Why is East Central European labor history peculiar or special? How and why has the situation of labor history been changing during the last decades? What is the relation between global labor history and ECE labor history? What kind of gaps are there in the research and what are the most important research trends?

A. From a global historical point of view, the modern, late nineteenth- and twentieth-century development of societies in East Central Europe (Puttkamer 2010; Livezeanu and Klimó 2017) differs in several ways from both the Western and the Eastern regions of the continent (Tomka 2013). This diversity especially can be seen in the social and economic position or role of labor and the working class. The differences can be seen in the delay of the industrial development and the partial or incomplete foundation of capitalism and a civil, bourgeois society. Yet, developments in the sense of their content and trends were basically similar to Western Europe, which was considered as the center of civilization and modernization, and thus the normative model.

Another important specificity of the East Central European region is that societies had been relatively open here until the mid-twentieth century. However they became more closed after 1945, when they became part of the Soviet sphere of interest. With this decisive change these countries exited the international systems of migration and the free movement of labor. Later, as the

role of labor was fundamentally reinterpreted, the position of different workers' groups became transformed by the state socialist system. Moreover, the planned economy exerted its influential role in the collectivization of private farms (Iordachi and Bauerkämper 2014). As a result, millions of peasants were forced to become industrial workers in a very short time. State socialist systems introduced the general obligation to work and thus full employment (Kornai 1992), which theoretically was accomplished between 1948/49 and 1989/90. However, in everyday life this resulted in "overemployment," which deteriorated work efficiency—in other words it resulted hidden unemployment.

Following the East European transitions (Eyal, Szélenyi, and Townsley 2008), the abolition of the planned economy occurred in parallel with not only the establishment of the institutions of market economy, but also the appearance and accelerated spread of multinational capital, globalization, and post- or re-industrialization (Berend 2009). The radical political, social, and economic transformation led to mass unemployment. The unemployment rate was on average close to 20 percent in the mid-1990s. The employment structure became transformed fundamentally, and even though most of the heavy industry factories enjoyed high priority in development during state socialism, the closure of mines affected their work dramatically. The changes in the field of labor were determined by the phase delay of modernization in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, and it was also influenced by the repeated system changes in the twentieth century. This is the only region where the system changes followed opposite trends, from socialism to capitalism, therefore the effects of these changes on labor and labor class can and should be studied (Kornai 2006).

B. Social science analyses dealing with labor and class were relatively independent from political and ideological constraints and expectations in the first half of the twentieth century. After the communist takeover in 1948/49, in all countries of Central and Eastern Europe that turned into state socialist systems, sociological and historical studies concentrated on labor and the working class—formally the ruling class—as an ideologically determined and simplified group. As a result, in the name of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the exclusively ruling communist parties considered workers as a kind of political-ideological reference of legitimation and also as the social base of their own power. In these above-mentioned systems, labor and class could be interpreted only among the theoretical frameworks of the Marxism-Leninism and class struggle. As a consequence, in the strongly controlled academic life of the state socialist systems, most often over-idealized analyses and descriptions were made—aside from the few exceptions. All of these works had common features. With regard to the period before the communist takeover, the world of labor

and the working class were described in relation to the permanent fight against exploitation and oppression. These histories depicted the hopeless misery of the impoverished urban and agricultural proletariat. In this situation, workers' organizations and the communist party were destined to lead as the only hope for the possibility of change. Obviously, this representation did not coincide with the social experiences and historical facts.

The history of labor movements with this special interpretation became part of this politicized discourse.¹ Socialist and social democratic (that is non-communist) participants and their actions were excluded from it and were described as labor aristocrats, as the enemies of the "revolutionary" working class. In the Marxist-Leninist framework, the history of labor movements was represented as a kind of teleological story. Accordingly, everything that happened before the communist takeover was necessary so that the revolution of proletariat, guided by the communist party, could accomplish the desired future (that was just happening at the time), that is, a classless communist society

This particular vision on history and society lost credit after a while and eroded scholarly interest in the field of labor both among historians and social scientists. Still it is worth mentioning that revealing sociological research on issues such as social mobility, commuting, work-organizing, and poverty in the Polish and Hungarian context of the 1970s and '80s—even contradicting the official standpoint—provided a far more authentic description of the situation and conditions of workers in state socialism (Kemény 1971; Staniszkis 1984).

As the real situation and everyday problems of workers did not, or just very rarely, appeared in the interest of social sciences controlled by the communist party, all objective studies in this field had become part of the oppositional sphere. That became uncomfortable for the rulers, and so the researchers were often forced to emigrate. However, a little later in the period of the slow erosion of the state socialist systems, in the early and mid-1980s, even researchers from the Western democracies were allowed to do some fieldwork in these countries—see for instance the works of Michael Burawoy (1989, 1995) and Martha Lampland (1995).

1 The meaning and concept of workers' movement was essentially different in West and East Central Europe, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. All of the organizations and institutions that belonged to the workers' movement in Western Europe were connected with the labor, political, cultural, and social organizations of the working class. By contrast, in the East, the meaning of workers' movement was restricted to the political action of workers in East Central Europe after the communist takeover.

Nevertheless, it was only after the transitions in 1989/90 that the conditions of social history research on workers changed in all East Central European countries, even though the general interest in this field still remained limited. Previous studies about the history of labor movements almost completely disappeared from the current research themes at that time. The only exception was the Polish Solidarity, and the questions of workers' resistance against the Polish communist rule (Ost 1991; Bernhard 1993; Ash 2002).

In the following period, transition research became independent from previous taboos and ideological constraints. Research interest focused mostly on three key areas:

1. the transformation of work and the working class before the communist takeover and the history of factories,
2. the condition of workers under state socialism,
3. the transformation of labor due to the return of capitalism

It should be pointed out that labor history in East Central Europe, though liberated from ideological and political constraints, still—apart from some transitional periods and situations—did not become an integral part of the social sciences and social research of the region. The field of labor history has rather been structured according to individual research interests and the related interpersonal academic connections, so far.

C. The renewed labor history research interest after 1989/90 in East Central Europe was mostly shaped by methodological nationalism, focusing on individual countries. There are a few examples in terms of regional comparative studies, but a global approach in the research schemes is still rare (Bartha 2013; Rutar 2013). When we investigate country levels, it can be seen that the most widespread research and also most detailed writings and analyses on labor history were carried out in the former East Germany (Hübner and Tenfelde 1999; Fulbrook 2005; Fuller 1999).

An important milestone in East Central European labor history is the volume *Arbeiter im Staatsozialismus* (Hübner, Klessmann, and Tenfelde 2005) which contains mostly case studies of different countries. This work promoted the possibility of comparative studies on workers' lives under state socialism, though only a few studies in this volume examined the field of labor in state socialism within a broader, global context. A good example of a comparable research project is the study by Mary Fulbrook (2005) on workers' social and political conflict situations. Another example that is worth mentioning is Peter Hübner's piece, from the volume above, on the Soviet model as a political construction.

“New labor history” is interdisciplinary and includes new trends of history (van der Linden 2007, 2012), such as historical anthropology, microhistory, and gender studies. The examination of workers’ social background, family structures, and everyday life constitute integral parts of new labor history. In this sense research can focus on any groups of laborers, not only organized working *men*. Currently, specialized research in East Central Europe has strong reasons to focus on new labor history writing or global labor history. On the one hand, the burden of the recent past is still rather depressing and there are also far too many issues concerning labor and the working class waiting to be explored, analyzed, and interpreted. At this phase there is a need for exploratory research on national levels, for being able to carry out valid regional comparative analyses, and to interpret globally what happened in this region in the field of labor in different phases of modernity. Moreover, current labor history studies in East Central Europe concentrate mostly on the structural changes of workers’ groups in certain localities and regions and they concentrate on the relations between the power (totalitarian systems) and the workers. Apart from a few examples these research schemes are less open towards more complex, interdisciplinary, and global analytical tools and approaches.

In the past decades, from a global labor history point of view, one of the most relevant questions has been related to the changes in the role of labor and social composition of workers during the transition and later on, in the process of the consolidation of market relations. Despite the rich literature of transitology, this question still has not received enough attention apart from a few exceptions.

The year 1989/90 caused changes not only in economy and society but also in the social sciences, bringing along. It was the year of the restoration of freedom of scientific research. The former party-controlled research institutions’ focus on the history of workers movements was partially or completely eliminated. Thus scientific research about the history of the state socialist period, including labor history, also became feasible, and without the secrets and taboos from of the state socialist period. At the same time generation changes also took place in the scientific life.

Some of the most important goals and achievements of labor history understood in a broad sense since 1989/90 in the countries of the region should be pointed out here:

1. the examination of the formulation of modern working class and its social stratification, especially under the state socialist system
2. the history of workers’ resistance against the state socialist systems

3. the study of different groups of workers, the gender relations of labor, and women's and children's labor
4. the transformation of labor and the working class during and after the transitions in 1989/90

Regarding the results of the last two and a half decades (Heumos 2010), the local and regional research projects so far have created a good foundation for both regional and global comparison that is still missing from the East Central European research portfolio. Future social and economic history research projects that deal with the systems of relations between capital and work or power and work, in the ECE countries in the nineteenth and twentieth century, should be able to fill in the existing gaps. A comparative social history analysis about the everyday life of workers on the local and regional levels is still missing. The urbanization of the industrial centers of the region and the development of industry and its impact both on society and workers are also key issues that need to be studied. Women's agricultural work under state socialism is another thoroughly underestimated research field. Instability, fluidity, and volatility of work and labor relations of ordinary people have been diagnosed as one important long-term feature of the history of labor in East Central Europe. So we can see that this field of research offers many tasks and opportunities for historians and social scientists.

The set of articles included in the current issue presents a cross section of some of the newest research results of modern East Central European labor history. The authors thematically investigate different sections and topics. Even though they are using different methodological approaches, all of them share the common idea of a global perspective on labor issues when analyzing different countries of modern East Central Europe.

Judit Acsády's article gives readers a deep analysis of changes in women's employment in Hungarian industry from the end of nineteenth century until today. The main question of Natalia Koulinka's article is how newspapers conceptualized the miners' strikes of 1989 and 1991 as well as the overall changes in Soviet society. She analyzes the historical background and demonstrates that the strike of 1989 was a proto-class struggle in a society that had ripened for post-industrial development but had been prevented from it by the policies and ideology of the state that positioned itself as a workers' state. Wiktor Marzec's article on working-class memoirs of late Russian Poland examines the biographical reminiscences of the emerging political participation of Polish working-class militants during the 1905 Revolution. Jakub Štofanič's article focuses on the role of religion among working-class inhabitants of two industrial towns in the Czech lands—Ostrava and Kladno—in the first half of

twentieth century. He analyzes a major religious conversion movement, the position of new actors of the religious life, and the religious behavior of workers. Finally, I investigate the social history of Hungarian factory workers from the late nineteenth century to the end of twentieth century, with a focus on the case of the factory town of Ózd. In my article I reconstruct a multigenerational worker family's life story, since families were one of the determining groups of the Hungarian working class.

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