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Bringing Labour Back to Migration History: A Report on the Activities of the Working Group Labour Migration History

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Abstract

While the search for (better) employment and the uneven distribution of wealth are among the principal triggers of migration worldwide, migration is often discussed as a humanitarian emergency, a social and a security problem, but rarely as a labour issue. This paper aims to foster debate on the interconnectedness of migration and labour history. Re-reading migration and labour history by exploring their interconnectedness is crucial to overcoming Eurocentric and nation-state centric approaches to labour and migration history. This paper discusses the findings of papers presented at two events organised by the ELHN Working Group Labour Migration History in 2021. The first part suggests new lines of inquiry which critically reassess Western-centric understandings and experiences of labour migration during the Cold War. The second part argues in favour of cross-disciplinary study of relations between migration, workers, and the state firmly contextualised as part of global processes of change.

Keywords: Labour history, migration history; Cold War; decolonisation; global history

Introduction

In the western world, there are few social phenomena which draw more attention than migration. Yet, the attention which migration receives is selective, and, more often than not, biased against labour. Since 2015, Western European media and political debate on migration has primarily focused on the ‘refugee crisis’ while the ‘labour migrant crisis’ which many Western European countries have experienced since the beginning of the Covid pandemic has received scant attention (Carroll et al., 2020; Perry, 2021). More broadly, while the search for (better) employment and the uneven distribution of wealth are among the principal triggers of migration worldwide, migration is often discussed as a humanitarian emergency, a social and a security problem, but rarely as a labour issue (Hatton & Williamson, 2006; Hagan, 1998). Similarly, research sympathetic to the struggles of migrants tends to denounce the violation of human and civil rights experienced by migrants but rarely focuses on the breach of labour rights endured by migrants as members of collectives of labourers (Anitha & Pearson, 2013; Atkins, 2016; Neergard et al., 2015; Schierup & Jørgensen, 2016).

This paper aims to foster discussion of the interconnectedness of migration and labour history. It argues that re-reading migration and labour history by exploring their interconnectedness is crucial to overcoming Eurocentric and nation-state centric approaches to labour and migration history. This is a timely and essential question that needs to be addressed in order for us to challenge simplistic assumptions about, and explanations for, current and future developments in migration patterns and policy globally. A key proposition in this paper is that, although economic drivers exist for most acts of migration, if and how

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migrants are perceived and classified as economic migrants depends on the socio-economic and political context in which their migration occurs. A second premise is that labour has almost always been more mobile than is recognised. Even if we are now in an era often described as the age of mobility (Weinar, 2017), preindustrial societies are now recognised as having been more mobile than previously assumed, as is the case of predominantly rural societies in the past and present (Moch, 1992; Florea, 2022; Flynn & Kay, 2017). Border controls, passports and bilateral agreements on migration appeared only from the mid-nineteenth century. *Immigration* in the modern sense of the term, in contrast to previous forms of ‘migration’, is an outcome of the importance that juridical and administrative means of state intervention obtained in controlling international mobility (Magri & Topalov, 1989). The fragile grounds on which migration observers and politicians have established neat distinctions between domestic and international migration patterns, family dependents and bread winners, or economically and politically driven migration, have been increasingly questioned by migration historians on both empirical and conceptual bases (Gabaccia, 2010, 2015; Steidl, 2020; Gatrell, 2013; Zahra, 2016). The ELHN Working Group Labour Migration History (WG LMH)² was founded in 2020 with the aim in part, of taking this discussion forward. Indeed, the WG LMH aims at creating an open platform which promotes scholarly debate about the interconnectedness of labour and migration history. With this goal in mind, in 2021, it organised a research workshop (University of Glasgow, 28 – 30 June 2021) and several panels at the ELHN-WORCK Conference (University of Vienna, 30 August – 3 September 2021).

The Glasgow workshop, titled ‘Labour Migration in the Cold War and beyond: New Questions, Methods and Sources’,³ focused on analysing and comparing different experiences of labour migration to critically reassess the supremacy of western understandings in the regulation of international labour migration. It started from the assumption that although they respond to the socio-economic and political needs of advanced liberal economies, Western standards of development and classification of migrants have been sanctioned as ‘universal’ by the international community and international treaties on migrant workers’ rights implemented worldwide. The Cold War was chosen as a ‘case study’ to assess the extent to which conscious alternatives to the dominant Western-centric paradigm emerged, were articulated and became institutionalised. Different and competing projects in the Cold War constructed different forms of labour migration. The Cold War was a period during which the international recognition of workers’ rights expanded greatly but also when they were increasingly contested and questioned (Jakobson, 1957; Kott, 2019). Accordingly, the working hypothesis of the workshop was that alternatives to the western-centric regulation of migration did exist, given the existence of the Cold War dynamic, but also because of conscious attempts by some actors in the Second and Third World to resist First World hegemony. Currently a special issue with selected papers from the workshop is in preparation and it is expected to be published in 2023 with *Labor History*. At the WORCK and ELNH 2021 Conference in Vienna,⁴ labour and migration historians presented papers which reflected

² <https://socialhistoryportal.org/elhn/wg-migration>.

³ Conference programme and book of abstracts are available at <https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/cees/eventsseminars/labourmigrationinthecoldwarandbeyond/>.

⁴ Conference programme and book of abstracts are available at <https://www.worck.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/worck21-26-08.pdf>.



upon the methodological questions posed by the interconnections between labour and migration history in their own research.

A thematic report follows below, which presents and reflects on the relevance for current academic debates on labour and migration history of the themes and key findings which emerged at both events. Because of space limitations and coherence of topics, the report focuses on papers presented at the workshop in Glasgow. References to papers are by name of paper presenters and commentators in the concluding roundtable at the workshop are also named.⁵ The report concludes with a few methodological observations based on the papers presented at the WORCK EHLN Conference in Vienna.

International Migration in the Cold War and Cold War Migration: Setting the debate

In any historical debate, the question of continuities and changes across time and space is a crucial one. What, if anything, defined international migration during the Cold War (both globally and in Europe) as distinct from the determinants of migration before the Cold War and after its collapse was one question which received great attention. In the concluding roundtable, Ulf Brunnbauer suggested that international migration before and after 1945 presents more continuities than ruptures. Moreover, he argued that migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries present many continuities. People mobilities follow similar patterns over time and across space because migration is, above all, a response to state policies. Sevasti Trubeta also highlighted continuities by stressing how ‘migrant’ was and remains a category imposed by the state on individuals to control their mobility, whereas the state-imposed category of migrant has little to do with the reality of mobile individuals or their self-identification as migrants. While agreeing that control is a key aspect of regulation of migration, Alena Alamgir added that important distinctions should be made between forms of and reasons for state control on mobility. These distinctions account for what is morally (un)acceptable in terms of limitation of individual freedoms in different ideological systems, and, how they feed into imaginaries of ideal migrants. In the Cold War, the ‘ideal migrant’ was highly charged ideologically: in the western world, the key was the freedom of individuals to choose their own life trajectories; in the socialist world, the collective effort to build a communist, classless society. This ideological component was what characterised international migration in the Cold War.

Cold War, Decolonisation and Migration: reassessing Western hegemony in the periphery

Cold War ideologisation did not only concern migrations which were created by Cold war dynamics but also migrations whose patterns and policies developed within long-term relations of dependencies between core and peripheries. Several papers explored these overlaps. For example, Elena Bouleti examined the trajectories of Greek Cypriots who left before and after the Attila invasion (1974) to showcase how this immigration of young Cypriots, which could be defined neither as entirely political nor as entirely economic, was politicized by both Britain and Czechoslovakia to exert influence over a neutral and geopolitically significant country like Cyprus. In Bouleti’s case study, Cold War dynamics were entangled with broader processes of historical change such as the end of British colonial

⁵ Panel discussants provided very insightful comments. For limitation of space, they are not included in the report.

mandate over Cyprus, political developments in Turkey and in the relations between Greek and Turkish-Cypriots. The entanglement of Cold War dynamics with decolonisation and processes of nation- and state-building in decolonised Asia and Africa was not only informing state policies towards immigrants but also the sense of belonging and loyalty of immigrant communities in western Europe. This was explored in Christian Jacobs' paper on postmigrant media debates in postcolonial France. The complexity of (post)colonial settings in which the decolonised re-define national belonging and state building was further discussed in Ekata Bakshi's analysis of the migration induced by the second partition of Bengal (1947) through the lenses of caste, gender and religious belonging.

International migration, whether classified as economically or politically driven, was not only a tool in Cold War diplomacy but also in the economic field. International migration was an important component of the international division of labour which underpinned the global economic order. Several papers examined how peripheral countries were not passively implementing directives given by Western core countries from which they were economically dependent. For example, the transfer of Hungarian refugees to South America after the Hungarian revolution (1956) examined by Yannis Papadopoulos and Maria Damilakou demonstrates that acceptance of refugees did not only serve South American countries to align their foreign policies with the strategies and priorities of the western bloc but also to achieve national development goals. Overlaps between Cold War dynamics, development policies and center-periphery relations were also explored by Ismael Garcia Colon in his paper on the farm labour program of the government of Puerto Rico (1945-1990) which Garcia Colon presents as a case of new colonialism: colonial entities (Puerto Rico) had more agency than was previously assumed, even though that agency was limited by the unequal power relationship between metropolis and colony. Moving to the guestworker programmes implemented in Western Europe, Michelle Kahn showed how the Turkish state was able to negotiate policies to avoid the return of its workers from Germany because workers' return migration was not compatible with Turkey's development needs.

In summary, these papers suggest that rather than being only one of the symbols of unequal distribution of wealth and relations of dependency, international migration can be used as a lens to explore the agency of peripheral countries and actors. As peripheries provided necessary cheap and unskilled workforces to core economies; and because peripheries served as the ideal countries for the relocation of politically problematic but potentially valuable workforces, the regulation of international migration was one of the few areas in which peripheries exerted power which, albeit limited, could challenge the western hegemonic regulation of international migration.

Cold War Migrations and its legacies: comparing capitalist and (post-)socialist experiences

Whether, how, and to what extent labour mobilities within socialist countries challenged/offered an alternative to the capitalist management of international labour migration was another key theme of discussion. The starting point for this exploration was comparative. While guestworkers programmes were widely implemented in the Western capitalist economies, they were (almost) absent in socialist countries. Commenting on that, Brunnbauer highlighted that international labour migration was of marginal importance for the socialist countries as it was prohibited or heavily restricted. With the exception of



Yugoslavia, domestic migration was by far more important for socialist countries. While the great importance of domestic migration for socialist countries is certainly an accurate observation, it is vital to add that we still know very little about international labour migration *within* the socialist bloc. Indeed, speaking at the opening panel of the workshop, David Smith, co-editor in chief of the leading area studies journal *Europe-Asia Studies* confirmed this gap in the scholarship, commenting on the limited number of research articles received and published by the journal on labour migration in Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War, which are down to one in the last decade (Prażmowska, 2018). Papers by Dariusz Stola and Raia Apostolova contributed to filling this gap while also offering a more nuanced picture of the geographies of migration characterising socialist countries during the Cold War.

Stola's examination of temporary Polish migration within the Soviet Bloc showed how Eastern Europeans were more internationally mobile than has been usually acknowledged in public and scholarly debates. More precisely, Stola explained how, following the death of Stalin, Poland gradually lifted many restrictions on labour mobilities. Beyond the case of Poland, even if border controls remained in place in Eastern European countries, the cross-border movement of labourers, experts and students between socialist bloc countries was extensive; short visits and travelling of East Europeans to Western Europe increased greatly in the 1980s. The paper by Apostolova offered fresh insight into the programmes implemented in Eastern European countries for the training and employment of workers from developing countries, experiences which only in the last decade have become the subject of a growing body of literature (Among the most recent ones, Alamgir & Schwenken, 2020; Burton et al., 2020; Apor, 2020). Moreover, focusing on the Bulgarian programmes for Vietnamese workers, Apostolova's paper pioneers research on the theorisation of international labour migration between socialist countries and developing countries. More precisely, examining the theoretical explorations by Bulgarian sociologist Minko Minkov in his search for the postulates of a 'socialist' state-sponsored international migration (which promoted countries' solidarities and mutual benefit against the exploitative guest worker regimes in the west), Apostolova demonstrated that international labour migration was indeed one of the arenas in which socialist theoreticians and politicians in Bulgaria attempted to challenge the hegemony of the West.

Further research is needed to assess to what extent the building of an alternative system of international labour migration was taken seriously across the socialist bloc. The existence of theoretical debates about migration in the socialist bloc, and the growing body of literature on labour migrant programmes implemented across the socialist bloc, also poses a comparative or indeed transnational challenge. Just as Bockman (2011) and Wilczynski (1976) demonstrated the existence of transnational discussions of economic thinkers or the existence of transnational processes of property conceptualization, so we may find that there was a transnational process of forging migration regimes (in an uneven global context). Beyond that, Apostolova's research and further comments by Alamgir on socialist programmes of internal labour migration delved into the impact of the oil shocks of the 1970s, and the one of 1979 in particular. They show that while in the 1970s programmes prioritised training of workers, in the 1980s there was a gradual shift towards economic profitability, suggesting that the debt crisis of the 1980s did not only limit the scope of solidarity labour programmes, but also the ideological premises which underpinned them. Although the term 'guestworker' was never adopted in socialist programmes, there were increasing (albeit still partial) similarities with western recruitment agreements of foreign unskilled workers. Exploring further this

comparison, it could be hypothesized that the 1980s were a more relevant turning point in labour (migration) than hitherto recognized, overshadowed by the study of the transition of the 1990s. Indeed, focusing on the debates surrounding German unification, Trumbeta stressed how many important questions have been dismissed too quickly and emphasized that academic parochialism has hindered a still needed debate about the meaning and nature of the socialist experience.

Moving beyond international migration, whether domestic migration within socialist countries should be treated as fundamentally different from international migration to socialist countries; and whether and how domestic migration within socialist countries were different from domestic migration within capitalist regimes, are questions to be yet explored. Another key related question is that of continuities and changes in the migration regimes in communist countries, in the post-Cold War period. Papers by Jake Lin and Minh Nguyen and by Rustam Urinbojev on current migration regimes in China and Vietnam, and in the Russian Federation respectively, offered fresh insight into these questions.

Lin and Nguyen examined the welfare provisions for the extensive rural to urban migrations which still characterise both China and Vietnam. Both countries are still ruled by a single-party systems but have transformed into market economies. Focusing on the last three decades, Lin and Nguyen showed how state responses to growing precarisation of labour have been shaped by both the experience of market socialization (collectivization) and the marketisation of socialist markets which have led to cycles of (de)commodification of welfare provision to labour migrants. Urinbojev explored how immigrants from Central Asia in the Russian Federation produce new forms of informal governance which the author attributes to the hybrid Russian regime as neither democratic nor conventionally authoritarian, a legacy of the communist past. Yet, albeit with important differences, the features of contemporary migration policies and patterns examined by Lin and Nguyen and by Urinbojev bear similarities with precarisation of labour and informality of labour practices, and dismantling of welfare system, experienced by international migrants in the western world. Beyond that, the paper by Urinbojev reminds us of the importance of regime change and state collapse in reframing the status of labour migrants. Many Soviet citizens working and residing in the Soviet federation but outside of their republic of origin became international migrants after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a change with wide economic, socioeconomic, political and cultural consequences for the broader post-Soviet region (Siegelbaum & Moch, 2016).

In Eastern Europe regime change and transition became entangled with the process of EU enlargement and the widening of the common market which gradually transformed international labour migration from the Eastern bloc to Western Europe into domestic migration within the European Union. Despite the change in legal status, the socialist experience still shapes in important ways expectations and (self)perceptions of, and about, labour migrants from the former socialist bloc to Western Europe, suggesting that the socialist experience was and still is an important part of the recent history of the European labour migration history. It also reminds us that the positionality of migrants (and researchers) matter. Three commentators made this point in different ways. Rebecca Kay showed this by examining the expectations and lives of migrants from Eastern Europe in contemporary Scotland. The paper by Panos Theoderopoulos used cover participant observation to understand precarity of labour migrants in contemporary Scotland. Alamgir discussed the experiences of workers and students from developing countries in the socialist bloc. All these



papers challenged overly simplistic oversimplistic categorisations according to the geographies of Cold War migration across time and space.

In Yugoslavia, the transformations unfolding the end of the Cold War were similar yet different from the other socialist countries. Like the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic and multi religious federation which went through a tragic dismembering during the wars of succession of the 1990s. Yet, Yugoslavia as a socialist, non-aligned country endorsing an open border policy and sponsoring temporary employment of its workers in the capitalist west, held an exceptional position in Cold War Europe. Yugoslav migrations have received greater scholarly attention than migration in any another European socialist country, but many questions still remain to be researched. For example, whether and how Yugoslavia was a model for other Eastern European countries; and what we can learn by comparing Yugoslav labour mobilities with those of other Eastern European countries. Yet, several papers offered fresh insight into still unresearched aspects of Yugoslav labour mobilities. For example, the paper by Mladen Zobec explored how mistrust towards ethnic minorities and private business overlapped in the political responses to Albanian workers owning small private businesses in Slovenia in the early postwar period, contributing to unpack the complexities of domestic migration patterns and policies in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious federation such as socialist Yugoslavia. Deana Jovanovic and Dragan Stojmenovic used the case study of the highly qualified Yugoslavs employed in Iran because of Yugoslav-Iranian collaborations in the 1980s to discuss whether the Yugoslav role in the Non-aligned movement created alternatives to western capitalist hegemony or was an adaptation to it. Dora Tot's paper further explored the still under-researched Yugoslav labour mobilities in the developing world and provided a new conceptual and theoretical framework to reclassify the repertoire of Yugoslav migrations which consider neglected categories such the legal and class status of workers, as well as recruitment practices.

Concluding, these papers suggest that labour migration, which remains a neglected aspect in the scholarship on the Cold War and its legacy, has much to offer to recent efforts to decolonise our knowledge of both the Cold War and labour history. Looking at the regulation of migration from the perspective of second and third world countries, papers exploring socialist experiences and experiments with labour migration advocate for a more dynamic understanding of the role of labour migration in shaping relations between the first, second and third world. Bringing back labour migration as a global phenomenon which transcended, and yet shaped, Cold War rivalries is not only useful to rethink the concepts and sources which have been used to affirm the universality of Western understandings of labour migration globally but also to critically reassess the West's own experience of labour migration.

Beyond the Cold War: methods and approaches for a global history of labour migration

The importance of contextualising the history of labour migration within global processes of historical change and what methodological questions a global approach to labour history implies (Van der Linden, 2008) were the overarching themes of papers presented at the WORCK and ELHN 2021 Conference in Vienna.

First of all, the need to understand migration not as a consequence of nation and state building but rather as one phenomenon which transforms, and, interacts with, the nation state was a theme that ran throughout the discussion. Many papers showed that although processes of

nation and state building such as wars and regime change affect greatly migration policies and patterns, the national frame is inadequate to encapsulate responses by labour migrants to historical change. Regions are more important than state regulation in defining migration patterns; regional systems of migration existed well before the establishment of nation states and remain resilient against the establishment of territorial borders across their territory. Migrants rely on informal networks and knowledge which develop parallel to the development of the nation state. Informal networks help migrants navigate the complexities of state bureaucracies without being replaced by them.

Several papers situated changes in migration patterns as a result of labour trading policies crafted within the development of specific industrial branches, suggesting the utility of research on labour migration in conjunction with business history and history of industries. While empowered by the state, businesses and industries shape the action of the state to regulate migration, for instance to expand or limit immigration and to increase or reduce the number of migrants eligible to permanent residence. This creates spaces for multiple interaction between labour migrants and native work forces which are not fully controlled by the state. Beyond that, the signing of different international conventions on workers' rights is a further limitation on state control. In order to regain control over labour migrants and their migration patterns, nation states rely on non-migration policies, which limit the social and political rights of migrants, such as welfare and social policies, and citizenship policies. This suggests that nation states adapt to migration and not only *vice-versa*.

Consolidating scholarship which successfully brings together urban history and migration history (among others, Riedler et al., 2011; Portes, 2000), several papers showcased how urban spaces are particularly useful to a history of labour which looks beyond the nation state. They focused on urban spaces to explore the contribution of labour migration to the development of cities and urban labour identities, as well as the role of urban milieus in the creation of migrant communities. First of all, as centers of commercial, political and financial power, cities are often granted wide autonomy from the central power in their development policies. Cities are, by definition, areas of transit and transition which attract workers from across the social ladder. Cities are places where distinction between domestic and international migrant, political and economic migrant, are blurred and fluid. Urban areas also offer insight into the heterogeneity and intersectionality of migrant experiences of labour and labour identities which help to deconstruct imaginaries of typical migrant labourers and their role within and beyond the urban community.

A good number of papers re-read episodes of labour migration history through the lenses of gender to shed light into the specific experience and contribution of female labourers. This is a crucial contribution to the study of labour migration history where voices and experiences of female labour workers in their own right remain under-researched, suggesting that migration history has only hesitantly embraced the gender turn which has reshaped labour history in recent decades (Becchio, 2020; Betti, 2016; Dimand et al., 1995; Donato et al., 2006; Gabaccia, 2016; Goldin, 1983; Kofman, 1999; Madden & Dimand, 2019).

While recognising the importance of de-nationalising labour migration history, papers also raised the crucial question of what sources are available to contribute to writing a global labour migration history, considering that what kind of sources are produced on different labour migrants and their migration patterns depends, to a large extent, on whether, how, and why they are recognised and classified as such by state actors. This has implications for any history



of labour migration which seeks to overcome state-imposed dichotomies of domestic and international; forced and voluntary; illegal and legal migration, an aim which was present in many papers. The availability of sources on specific migration patterns and migrant profiles is also linked to the fluid boundaries of work (Petrungaro, 2013) and the lack of recognition of forms of work such as sexual workers or street artists (Petrungaro & Selezneva, 2015). This lack of recognition often makes undocumented and unrecognized workers more mobile, but it also makes both their labour and migrant identities more contested, less documented and therefore more difficult to investigate. A greater reliance on oral history and other ego documents and closer textual and discourse analysis of migrants' own voices might be the solution to this methodological challenge as it was suggested by many papers. Yet, whether the categories of labour and migration should be more flexible and inclusive, and what sources should be used to achieve this inclusivity, remains an open question. Answer to it will shape future debates in labour and migration studies.

To conclude, the interconnectedness of labour and migration remains under-researched in the scholarship on labour and migration history. Drawing on the research findings and themes discussed at two events organised in 2021 by the Working Group Labour Migration History, this paper demonstrated the relevance of critically thinking about human mobility and the mobility of labour as deeply embedded in global dynamics of social, socio-economic, and (geo)political change. This conceptual and empirical exercise will not only enrich our understanding of past (hi)stories of migration and labour. Suggesting that labour is a fundamental dimension of human mobility, and vice versa, will contribute to fostering discussion about the possibility of addressing current and future crises in labour and human mobility not as separated but as interconnected phenomena.

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