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Changing Degrees of ‘Openness’: Some Considerations on the Development of the Notion of ‘Work’ in Argentinean Labour Historiography*

ABSTRACT

This article discusses certain fundamental moments in the evolution of the historiographies on work, workers, and labour movements in South America, in particular in Argentina and Brazil. In that, the analysis follows a double track: First, it will shed light on the changeable notion of ‘work’ in these historiographies and analyse the degree of ‘openness’ in each of these moments in relation to the historical diversity within labour relations. Second, the interrelation between the predominant notion of ‘work’ and contemporary political conflicts is considered. The article focuses on two different phases in the evolution of historiographical debates in Argentina: the long 1960s and the 1980s, which were associated, respectively, with the idea of ‘revolution’ and ‘(re)democratization.’ While historiographic debates in Latin America in the 1960s tended to stress the compatibility of coercive labour relations with the capitalist world-market, the period of re-democratization in the 1980s correlated, at least in Argentina, with a narrowing of the notion of ‘work,’ in terms of a renewed emphasis on ‘wage-labour.’ Contrary to the narratives implicit in current global labour historiography about its own becoming, in Argentina there was no linear evolution from ‘narrow’ to ‘broad’ notions of ‘work.’

Keywords: *History of historiography; Global Labour History; notions of ‘work’; Argentina, Brazil*

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One of the longstanding intellectual-political companions of labour movements have been labour historiographies. While the relationship between the two entities—‘work’ and ‘organized labour’ on the one hand, and history writing on work and labour movements, on the other—is a complex, if not fraught one, practices of writing history have certainly influenced, sometimes even co-shaped fundamental ideas and notions within labour movements and among workers. The very idea of ‘work’—what belongs to ‘work,’ how it is distinguished from other activities, which activities are legitimate and honourable and which are despicable and demeaning ones—ranks high among these fundamental notions.

This article discusses two important moments in the evolution of the historiographies on work, workers and labour movements in South America, in particular in Argentina and Brazil, the two countries which can boast, together with Chile, the most substantial labour historiographies on the sub-continent. While this article concentrates on Argentina—bringing in the case of Brazil as a contrasting, yet asymmetric comparison, the analysis follows a double track: First, it sheds light on the changeable notion of ‘work’ in these historiographies and analyses the degree of ‘openness’ in relation to what, in the current discussion, is seen as a fundamental fact of the historical experience in Latin America: the diversity of labour relations with all kinds of combinations of free and unfree, paid and unpaid, formal and informal, industrial and agrarian, subsistence- and market-oriented, household-bound and workplace-centred forms of labour. If one of the main imperatives of global labour history is to overcome the myth of the prevalence of ‘double-free wage labour’ in modern, capitalist economies, then Latin America certainly is a case in point. While labour historiographies in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, are regularly cited as a major point of reference—if not points of origin—for the emergence of contemporary global labour history,¹ scholars of Latin America have nevertheless tended to subscribe to the same view as their European or North American colleagues and defined ‘labour’ as synonymous with industrial wage-labour.

Second, this article analyses the interrelationship between the predominant notion of ‘work’ and contemporary political conflicts by focusing on two different phases in the evolution of historiographical debates in South America: the long 1960s and the 1980s, which were associated, respectively, with the idea of ‘revolution’ and ‘(re) democratization.’ The comparison between the 1960s–1970s and 1980s points to some unexpected ‘contrarities’: While historiographic debates in Latin America in the 1960s tended to stress the compatibility of coercive labour relations with the capitalist world-market, the period of re-democratization after the end of the military dictatorships in the 1980s correlated with a narrowing of the notion of ‘work’ through a re-

1 See Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), 3.

newed emphasis on 'wage-labour' (the comparison with Brazil reveals a somewhat different development in 1980s there). This begs the question: Did re-democratization need an idea of the 'worker' that, from today's point of view, was rather limited? On this level, the polysemic concept of 'freedom' reveals some of its many ambiguities: its political meaning, closely tied to notions of 'democracy,' can, under certain circumstances, promote an idea of work that is *less*, not more inclusive in acknowledging the variegated historical worlds of work.

There is an important methodological caveat to be added at this point: The argument presented here only works if one understands the study of the history of labour historiography as part of several other, broader fields of historiography, from broader perspectives, such as social or cultural history, and neighbouring fields such as agrarian history, urban history, social history, and the history of slavery, to the important zones of intersection marked by left history writing and Marxist historiography, in terms of their political and paradigmatic stances (as captured in the German notion of *Weltanschauung*). It is these politico-intellectual currents within historiography that give both a more ecumenical and more specific sense to the commonalities and intersections between labour history in the strict sense and other areas of enquiry—of which colonial history, economic history, or the history of everyday life, are the most important in the context of this analysis.²

The history of historiography has, in the last two decades, seen several attempts not only to take up the global turn and overcome Eurocentrism,³ but also to emphasize the political contextualization of the development of historiographic debates. More recently, these activities have been further expanded by understanding academic historiography as closely related to the ongoing societal struggles around the hegemonic interpretation of history. Historiography is seen as, if not quite an immediate *part* of the politics of history, then at least as one of its components.⁴ Such a history of his-

- 2 This is not to imply that all labour history, in whatever regional context, has been or still is automatically inspired by Marxist perspectives.
- 3 See Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf, eds., *The Oxford History of Historical Writing. Vol. 5: Historical Writing since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Eckhardt Fuchs and Benedikt Stuchtey, eds., *Across Cultural Borders: Historiography in Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008); Q. Edward Wang and Georg G. Iggers, eds., *Marxist Historiographies: A Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
- 4 Stefan Berger, ed., *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersections of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession* (New York: Berghahn, 2019). On the politics of history of the Left in Latin America, see: David Mayer, "Contrahistorias – historische Deutungen und geschichtspolitische Strategien der Linken im Wandel," in *Vielstimmige Vergangenheiten – Geschichtspolitik in Lateinamerika*, eds. Berthold Molden and David Mayer (Wien: LIT, 2009), 125–148.

toriography that is sensitive to history's political stakes does not, of course, deny the 'internal' dynamics and (relative) autonomy of scholarly or intellectual debates. At the same time, it includes those practices of history writing that are non-academic or can be considered part of social movement-oriented historiography (in Latin American context often called *historiografía militante*) and, more broadly, as 'historical cultures.'⁵

Mapping the field of labour history is an exercise that has been practised for several decades now and which has produced its own trajectory, documenting how debates, paradigms, and fashions have changed. More recent global labour history has seen—as have most fields inspired by the 'global turn' and its concomitant imperatives of 'self-reflexivity' and 'de-centring'—the establishment of a continuous self-reflection about the origins, contexts, and stakes of the writing of this history. Labour history on/from Latin America has been no exception to this—although it is noteworthy that surveys of the development of labour historiographies in specific nation states within Latin America have mostly been written by scholars from Latin America, while regional or continental surveys tend to be authored by colleagues from the Global North.⁶

Parallel to its self-historization, labour history also has experienced an increased interest in historicizing its core notions, including 'work' or 'worker,' and in de-

- 5 Stefan Berger and Christoph Cornelissen, eds. *Marxist Historical Cultures and Social Movements during the Cold War. Case Studies from Germany, Italy and Other Western European States*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- 6 For more recent panoramic views, see: John D. French, "The Latin American Labor Studies Boom," *International Review of Social History* 45, no. 2 (2000), 279–308; John D. French, "The Laboring and Middle-Class Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean: Historical Trajectories and New Research Directions," in *Global Labour History. A State of the Art*, ed. Jan Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 289–333; James P. Brennan, "Latin American Labor History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History*, ed. Jose C. Moya (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 342–366; Rossana Barragán and David Mayer, "Latin America and the Caribbean," in *Handbook Global History of Work*, eds. Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 95–121. For an overview of recent labour history in Argentina, see Laura Caruso and Lucas Poy, "Los mundos del trabajo en la historiografía argentina: sindicatos, izquierdas y género, una mirada de conjunto," in *Trabajos y Trabajadores En América Latina (Siglos XVI–XXI)*, ed. Rossana Barragán Romano (La Paz, 2019), 149–179. For a comparison between Argentina and Chile, see Sergio Grez Tosco, Gabriela Águila, and Hernán Camarero, "El estudio de la clase trabajadora y las izquierdas: recorridos historiográficos y perspectivas," *Archivos de historia del movimiento obrero y la izquierda* 8, no. 14 (2019), 164–185. For Brazil, see Claudio H. M. Batalha, "A historiografia da classe operária no Brasil: trajetórias e tendências," in *Historiografia brasileira em perspectiva*, ed. Marcos Cezar de Freitas (São Paulo: Contexto, 1998), 145–158; Paulo Fontes, Alexandre Fortes, and David Mayer, "Brazilian Labour History in Global Context: Some Introductory Notes," *International Review of Social History* 62, Special Issue 25 (Brazilian Labour History: New Perspectives in Global Context) (2017): 1–22.

constructing its tacit assumptions, either through a discursive or semantic focus or through an analysis of historical attitudes to work.⁷ This has further contributed to the questioning of a number of myths, in particular the prevalence of the ‘double-free wage labourer.’ Unsurprisingly, this research has shown that ‘work’ and ‘worker’ are semantic chameleons. The same, one can safely assume, goes for political notions such as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy.’ Shifting the analysis to contexts outside the Global North not only offers an opportunity to diversify our knowledge about these categories, but also to reveal hidden assumptions and tacit normalizations in our understanding of the genealogy of these notions.

Historiografía militante and the ‘people’

Labour historiographies in South American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile initially developed in a similar fashion to those in the Global North—and in many ways they have been closely intertwined through the biographical trajectories of its authors and the international networks they have been involved in politically. In these works, in particular since the 1930s, ‘labour history’ was defined first and foremost as a history of movements and organizations and was written by activists or movement-embedded intellectuals. These presented not only a ‘partisan historiography by and for activists’ (*historiografía militante*), but also—more specifically—interpretations from the standpoint of certain currents.⁸ Especially in Argentina, from the interwar period onward, an almost emblematic historiographical ‘line-up’ emerged

7 Jörn Leonhard and Willibald Steinmetz, eds., *Semantiken von Arbeit: Diachrone und vergleichende Perspektiven* (Köln: Böhlau, 2016). Karin Hofmeester, “Attitudes to Work,” in *Handbook Global History of Work*, eds. Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 411–431.

The “parallel” between self-historization and historization of core notions is not only temporally but also conceptual: both developments seem to stem from a common urge to question the naturalized, tacit presuppositions of doing labour history.

8 For a general overview of left-wing historiographies in Argentina, see Omar Acha, *Historia crítica de la historiografía argentina. Vol. 1: Las izquierdas en el siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo 2009); Laura Caruso and Lucas Poy argue that these current-mediated militant historiographies constituted an early form of globalized history writing as they were highly shaped by political (and migrational) long-distance networks. See Poy and Caruso, “Los Mundos Del Trabajo En La Historiografía Argentina,” 152. For the notion of ‘historiografía militante,’ see Fernando Devoto and Nora Pagano, eds., *La historiografía académica y la historiografía militante en Argentina y Uruguay* (Buenos Aires: Biblos 2004).

with anarchist, socialist, and communist interpretations vying for influence in the labour movement.⁹

In Argentina, the rise of Peronism (1943/45–1955) also brought about its own kind of historiographic intervention, called ‘historical revisionism’ which sought to distinguish itself both from the academically established (either ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’) historiography and left-wing *historiografía militante*.¹⁰ While it offered a particular brand of nationalist narrative, its social interpretation hinged upon the category of the ‘people’ (a subject seen as ‘naturally’ hostile to non-patriotic elites, the ‘oligarchy,’ centralism, and imperialism). Despite its vagueness, the notion of the ‘people’ has (and still continues) to be a powerful intellectual and political reference in Argentina and Latin America more widely. In terms of the analysis of the ‘worlds of work,’ it has both offered pathways to imagining social sectors and groups of workers beyond the prototypical industrial wage labourer (the trend in the 1960s, but also in Brazil since the 1980s) and served to condense all groups of workers into an urban ‘working class’ which was seen as synonymous with ‘popular sectors’ (in 1980s Argentina).

While it was only in Argentina that populism produced a distinct historiographical school (the other two classic cases of Latin American 1930s–1940s populism, Brazil and Mexico, did not see a similar intellectual phenomenon), the emergence of populist movements and regimes nevertheless posed a serious intellectual challenge and became a fundamental point of origin for sociology and other social sciences in South America. In a peculiar mixture of functionalism, modernization theory, and Marxism, the sociologists of the 1950s and 1960s posed the ‘unsettling’ question of how it was possible that major parts of the working class associated themselves with the populist projects in Argentina and Brazil. Gino Germani, a founding figure of sociology in Argentina and South America in general, gave an explanation that was quite representative of the contemporary debates on ‘workers’: In the 1930s, he argued, the ‘old’ working class, which had been constituted by migrants from Europe, was replaced by one that swelled through internal migration from the countryside. This ‘new’ working class, politically ‘immature’ as it was, offered itself to populist leaders as base for their

- 9 The following works are representative of their respective currents (in order of appearance: anarchist, socialist, communist, and syndicalist): Diego Abad de Santillán, *La F.O.R.A.: ideología y trayectoria del movimiento obrero revolucionario en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1933); Jacinto Oddone, *Gremialismo proletario argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1949); Rubens Iscaro, *Origen y desarrollo del movimiento sindical argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1958); Sebastián Marotta, *El movimiento sindical argentino. Su génesis y desarrollo, 1857–1907* (Buenos Aires, 1960).
- 10 Alejandro Cattaruzza, “El revisionismo: itinerarios de cuatro décadas,” in *Políticas de la historia: Argentina 1860–1960*, eds. Alejandro Cattaruzza and Alejandro Eujanian (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 2003), 143–182; Michael Goebel, *Argentina’s Partisan Past: Nationalism and the Politics of History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

manipulative politics.¹¹ This argument remains powerful until today, reflecting a trope in which Latin America is seen as deficient vis-à-vis the normal—European—path of modernization. While these early sociologists worked with a relatively static notion of 'working class' and of the kind of work these workers engaged in, several waves of revision, beginning as early as the 1960s, have highlighted to what degree Peronism actually was the product of a successful campaign to win over the 'old' working classes and their trade unions and cultivate a cultural symbiosis between working class sociabilities and the political rhetoric of Peronism.¹² While Vargasismo in Brazil (1930–1945; 1951–1954) has not seen sizable popular mobilizations in its first years, Alexandre Fortes has argued that it also morphed into an actual populist regime when it entered into a similar alliance during the Second World War with the 'old' urban working class, made up of European migrants.¹³

This analysis of populism and its discussion of a 'deficient' working class also implies a set of analytical and political-cultural standpoints: While there was little explicit discussion of the actual sites and practices of work (which was assumed urban and industrial, with workers who are formally employed, male and white¹⁴), there was an indirect and rather negative assessment of phenomena that only a few years later would take centre stage among Latin American sociologists (and have remained central ever since): rural exodus, semi-proletarianization, the emergence of a precarious world of urban poor and its economic corollary, the informal sector. As we will see, labour historiography in the 1980s in South America started, in part, to take this up by shifting its focus to urban neighbourhoods (*barrios*) and the 'popular sectors.'

- 11 Gino Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición, de la sociedad tradicional a la sociedad de masas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós, 1962). Two 1960s sociological interventions in a similar vein from Brazil are Juarez R. B. Lopes, *Sociedade industrial no Brasil* (São Paulo, 1964); Octavio Ianni, *O colapso do populismo no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1968).
- 12 Miguel Murmis and Juan Carlos Portantiero, *Estudios sobre los orígenes del peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Argentina Editores, 1971); Daniel James, *Resistance and integration. Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 13 Alexandre Fortes, "World War II and Brazilian Workers: Populism at the Intersections between National and Global Histories," *International Review of Social History* 62, Special Issue 25 (2017): 165–190.
- 14 The racializing undertones of the early sociological works on populism seemed most audible in studies on Brazil; yet even the Argentinean debates were, despite the country's professed and ostentatious 'whiteness,' imbued with similar anxieties, as the notion of *cabecitas negras* ('little black heads') for Perón's supporters graphically illustrates.

1960s—a revolutionary opening

The ‘long’ 1960s in Latin America were without doubt a period of intense contestation, social mobilization and generalized social unrest. As an in-depth elucidation of the roughly 15 years beginning with the Cuban revolution and ending with the forceful disruption of the Allende government by a military coup in 1973 is impossible here,¹⁵ a semantic example will suffice to illustrate the profound shift in the correlation of forces: In the 1960s, the notion of ‘revolution’ had become so compelling that even outspoken opponents of the Cuban Revolution saw themselves obliged to use it. Thus, Eduardo Frei, Christian-Democratic presidential candidate in the 1964 Chilean elections (which he won against the socialist candidate Salvador Allende) used *revolución en libertad* (revolution in liberty) as the main slogan for his campaign.

These mobilizations and contestations manifested themselves in fierce intellectual controversies and new, innovative ideas. Some of these, such as dependency theory, were transferred back to the Global North and continue to be in use today (dependency theory remains one of the very few paradigms originating the Global South to have made a lasting impact in the social sciences and humanities of the North). As an attempt to explain the ‘lack’ of development in Latin America not as the result of any internal shortcomings but of colonialism and the forceful integration of Latin America into the international division of labour in a subordinate position, dependency theory also put forward a deeply historical argument.¹⁶

- 15 While there are countless publications on the long 1960s for individual countries within Latin America, studies with a regional, comparative, or transnational approach are still relatively rare; see Victoria Langland, “‘Il est Interdit d’Interdire’: The Transnational Experience of 1968 in Brazil,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 17, no. 1 (2006): 61–81; Tanya Harmer, “Two, Three, Many Revolutions? Cuba and the Prospects for Revolutionary Change in Latin America, 1967–1975,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 61–89; Eugenia Palieraki, “De Pékin à La Havane. La gauche radicale chilienne et ses révolutions, 1963–1970,” *Monde(s). Histoire, Espaces, Relations* 11 (2017): 119–138; Pablo Bonavena and Pablo Millán, eds., *Los ‘68 latinoamericanos. Movimientos estudiantiles, política y cultura en México, Brasil, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina y Colombia* (Buenos Aires: Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, 2018); Aldo Marchesi, *Latin America’s Radical Left: Rebellion and Cold War in the Global 1960s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Peter Birle, Enrique Fernández Darraz, and Clara Ruvituso, eds., *Las izquierdas latinoamericanas y europeas: idearios, praxis y sus circulaciones transregionales en la larga década del sesenta* (Madrid: Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert, 2021).
- 16 On the history of dependency theory, see Cristóbal Kay, *Latin American theories of development and underdevelopment* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Ruy Mauro Marini and Mária Millán Moncayo, eds., *La teoría social latinoamericana. Tomo 2: Subdesarrollo y dependencia* (México, D. F.: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1994).

Indeed, the field of history turned into one of the major sites of politico-intellectual dispute; although dependency theory was conducive to this proclivity, it was not its sole inventor. Within the Left, particularly in Argentina, interpretations of the past had, as early as the 1940s, functioned as one of the preferred proxy sites for political confrontation—in particular the debates surrounding socio-economic formations and transformations.¹⁷ This historical debate interrogated the fundamental questions of macro-social analysis: How to characterize the societies in the epoch from the sixteenth to the eighteen centuries? How to define the notions of 'feudalism' and 'capitalism'? Above all, how to explain the macro-social historical transformations that created the basis for contemporary Latin American societies—societies which were obviously not as rich, technologically advanced, and powerful as those of the Global North?

Returning to debates that originated in the 1920s in the context of Communist parties and Comintern-discussions, two interventions in the 1940s would set the tone for the controversies of the 1960s: In 1940, the Argentinean author and journalist Rodolfo Puiggrós, who at that time was a communist militant, published his historical essay *De la colonia a la Revolución* (From the colony to the Revolution). More importantly, in 1949, the Argentinean sociologist Sergio Bagú published *Economía de la sociedad colonial: ensayo de historia comparada de América Latina* (The economy of colonial society: an essay on the comparative history of Latin America). These two books put forward characterizations of colonial Latin America which remained, for the most part, remarkably stable during the three following decades. Rodolfo Puiggrós took up the feudalism thesis (which had a long tradition in Latin America from the nineteenth century onward)¹⁸ to argue that Spain had exported a decaying form of feudalism to Latin America. Later, he further sharpened this argument by stating that a colonial power could not possibly establish a higher social formation (capitalism instead of feudalism) in its colonies than the one prevalent in the imperial centre. Consequently, the dominant form of labour relations in Latin America was different iterations of 'serfdom.' Sergio Bagú, on the other hand, in line with certain predecessors (such as Caio Prado Junior from Brazil),¹⁹ put forward the argument that what had existed in colonial Latin America was some kind of 'colonial capitalism,' based on its full connection to markets—indeed, the world-market. Labour relations, whatever

17 The following paragraphs are based on David Mayer, "Coming to Terms with the Past, Getting a Grip on the Future—Manfred Kossok's Interventions into Historiographical Debates About Latin America During the Radicalized 1960s," *Review. A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 38, no. 1–2 (2015): 15–39, 21–23.

18 On the continuities of the 'feudalism' thesis, see José Carlos Chiaramonte, *Formas de sociedad y economía en Hispanoamérica* (México, D.F.: Grijalbo, 1984), 48–82.

19 See his foundational study on Brazil's economic history: Caio Prado Júnior, *História Econômica do Brasil* (São Paulo, 1945).

they might have been on the surface were framed in the context of their functionality for merchant capital. He also added that the most common labour arrangement in colonial Latin America had been slavery (an assessment which was certainly true for export-oriented production in colonial Brazil). Puiggrós and Bagú created a set of dichotomies which would predominate successive waves of debate well into the 1970s: internal or external perspectives, extra-economically enforced (pre-capitalist) labour tribute or market-oriented (thus capitalist) labour mobilization, etc. The discussion continued during the whole of the 1960s, especially in Argentina and Chile. In both countries, intellectuals of different political backgrounds within the Left (communists, socialists, Trotskyists, left-wing nationalists) and of varying profile (from movement intellectuals to academically established historians) participated.²⁰ The debate reached an initial highpoint in a heated exchange between Andre Gunder Frank and Rodolfo Puiggrós in 1965 about Frank's thesis which defended the idea that Latin America had been completely capitalist practically from October 1492 on.²¹

At the beginning of the 1970s, a new discussion emerged from these earlier controversies: the mode of production debate. It shifted attention to one of Marx's central conceptual legacies, although the notion of the 'mode of production' did not have a stable meaning in his writings. Since its (re-)discovery in the 1960s (partly as a result of the *Grundrisse*-revolution in Marxist discussions in several contexts), it stimulated a flurry of debates in several world-regions, when the term became, for a brief period, the most fashionable heuristic notion in many humanities and social science departments.²² This short ascendancy, curiously, is almost forgotten today, and the relevance of the term for current discussions in global history or social ecology is minimal. Furthermore, the global history of the modes of production debates is still to be written; it would be a worthwhile task, since the concept was interpreted broadly—its meaning and its heuristic use ranging from highly abstract and philosophical

- 20 In Chile, this included historians like Hernán Ramírez Necochea, Julio César Jobet and Marcelo Segall; in Argentina, in addition to Rodolfo Puiggrós, militant intellectuals like Leonardo Paso, Milcíades Peña and Alberto Plá.
- 21 The original debate took place in 1965 in *El Gallo Ilustrado*, the Sunday supplement of the Mexican newspaper *El Día*. It was subsequently published in different editions in several countries. On Puiggrós' role in the debate, also see: Omar Acha, *La nación futura. Rodolfo Puiggrós en la encrucijadas argentinas del siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2006), 202–206. Frank's legendary monograph *Capitalism and Underdevelopment* appeared in English in 1967, but in Spanish only in 1970.
- 22 On the different ways the *Grundrisse* have been taken up, see Marcello Musto, ed., *Karl Marx's Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later* (with a special foreword by Eric J. Hobsbawm) (New York: Routledge, 2008). A keystone in new mode-of-production-inflected historical interpretations was: *Karl Marx: Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, trans. Jack Cohen., ed. and with an introd. by Eric J. Hobsbawm, London 1964.

renderings to more historicistic and empirical adoptions. The Latin American debate, although it remained almost unknown in the Global North and is forgotten today even in Latin America, truly stands out for its depth, level of sophistication and deeply historicistic readings of the concept. Its most emblematic expression is a collected volume titled *Modos de producción en América Latina* (modes of production in Latin America), originally published in 1973 in the equally emblematic book series of the left-wing intellectual journal *Pasado y Presente* (past and present).²³ While the notion of 'modes of production' was accompanied by the attributes 'feudal,' 'capitalist,' and the like, it was analytically more comprehensive and flexible than previous considerations of 'feudalism' and 'capitalism.' Describing an ensemble of labour relations, property relations, institutions, and technological potentials, it was much more open to being developed further, namely by introducing additional and more historically specific modes of production.

The analytical core of the multi-relational notion of 'modes of production' is constituted by 'work'—in short, it attempts to capture the historically specific social organization of work in relation to the whole of the social body. While the Latin American debate saw a broad range of interpretations in terms of determining different modes of production,²⁴ these authors, interestingly, shared common ground in terms of their understanding of labour relations. Most agreed that colonial and postcolonial Latin America had experienced very diverse labour relations and socio-political arrangements stemming from them; that various forms of unfree labour predominated (ranging from outright plantation slavery to a gamut of coerced labour both in agrarian production and mining) and that these could co-exist both next to each other and alongside less coercive labour relations; and that all these forms of labour were

- 23 Carlos Sempat Assadourian, Ciro Flamarión Santana Cardoso, Horacio Cifardini, Juan Carlos Garavaglia, and Ernesto Laclau, *Modos de Producción en América Latina* (Cuadernos de Presente y Pasado N° 40), 11th ed. (México, D. F. 1983 [1973]). A further collected volume documenting the debate was Roger Bartra, Agustín Cueva, Pierre Beaucage, Raúl Olmedo, Sergio de la Peña, Enrique Semo, Ciro Flamarión Santana Cardoso, and José Carlos Chiaramonte, *Modos de producción en América Latina* (Lima: Delva Editores, 1976). A late-1980s assessment of the debate is given in Steve J. Stern, "Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World-System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 829–872. For a recent re-assessment of the debate and its continued relevance for research, see Juan Marchena, Manuel Chust, and Mariano Schlez, eds., *El debate permanente. Modos de producción y revolución en América Latina* (Santiago de Chile: Ariadna Ediciones, 2020).
- 24 Several called for a differentiation into more regionally specific modes of production (colonial mode of production, Andean mode of production, slavery-based mode of production, Jesuit mode of production); others argued there existed a combination of different modes of production in Latin American colonial societies, interrelated among each other ('articulation').

harnessed to produce cash crops and bullion for the world-market. The controversy was thus to which degree this mercantile orientation justified the attribute ‘capitalist.’

The political stakes involved were high and understood as acute. The analysis of the past was seen as directly indicative of the potential for socio-political transformation in the present. If there was already a century-long capitalist trajectory, then a socialist transformation was not only possible, but necessary. If, however, societies in colonial and post-colonial Latin America could be characterized as ‘feudal,’ as in the earlier rendering of the debate, or at least ‘specific’ in their mode of production, as in the modes of production debate, then a more moderate transition (‘bourgeois-democratic’ in the language of the communist theory of stages) was advisable. In that, four characteristics of the debate are notable: First, while the modes of production debate can partly be seen as a reply to Andre Gunder Frank and thus as a ‘traditionally communist’ rebuttal of his plea for Cuban-style revolution, the intellectual and historical arguments of the ‘mode of production’ authors, in fact, went a long way in acknowledging Franks fundamental idea: Latin American societies since the sixteenth century were overdetermined by, in Frank’s rendering, their integration into a new and asymmetric inter-continental division of labour, or—alternatively, but also similarly—by the fact of their ‘coloniality,’ in the rendering of the modes of production adherents.²⁵ Second, while today we can see the proximity between authors who saw themselves in conflict, the political acuteness of their stand-off should not be underestimated. The cognitive horizon of all the authors involved was ‘revolution’ as a real and actual possibility; the only question that remained was how radical a transformation was ultimately possible. ‘Freedom’ thus was defined in terms of ‘liberation’—in short, as comprehensive social and cultural emancipation.²⁶ In that, the notion of ‘democracy,’ if it figured at all, stood behind the idea of ‘liberation.’ At the same time, the perspective of radical emancipation let these intellectuals experience contemporary Latin America as not-yet-liberated (despite it having achieved, for the most part, its formal independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century). Politically, this orientation implied the need for a broad alliance of social groups, including workers, peasants, students, among others. Both the emphasis on being ‘not-yet-free’ and the stress on an alliance helped to open the view for those worlds of work that were characterized by coercion and contributed to acknowledging the interrelated coexistence of different labour relations. The Latin American discussions thus anticipated central tenets of current global labour history. This is one of the reasons why today many historians from Latin

25 With their insistence on an overriding characteristic by way of Latin America’s colonial status, these 1970s authors anticipated a central tenet of subsequent post-colonial or decolonial debates.

26 For a ideational survey of “liberation” in 1960s Latin America, see Eduardo Devés Valdés, *El pensamiento latinoamericano en el siglo XX – entre la modernización y la identidad. Tomo 2: Desde la CEPAL al neoliberalismo, 1950–1990* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2003), chap. 3.

America are sceptical about the rise of global labour history and the global turn in historiography more broadly, as it is often seen as yet another fashionable paradigm from the Global North that demands allegiance without noticing that some of its ideas have long been discussed among Latin America intellectuals. Third, although the Latin American debate revealed a very historicist reading of the *Grundrisse*, it was still very much in tune with the 'structuralist affinity' prevalent in the global early-1970s vogue centred around the notion of 'modes of production.' Thus, despite 'revolution' functioning as the fundamental political horizon, paradoxically, historical 'agency' did not play a substantial analytical role in the analysis. Fourth, in terms of sociology of knowledge, the debate had a number of important characteristics: it marked, despite its political stakes, a general shift from a predominantly activist/*militante* controversy toward a more academically embedded discussion; also, its participants, whatever they had to say about 'labour,' were clearly not invested in 'labour history' (either in contemporary or current terms) but in fields such as 'colonial history,' 'economic history,' or 'agrarian history.'

1980s— a 'narrow' working class for democracy?

These debates ended quite abruptly in the second half of the 1970s. On the one hand, they seemed to have exhausted themselves on the other, they were disrupted by political circumstances: From the mid-1970s onward, almost all countries in Latin America were ruled by military dictatorships, many of which engaged in heavy-handed repression up to the level of state terrorism, as in Argentina and Chile. Many left-wing intellectuals had to go into exile or, at a minimum, keep a low profile by retreating into private institutions. The experience of military dictatorship contributed greatly to a deep shift in the general tone and orientation of the debates: they turned away from 'revolution' and horizons of radical transformation toward a new appreciation for democracy and reforms under a constitutional system.²⁷ While this intellectual transition was not as marked in the case of Chile (since the exiled party structures of both the socialists and communists offered a certain level of ideological cohesion), and a renewed labour movement had emerged in Brazil as early as the late 1970s (first through 'new unionism,' subsequently through the formation of the PT), the shift was particularly severe in Argentina. There, the military dictatorship had been intensely repressive, and, conversely, the process of re-democratization was achieved quite swiftly in 1983.

27 Stephan Hollensteiner, *Aufstieg und Randlage: Linksintellektuelle, demokratische Wende und Politik in Argentinien und Brasilien* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2005).

Argentina had been among the first countries outside Italy to experience a lively appropriation of Antonio Gramsci, beginning in the 1950s, both within the official Communist Party and among the generation of intellectuals who left it—particularly those around the journal *Pasado y Presente*.²⁸ The shift in the late 1970s saw a renewed interest in Gramscian ideas and a general orientation toward more cultural-political versions of Marxism. In terms of the political debate, this turn crystallized around new journals such as *Punto de Vista* (Viewpoint), *Controversia* (Controversy), or *Ciudad Futura* (Future City).²⁹ In the field of history, a new generation of scholars—among them Luis Alberto Romero, Hilda Sabato, and Leandro Gutiérrez—turned toward social history and to British Marxist historians such as E. P. Thompson or Eric Hobsbawm, in particular, as their central points of reference. As the Argentinean historian Lucas Poy has recently argued, the Argentinean E. P. Thompson was a of special kind, however: The radical politics of E. P. Thompson and his insistence on ‘class’ as a heuristic notion was pushed into the background, and his interest in popular culture and the everyday sociabilities of the common people emphasized.³⁰ In this way, a peculiar variant social history was forged in the 1980s, one in which the reference to the term of ‘working class’ remained, but which simultaneously saw a number of shifts in relation to the notions of ‘worker’ and ‘work’—shifts which involved, in a contradictory way, their simultaneous opening and narrowing. These contradictory intellectual transmutations might be summed up in the following tentative observations: First, the focus of labour historiography was now on the late nineteenth and the first four decades of the twentieth century (and thus on a period that the majority of the 1960s and 1970s authors would have characterized as fully ‘capitalist’). The category of ‘working class’ was expanded and pluralized by introducing the notion of *sectores populares* (the popular sectors, the lower classes, the common people).³¹ This

- 28 On the Gramsci-reception in Argentina, see: Raúl Burgos, *Los gramscianos argentinos: cultura y política en la experiencia de ‘Pasado y Presente’* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2004).
- 29 Martina Garategaray, “Democracia, intelectuales y política. ‘Punto de Vista,’ ‘Unidos’ y ‘La Ciudad Futura’ en la transición política e ideológica de la década del ‘80,” *Estudios* 29 (2013): 53–72.
- 30 Lucas Poy, “Remaking the Making: E.P. Thompson’s Reception in Argentina and the Shaping of Labor Historiography,” *International Review of Social History* 61, no. 1 (2016): 75–93. I am highly indebted to discussions with Lucas Poy for the following considerations. On the specificities of Erich Hobsbawm’s reception in Argentina, see Juan Suriano, “Algunos aspectos de la recepción de la obra de Hobsbawm en la Argentina,” in *Historia y política. Seis ensayos sobre Eric Hobsbawm*, ed. César Mónaco (Buenos Aires, 2017), 27–43.
- 31 See Luis Alberto Romero, “Los sectores populares en las ciudades latinoamericanas del siglo XIX: la cuestión de la identidad,” *Desarrollo Económico* 106 (1987): 201–222; Diego Armus, ed., *Sectores populares y vida urbana* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 1984); Leandro Gutiérrez, “Condiciones materiales de vida de los sectores populares en el Buenos Aires finisecular,” in *De historia e historiadores. Homenaje a José Luis Romero*, ed. Sergio Bagú (Mexico City,

involved going out of the factory and turning toward the neighbourhoods (*barrios*) as central sites of everyday sociability and space where one could find associations and clubs of all sorts that, often functioning in a mutualist tradition, offered its members some social protection. This historiographic pluralization and its new focus on 'agency' was a plea for making diverse groups of common 'citizens' more visible. While the idea of the 'working class' (in terms of the Thompsonian 'double-package' of both a socio-economic group and a political-ideological collective) became more diluted in these new interpretations, they paradoxically featured a reaffirmation of a world in which 'work' was synonymous with 'double-free wage labour.' Second, the *sectores populares* were seen as a political subject. As certain historians stated in a paper published in 1982, one year before the end of the dictatorship, it would be one of the tasks of social history in a newly democratic Argentina to highlight historical popular practices which could be understood as incubators for democracy (they called it "nests of democracy").³² The aim was to demonstrate a turn-of-the-century society that was based on generalized wage labour, featured a diverse urban culture and was characterized by upward social mobility. In this world of dynamic upward mobility, the *sectores populares* could be understood as a middle-class-in-waiting, if not in-the-making. Such a perspective not only seemed appropriate as a historiographic support for the re-democratization process from 1983 onwards but more specifically for the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín. Alfonsín was a member of the Unión Cívica Radical, one of the rare examples in Latin America of a long-standing social-liberal political tradition that specifically went back to the turn of the century, where it had emerged from the new, upwardly-mobile urban middle classes. Third, this kind of social history was (and still is) rooted in the idea that Argentina was, since the 1880s, a country fully characterized by capitalism and proletarianization in which the 'labour market' functioned as the only mechanism for allocating labour. A pivotal study by Luis Alberto Romero and Hilda Sabato about the workers in Buenos Aires in the second half of the nineteenth century illustrates this perspective in its subtitle by alluding to the "experience of the market."³³ While this is certainly not inaccurate, the book offers insights which today, considering the contemporary debates about the diversity of labour relations, might warrant a different subtitle: it shows us a world in which there existed, alongside double-free wage labourer, the full urban *mélange* characteristic of so many cities in Latin America even today: precarious day-labouring, petty commerce (frequently makeshift), all

1982), 425–436. For a later summary of this approach, see: Leandro Gutiérrez and Luis Alberto Romero, *Sectores populares, cultura y política: Buenos Aires en la entreguerra* (Buenos Aires, 1995).

32 Programa de Estudios de Historia Económica y Social Americana, "¿Dónde anida la democracia?," *Punto de Vista* 15 (1982): 6–10.

33 Hilda Sabato and Luis Alberto Romero, *Los trabajadores de Buenos Aires: la experiencia del mercado, 1850–1880* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1992).

kinds of self-employment, and household-based market production in blurry coexistence with reproductive work. To tacitly subsume all these activities under the notion of ‘working class’ was not only congenial to the political stakes of re-democratization, but also corresponded to the self-image of a country which for a long time had nourished the idea of being distinct from other Latin American societies. Assuming a highly homogenous working class thus served, particularly in the 1980s historiography, as a vector for the demand for full political inclusion in the context of regained democratic institutions of representation.

The case of Brazil offers an interesting contrast. Re-democratization in Brazil was more drawn-out than in Argentina (coming to an end in 1985/1988); at the same time, a new kind of unionism had already emerged in the 1970s. This *Novo Sindicalismo* was much more participatory and social movement-oriented than previous union organizations and constituted a fundamental component in the foundation of the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) in 1980.³⁴ These political developments contributed greatly to the formation of a new labour historiography that crystallized in particular at the University of Campinas (Universidade Estadual de Campinas, UNICAMP). E. P. Thompson as a reference point was as important for this historiography as for their colleagues in Argentina, the emphasis, however, was a slightly different one:³⁵ While everyday experiences and ‘agency’ also took centre stage, it tended to be the everyday experiences of workers (not primarily ‘popular’ barrio residents) that caught the interest of historians. In that sense, the Thompsonian notion of ‘working class’ was not so much stretched to the point of thinning out (as in the case of Argentina), but, to the contrary, asserted. Moreover, these workers were seen as active advocates of certain political traditions—mainly anarchist and syndicalist. The emphasis, both in relation to the workers’ culture and their political organization, was on ‘autonomy,’ an orientation also central to the *Novo Sindicalismo*.

Simultaneously, a first rapprochement between the hitherto completely separated fields of labour history and the history of slavery occurred in Brazil in the 1980s. The dialogue between the two would become a characteristic of Brazilian labour history and has contributed to its attractiveness for global labour history debates. This convergence, however, was a slow and gradual process. In 2009, Sidney Chaloub and Fernando Teixeira da Silva still spoke, in a much-quoted statement, of a “historiographic

34 Maurício Rands Barros, *Labour Relations and The New Unionism in Contemporary Brazil* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); Francisco Barbosa de Macedo, “Social Networks and Urban Space: Worker Mobilization in the First Years of ‘New’ Unionism in Brazil,” *International Review of Social History* 60, no. 1 (2015): 33–71.

35 Marcelo Badaró Mattos, *E. P. Thompson e a tradição de crítica ativa do materialismo histórico* (Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ, 2012); Antonio Luigi Negro, “E. P. Thompson no Brasil. Recepção e usos,” *Crítica Marxista* 39 (2014): 151–161.

Berlin Wall” that separated labour history and the history of slavery.³⁶ Still, as early as the 1980s, a fundamental openness emerged to rethink ‘work’ in Brazilian history as the simultaneous existence of slavery and wage-labour, of urban and agrarian, and formal and informal labour as well as of practices of unfree labour persisting until today. Moreover, these efforts were quite directly understood as part of a political project in which a new political party of the Left, founded in a predominantly urban and industrial environment, strove to include other oppressed segments of society: the urban poor of the *favelas*, the Afro-Brazilians both in town and in the countryside, rural workers and the landless. This inclusionary project found a congenial historiographic corollary in the broadened notion of ‘work’ called for by labour historians. The foundation of *Mundos do Trabalho* as a network within the authoritative Brazilian Association of History (Associação Nacional de História, ANPUH) made this process tangible both in programmatic and institutional terms.

The dialectics of myth-breaking and -making

Labour historiographies in Argentina and Brazil during the second half of the twentieth century entertained notions of work and workers that varied greatly in relation to their openness and narrowness. These not only changed over time, but also diverged between different countries. Both the inner dynamics of the intellectual debates and their respective political contexts as well as the ambitions of historians for political intervention greatly influenced to which degree ‘work’ and ‘worker’ were seen as synonymous with industrial, urban wage labour or defined more broadly.

As this article has argued, some of the historiographic evolutions in Argentina and Brazil developed in contradiction to the idea, derived from the evolution of the debates in the Global North, that there was a linear movement from a narrow to more extended conceptions of ‘work.’ Strikingly, the controversies in the long 1960s in South America, propelled by the political storms of revolutionary, radical liberation, tended to correlate with an emphasis on a broad notion of ‘work’ (although it remained tied to a structuralist vision of an ensemble of modes of production, devoid of ‘agency’). Meanwhile, during re-democratization in the 1980s, most intellectuals began to support the idea of a representative and institutionalized democracy. In Argentina, this was accompanied by a contradictory double-movement among a new

36 Sidney Chalhoub and Fernando Teixeira da Silva, “Sujeitos no imaginário acadêmico. Escravos e trabalhadores na historiografia brasileira desde os anos 1980,” *Cadernos AEL* 14, no. 26 (2009): 11–49, 44. The politico-historical metaphor of the ‘Berlin Wall’ might sound odd to German speakers as myself, the ‘cultural appropriation’ of such metaphors, however, is not the prerogative of Northern academia and gives us a sense how strange the ubiquitous metaphorical reference to the Great Wall of China might sound to native Mandarin speakers.

generation of social historians: On the one hand, the notion of working class was both pluralized and diluted into ‘popular sectors,’ thus expanding into other spheres than the industrial workplace; on the other hand, this historiographical pluralization of socio-political milieus was accompanied by the (re-)assertion of a comparatively narrow notion of work as synonymous with double-free wage labour. Here, the demands of democratic inclusion seemed best served by a historical backdrop of a relatively homogenous society of wage workers prone to mutualist association and benefiting from a general trend of upward social mobility. ‘Inclusion’ here was envisaged for a large, wage-labour-based popular block. In Brazil, meanwhile, the continuing legacy of slavery and other forms of unfree labour led to an earlier broadening of the idea of ‘work’ among labour historians. Here, ‘inclusion’ meant tackling the co-existence of varying labour relations and highlighting diversity.

Global labour history involves the painstaking effort to critically question previous attempts at writing the histories of work, workers, and labour movements. In its call to overcome methodological nationalism, eurocentrism, and, above all, a narrow notion of the worker as a male, industrial wage labourer, it has demystified many beliefs dear to labour historians until the 1990s. However, successful attempts at myth-breaking tend, as a both inadvertent and inevitable side-effects, to create myths of their own. One of these, in the case of global labour history, is the narrative of its own becoming, which has proceeded in a linear fashion from ‘old’ through ‘new’ to ‘global’ labour history.³⁷ As this article has shown for the development of labour historiography in Argentina, the story of labour history’s own development proves to be more complicated: A broadened notion of ‘work’ was developed much earlier than in the Global North, and under certain circumstances, it made political sense to go back to a comparatively narrow idea of the ‘working class.’

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37 Marcel van der Linden, “Labour History. The Old, the New and the Global,” *African Studies* 66, no. 2–3 (2007): 169–180.