

**Report on “Transnational Labour, Transnational Methods” Summer Institute, 8-14 June 2008,
Toronto.**

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With more than 20 facilitators and 50 participants, “Transnational Labour, Transnational Methods” Global Labour History Summer Institute started on 8th of June, 2008 at University of Toronto, New College. The crowd was not composed of historians only, there were sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, and last but not least, a number of trade unionists –United Steel Workers was represented by around 10 participants, whereas we had only one non-North American trade unionist from Brazil- who enriched the discussion especially at the working group level. Overall, the institute had around 80 people from more than 15 countries around the world with very different backgrounds in academic and activist circles. From the outset, this diversity promised a very interesting week of discussions.

The structure of the institute was a complicated one indeed. The 12 hour working-day started with plenary sessions by two or three facilitators with themes ranging from comparative and transnational history to labour and environmentalism, from occupational health and the study of labour to commodity chains, from labour laws to gender and labour history. Following the plenary sessions, the large group was divided into four groups to form what the organizers called the “home groups.” This, however, should not be confused with the “working groups” which was yet another division of the whole group into four smaller groups. The home groups were supposed to consider questions and themes following the morning sessions and to respond to the readings that had been previously posted on the website. This endeavor, in my opinion, has failed because of the loose structuring of the groups and the neglect of the reading material altogether. Some plenary sessions made no reference to reading material and consequently the following discussions have been somewhat arbitrary. Moreover, the fact that it was mainly the facilitators who led the discussions during the plenary sessions created a rather difficult atmosphere for the participants who struggled with trying to understand the standpoint of various facilitators and respond to many different questions at once. This problem could have been solved by providing more guidance for the participants and a more democratic decision-making process in which all the actors could partake to a larger extent.

The same could be said about the working group experiment. The working groups were asked to prepare an edible, digital document, and to identify key primary documents/sources, key secondary texts, key historiographical themes, and key historical, possible collaborative projects that future historians should undertake. Naturally the four working groups, namely “Migration and Diaspora,” “Globalizing Production,” “Labouring Culture,” and “Labour and Empire,” have interpreted these tasks in different ways which resulted in a certain degree of incompatibility in the discussions we had at the end of the institute. While “Globalizing Production” and “Labouring Culture” focused on theoretical and historiographical questions, the other two groups focused on creating documents such as timelines and maps in the wiki format. Though the end products are not available to comment on yet –the groups created their own websites and listservers with a commitment to do further work on their topics-, the discrepancy among the groups in the wrap-up session made me think that an opportunity for creating a more coherent end product was missed.

The recurring themes of discussion at the institute were numerous. At the top of the list was the need for a transnational approach to labour history, a need brought about by increasing suspicion towards national explanation and emphasis on national particularity. Consequently, globalization was a much debated term at the institute with a particular reference to theories suggesting that it is a far older phenomenon than what the recent literature argues. Opened with a plenary session on these themes, the discussions continuously came back to similar points such as the need to transcend the national boundaries while writing on histories of labour. The concerns here were two-fold to my mind. On the one hand, there were theoretical and historiographical arguments which proposed a new agenda for labour history. On the other hand, and mainly due to the presence of trade unionists among the group and the spirit of activism among the academic community, the questions of audience of labour history and the political implications of transnationalizing labour history were discussed. In other words, the complicated character of the relationship between scholarship and political practice was present in many discussions which made the institute highly interesting for both set of participants as far as I observed.

The problem with the discussions of comparative and transnational approaches to labour history that has been discussed extensively among the participants in personal conversations was the limited definitions of comparative and transnational history. Despite the discontent with the overemphasis on national boundaries/particularities/explanations, comparative and transnational labour history was exemplified mainly through studies that took more than one nation-state as their

unit of analysis. As such, there was the implication that comparative history could only apply to research that includes more than one nation-state. To my mind, methodology was collapsed with a certain unit of analysis leaving the option of doing comparative history on a more local level out of the picture. In other words, translocality was not discussed as a possible way of overcoming the bias towards nation-state based explanations.

Another recurring theme was free and unfree labour. The need to overcome the dichotomous relationship between the two categories through a critic of teleological and unilinear evolution of labour relations was voiced by several participants. Unfree labour was discussed not as a pre-capitalist hangover but as an inherent quality of capitalism within the proposed theoretical framework. When the discussion steered towards the ironic two-fold definition of freedom formulated by Marx, however, the meaning of freedom and unfreedom got multiplied and thus complicated giving way to doubts about the very distinction between the two categories. The home groups and the working groups spent a lot of time on this debate which was one of the best moments of the whole institute in my opinion.

The institute provided the opportunity to exchange information about the state of the field in many different countries ranging from Brazil to Italy, from Cuba to New Zealand. A global history of labor historiography was useful for the participants for two reasons: first, it showed us how our studies are connected as much as our object of study across the globe and second, the peculiar nature of our field, namely its close connections to the political and social atmosphere of the countries we work in, became visible. Despite the discrepancies among different countries regarding the access to the archival material, the level of academic production in the field, and the availability of resources, one commonality was observed: contrary to recurring claims about the death or the crisis of labor history, the field has many young practitioners around the world who are interested in providing new answers to old questions. Overall, the institute signaled that labor historians have advanced beyond the old assumptions of the field such as limiting the object of labour history to factory workers, writing labour history within and with respect to national boundaries, neglecting gender and race questions at the expense of class analysis, etc. Like any other healthy field, there is no consensus among labour historians as to how to replace these old assumptions with new ones. Similarly, the question “What should labour history look like in the future?” has multiple answers. But there is agreement, at least among the 70 or so scholars that participated in this organization, that what we do is important, thus it needs to be constantly reflected upon and it has a double

impact: one on our objects of study, the labourers, and one on us as people who still have faith in hope. Due to this faith, a number of participants, including myself, are getting organized to take the “Transnational Labour, Transnational Methods” Summer Institute to ILO for making us work for 12 hours a day!

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