***Proposal for a Special Session on*** *‘Labour History as a field: where do we stand?’****, ESSHC 2016***

***Network:* Labour History**

***Organisers:* Marsha Siefert and Susan Zimmermann**

***Title:***

**Still the Darker Half of the Continent: Writing the History of Labour in Eastern Europe, 1945-2015**

***Session Chair:*** Marsha Siefert

*Description:*

Through the 1980s research into the history of labour, and labour movements in particular, thrived in Central Eastern Europe perhaps even more than in other parts of the world, with a corresponding rich and variegated historiographic tradition. In the 1990s, in the Eastern half of Europe, the end of state-socialism and global historiographic trends combined to produce a particularly strong back-lash against labour history as such. While the new millennium witnesses the rise of an innovative research culture on the history of labour under state-socialism, this research has remained quarantined from the booming new global labor history to a considerable degree. In the meantime, the history of labour in the pre-state-socialist period has not yet received much renewed attention.

In this panel we aim to take stock of the state of the art in the historiography of labour in the 19th and 20th centuries in the lesser known Eastern half of the European continent. Giving keen attention to historical detail and historiographic complexity each paper in this panel discusses selected clusters of the scholarly literature published on this subject since 1945. With a view to trigger debate on how concepts and findings of this research relate to, or can be used to critically interrogate, concepts used in the new global labor history, the five contributions to this panel explore three overarching, interrelated questions: How has the historiography of the past 70 years under review reflected on the role of (unequal) transnational development within and beyond Europe in shaping the history of labour in Central Eastern Europe? How has this historiography contributed, and how can its critical re-reading contribute, to shifting and challenging boundaries between normalized and marginal workers, labour relations and labour movements? What has been the impact of changing political and socio-economic circumstances on the interests and concepts, priorities and anxieties which have been driving the development of the history of labour in Central Eastern Europe?

In this way the papers not only extend and transcend geographical borders but also interrogate the assumed inclusiveness of the new global labour history, and add empirical depth, from a regionally grounded global perspective, to conceptual debates on the study of labor.

***Panelists and Papers (authors):***

Ulf Brunnbauer, Professor, Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (Regensburg, Germany)

**Fragmented pasts: the institutionalization and decentralization of labour history in socialist Yugoslavia**

Like other communist regimes, the Yugoslav one sought to build legitimacy also through history. Since universities and existing research institutes proved reluctant to write Marxist history, the communists began to establish institutes for the history of the working movement. From the 1950s, such institutes were established in all constituent republics but Macedonia, and in Belgrade there was also a federal Institute for the History of the Yugoslav Working Movement. While the first generation of historians at these institutes were more distinguished by their war-time partisan credentials than their methodological competences, over time these institutes developed into professional bodies of interesting historical research. Even though the level of ideology remained high, they did produce valuable histories of the working class and of social history more general. This constituted an innovation in the context of historiography in Yugoslavia. At the same time, the decentralized organization of these institutes, similar to the organization of history writing at large in Yugoslavia, facilitated approaches that concentrated on individual republics and their constitutive peoples, while overall Yugoslav or comparative approaches were rare. This was the institutional foundation for the emergence of distinctly nationalist approaches in the 1980s. These were also manifest in the renaming of the institutes in the late 1980s, early 1990s, which became Institutes for Contemporary History of a particular nation state. Hence, the development of the institutions once charged with writing the history of the working class mirrors, and even prefigured, the change from class to nation as the dominant political language. Citizenship became defined through national affiliation, and not through labour – and the vision of the past transformed accordingly.

Alexandra Ghit, PhD candidate, Central European University (Budapest, Hungary)

**‘Years of struggle’: A reading of Romanian state socialist historiography on women and gender as gendered ‘new labor history’**

What kind of work did women in Romania do during the "oppressive" interwar period? In writings on the 1918-1940 period -portrayed as ancien régime- historians working in state socialist Romania established a focus on women as workers. Due to factors shaping historiographical discourses, this consecration was done in a rather interesting manner. In my paper, I outline the main discourses through which the “working women” category was set-up between 1945 and 1989. I proceed by analyzing articles focused on the history of women and gender appearing in the two main historical journals published in Bucharest, *Studii de Istorie* [History Studies] and the transnationally-oriented *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*[Review of Eastern European Studies]. The sources will also include the sections on the interwar period from women’s history volumes or studies published in the same period in Romania.

I show that in this body of works, the interwar period is, somewhat unsurprisingly, described as one of women’s increased militancy within the social democratic or communist movements. On the other hand, the period is also described as one of worsening living conditions for proletarians, of successive crises of social reproduction. The intersection of these two narratives creates in this rather limited historiographical body the surprising effect of granting high visibility to reproductive labor. It thus implicitly broadens definitions of ‘work’. Furthermore, I argue that the trope of women’s political participation ‘alongside men’ or ‘under the leadership of the Romanian Workers Party’ can be read counter to its contemporary gender-struggle-harmonizing intentions, via the fairly recent concept of ‘affective labor’, defined as a kind of activity marked by self-regulation and accommodation to the needs of others.

Methodologically, in analyzing Romanian state socialist historiography on women and gender with a focus on both explicit and implicit conceptualizations of ‘work’, I am proposing a double-vision reading strategy for state socialist history studies: ‘along-‘ and ‘against the grain’. I suggest that through reading ‘along the grain’, with attention to intention and context in socialist knowledge production, current labor historians working on state socialisms can recover a body of writing on women’s history where ‘work’ was a principal organizing concept, thus accessing a form of gendered labor history, a genre presumed absent for Eastern European historiography.  In reading against the grain, the same practitioners can tease out themes of current interest for global labor historians, among which changes in the gendered division of labor in industrializing interwar Eastern Europe. In proposing an analytical grid attentive to ‘work’ as production and reproduction, the paper heeds Dorothy Sue Cobble’s call for fully integrating household and other forms of reproductive labor in the ‘new global labor history’.

Natalia Jarska, PhD, Institute of National Remembrance (Warsaw, Poland)

**Polish historiography of the ‘working class’: topics, concepts, arguments**

The paper aims at presenting and analyzing Polish historiography of the ‘working class’ written in 20th and 21st centuries. The analysis focuses on the conceptualization of ‘working class’ in the works of Polish historians, especially in the research carried out during the communist period (1945-1989). History of the workers was then written in the framework of economic and social history, and included topics such as the making of the “working class” (dated back from 18th century), labour relations, work conditions, everyday life and family life of industrial workers. The paper will also summarize briefly the most important achievements of this area of historical studies. Many of these works are of high scientific quality, and were written by some of the best Polish historians (for example, Witold Kula), in contrast to the history of labour movement, dominated by the Communist party historians and more dependent on political and ideological context. The paper includes also the analysis of post-1989 workers’ historiography – continuity and changes. In the end, I will try to answer the question: are these works still useful because of their methodological approaches?

Thomas Lindenberger, Professor, Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam (Member of the Leibniz Association) (Potsdam, Germany)

**True to Socialism, Stuck in Fordism: Reading East German Labor and Global Economic Relations, 1945-1989**

While the history of labor and industrial relations did not stand in the center of the overall settling of accounts with the communist past in unified Germany the swift opening of all relevant archival sources made sure that these themes established themselves as relevant topics on the research agenda about the history of the GDR. Profiting both from an advanced state of art of labour history in West Germany and a handful of original innovators in East Germany the GDR was explored and increasingly understood as an essentially ‘work-centered society’ governed by a panoptic ‘welfare dictatorship’. When it came to interpreting the multifold and heterogeneous findings one line of reasoning gained peculiar attractiveness, namely to read the East German ‘case’ as one variant of Fordist modernization in the middle of the 20th century. This opens up two perspectives of critical interrogation: International and transsystemic comparison with other labor regimes characterized as ‘Fordist’, and looking in particular at the ways in which the GDR as a rigidly planned national economy ‘missed’ the moment of necessary restructuring of advanced industrial societies to global economy relations from 1970s onwards, adaptations often referred to in the literature as a general transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism.

Meanwhile more recent research projects have shed new light on the GDR’s economic relations with globalizing capitalism during the last two decades of its existence. They seem to indicate its transformation into a supplier of cheap labor (of all levels of sophistication) for international, mostly West Germany based, enterprises. While this raises some ethical concerns in current ‘coming to terms with the past’ debates, since contracts with Western firms included work by prisoners (‘forced labor’?) and pharmaceutical testing (East German patients as ‘guinea pigs’?), not to speak of the coordinating omnipresence of the infamous secret service (*Stasi*) in any economic exchanges with the West, such phenomena will be discussed in my paper as a crisis-ridden national economy’s strategy to integrate itself into the emerging new order of a globalized political economy of production.

Susan Zimmermann, University Professor, Central European University (Budapest, Hungary)

**The social history of workers beyond the working class in industrial-agrarian Hungary**

This paper focuses on labour history as social history, looking at historicographical traditions and innovation as developed in Hungary since 1945. In particular I explore how key writings belonging to this body of literature, and discussing the period before 1944, ‘respond’ to two questions which are – or ought to be – at the core of present day global labor history:

1.) To which extent, and grounded in which conceptual considerations, does this body of literature deal with labor relations involving those strata of the working population who didn’t belong the core industrial classes, as constructed by traditional labor history? The literature on the worker-peasant, agricultural day labourers, etc., is of particular, but not exclusive, interest here.

2.) To which extent, and in which way, does this literature contextualize the narrative about life and labor of ‘workers beyond the working class’ as being informed by global and transnational developments, and as departing from the idealized patterns of the development of the working class in industrial core countries?

The paper demonstrates that the considerable interest under state-socialism in particular for workers beyond the (narrowly defined) working class was related to two factors: conceptual reflection on historical repercussions in the world of work in Hungary of uneven international development, and the – closely related – politics of the state-socialist state aimed at bringing about the ‘union of workers and peasants’. The paper discusses conceptual limitations of some of the post-1945-writings about ‘workers beyond the working class’ in the later decades of the 19th and the earlier decades of the 20th century. It argues that these limitations come to light in particular when reading the material against some of the – sometimes unacknowledged – present-day insights into the character of the global history of labor which have informed the new global labor history. In addition, the paper argues that some of the conceptual and historical-empirical tools developed in these scholarly works focusing on a ‘less developed’ European country can be useful tool when integrated into and adapted to the new global labour history.

***Discussant:*** Marsha Siefert, Associate Professor, Central European University (Budapest, Hungary)