

van der Linden, Marcel

*Trabalhadores do mundo: ensaios
para uma história global do trabalho*

Fernando Teixeira da Silva*

Campinas (SP): Ed. Unicamp, 2013. 520p.

In the Belgian Congo at the end of the nineteenth century, in his voyage into the heart of darkness of ‘modern man,’ Joseph Conrad found many Bacongós who had died from working on the building of King Leopoldo’s railway, as well as witnessing the flight of those who had refused to be recruited. In the middle of the twenty-first century in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a *New York Times* report found that 90% of miners worked in slave-like conditions to extract tungsten and tin used in electronic devices consumed in different parts of the globe. Lamentably, they are not an exception. Min Min, a pseudonym used to avoid retaliation, was recruited at 19 in her native land, Myanmar, to work on fishing boats in the neighboring Thailand, in the hope of finding better days, as her ‘agent’ promised her. Reaching the docks, he told her: “I am your owner.” Min Min found herself forced to work up to 20 hours per days, from Sunday to Sunday, without receiving any pay. When she tried to flee, she was captured and tortured with hooks. The good news is that after nine years of nightmares, Min Min managed to escape and return to her house. “I feel free,” she says (Potenza, 2014). Most of the around 30 million workers submitted to ‘contemporary slavery’ in more than 160 countries, according to a report on compulsory work in the current world, did not have the same fortune (Global Slavery Index, n.d., p.7).

It is well known that from the Congo of the time of Conrad to the fishing boats of Thailand of our days, ‘modern’ slavery thrived from the time of the Discoveries to the nineteenth century, before being prohibited in law. More than this, any work not considered ‘free’ is morally objectionable. Nevertheless, slavery remains present. It is like something different from what was arranged, but this impression is quickly undone when we perceive that the history of capitalism, since the expansion of the world market in the fourteenth century, has always been the history of compulsory labor, by physical and economic

* Department of History, Unicamp. ftdsilva@gmail.com

compulsion. This finding constitutes the essence of *Trabalhadores do mundo* (Workers of the World), a book which Marcel van der Linden originally published in English in 2008, and which has now been released in Portuguese by Unicamp Press.

Extraordinarily erudite, the director for various years of the prestigious International Institute of Social History (IISH) from Amsterdam, and fluent in various languages, van der Linden is well positioned to *propose* a 'global history of work,' a term which he says was coined by the IISH. Van der Linden soon warns that no new paradigm, historiographic school, or other Grand Theory, is being proposed. In precise terms, this history is an 'area of interest.' In first place is the interest in producing a transnational and transcontinental history, capable of breaching the comfortable historiographic barriers tied to the often naturalized frontiers of nation state. In an expanded context of historic processes, combinations and material and symbolic flows can be examined which cut across different geographic dimensions, while comparisons can be made to test hypotheses previously prepared within national frameworks.

Equally important is the interest in challenging reductionist definitions of the 'working class,' so much to the taste of the determinist and evolutionary perspectives of studies undertaken in the so-called North Atlantic, according to which peripheral countries accompany the 'stages' of development of the center of capitalism, where salaried workers predominated in a 'pure' state. Ingrained teleological thought believes that slavery, contract servitude, autonomous, domestic, child, and subsistence labor were residual forms of exploiting workers, not subordinated to the logic of capitalist mercantilization, and, therefore destined to disappear. If the field of vision is expanded to a global scale, it can be observed that all these forms of labor coexist and are often complementary. According to Para van der Linden, "the foundation common to all subordinate workers is the *coerced* mercantilization of their labor force" (p.41, original emphasis). It is therefore important to list the motives which led to the use of this or that form of exploitation of the labor force, or impede it. Slave labor is less efficient because "a person incapable of acquiring properties cannot have interests other than eating as much as possible and working as little as possible," as Adam Smith (p.75) pontificates. Questions such as these are what the author seeks to disentangle, not only from the point of view of economic calculations, but also based on legal, political, and moral considerations.

This summary covers the first and most instigating part of the book. After this, a little more than half the study is dedicated to analyzing the expressions of the collective action of 'subordinate workers' against the domination of

capital. In a real *tour de force*, with examples extracted above all from the vast secondary literature produced on five continents, van der Linden presents in the second part of the work, an extensive taxonomy of worker organizations (mutual aid societies and cooperatives), and in the third part forms of resistance, such as strikes and worker internationalism (trade unions are curiously part of this final section, perhaps reproducing theses which demarcated and hierarchized the frontiers between mutualism and trade unionism, although the limits between both are often fluid and badly defined). Through the indefatigable descriptions, the typological enthusiasm of the work orders, categorizes, and defines common phenomena, at the same time as it established similarities between them. In more two hundred pages specimens extracted from distinct times and places are categorized seeking regularities, tendencies, frequencies, and comparisons which question and control tempting generalizations. The reader can use this classificatory impulse in various ways, such as read the chapters separately, or in accordance with specific interests (as the author suggests in the Introduction), and using the information with an encyclopedic breadth as a reference for possible consultation.

The final part is an appeal to an interdisciplinary dialogue, in particular with economics, sociology, and anthropology. Specially notable is the chapter about world systems theory, inspired to a great extent by Immanuel Wallerstein and the reactions to his work. This theory argues that since the sixteenth century capitalism has expanded globally, configuring a system which is characterized “by a *single* international division of labor and *multiple* political territories (states) organized in an *interdependent* totality formed by a center of unequal exchanges in international trade, and by a semi-periphery economically situated halfway between the center and the periphery” (p.320, original emphasis). Van der Linden recognizes that the concept has limits, although it can contribute to the construction of a global history of labor, which leads back to the central questions of the first part of the book. Reexamined now are the various, and usually simultaneous, ‘modes of labor control,’ as well as strategies of resistance by subordinate classes to the extent that the capital-labor conflict is found at the center of the development of the world-system. Of special interest are Chapters 13 and 14, respectively dedicated to the study of interdependence between subsistence labor and the production of merchandise and the impact of the incorporation of an ethnicity from Papua-New Guinea in Oceania in capitalism and in particular with salaried labor.

The great contours which Marcel van der Linden offers to the configuration of a global history of labor reveals the great potential of this ‘area of interest,’ but

also invites reflection on its risks and challenges. *Trabalhadores do mundo* closes with an observation by E. P Thompson: “each historic event is unique. However, many events separated between vast distances of time and space, reveal, when placed in mutual relations, a regularity of processes” (cited on p.413). The assertion justifies much of what van der Linden develops during a large part of the book, though it also calls attention to the notion of process which a typological description can leave adrift. The juxtaposition of examples drawn from different times and spaces tends to sacrifice the actual historicity of the phenomena analyzed and the perception of historic change. Risks such as these are fortunately avoided in the suggestive chapter on ‘worker internationalism.’

Similarly to the fact that the expansion of the concept of working class needs to be at the core of any global history of labor, it seems fundamental to also expand what is understood by collective forms of worker action and organization. These are certainly not reduced to formal institutions. Celebrations, rituals, leisure, sport, and ‘small conflicts’ in workplaces are phenomena which can also be examined at a global scale, since they constitute cultural and political expression which at various moments are interconnected in the transnational sphere, which obviously van der Linden does not ignore, although he has chosen to deal, above all, with a better known and documented institutional universe.

How to ‘globalize’ the history of work without duly disregarding the characteristics of nation-states? To deal with this question, Leon Fink’s study of English and American sailors in the nineteenth and twentieth century is instructive. Perhaps there is no category of workers more ‘suitable’ for transnational studies than sailors, directly involved in the ‘world economy’ and exercising a leading role in the transport and the global market of merchandise. Sailing across seas and oceans, going to the various national territories, and working in a highly competitive industry which presented challenges to nations and empires wanting to regulate on an international scale its business and principally its labor relations. Regulatory efforts usually failed, and the workers remained for long period submitted to physical maltreatment and prevented from leaving their work, under the risk of being condemned for desertion, for which reason they were frequently compared to slaves. Fink monitored parliamentary debates, political disputes, legislation, collective clashes and the trade unions committed, amongst other aspects, to creating a more uniform world labor market and thereby equalizing wages and working conditions based on ethnic and racial divisions. To write a history of the fight for the regulation of sailors’ work in the ‘long duration’ on both sides of the Atlantic, the author needed to contextualize the ‘political culture’ of the two

countries in the various periods covered by the work, as well as the different political, institutional, and legal traditions of both nation-states (Fink, 2011). In summary, taxonomic descriptions can transform the specificities of national states into epiphenomena.

On the other hand, depending on the problem, the subject, and the approach, principally when the intention is to analyze long historic processes, such as the international regulation of work, what is lost is the ‘lived experience’ of workers. It therefore must be asked if the ‘nature’ of the global history of work, occupied with theories such as the ‘world system,’ emphasizes ‘structural’ aspects in detriment to history ‘seen from below.’ As van der Linden highlights, quite a few critics saw that theory as determinist, Eurocentric, closed, and averse to incorporating workers, while many who embraced it defended that the collective actions of the subordinated were interconnected on a planetary scale due to the international division of labor, giving workers the role of protagonists (Chapter 12).

We are facing a complex problem of ‘games of scale.’ Nevertheless, there are good examples which show the possibility of connecting the dimensions of what we can call ‘macro and micro,’ without falling into the false dichotomies still in vogue between ‘totalization’ and ‘fragmentation,’ ‘structure’ and ‘agency,’ ‘power’ and ‘resistance.’ More than once, historians of seamen can be invoked to help. According to Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s well known study (2008), the ships in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were both a space of domination, tyranny, insecurity, and monotony, and a means of production and a point of convergence of proletarian radicalism in the North Atlantic during the formation of capitalism. Shipwrecks, slaves, Irish servants, pirates, sailors, wage earners, *quilombolas*, Amerindians, and plebs of every order interconnected (to use an expression dear to van der Linden) and made circular experiences transcontinental. They led mutinies, revolts and revolutionary waves, as was the case of the São Domingos revolution, whose impact, for reasons which cannot be elucidated here, resulted in the ‘nationalization’ of groups which formed the Atlantic ‘multitude’ (“what resulted from that was national and partial: the *English* working class, the black *Haitians* and the *Irish* diaspora,” p.300). In this deservedly praised work, the scope of the concept of ‘working class’ is further expanded, transnational processes are historically contextualized, the periodization accompanies great changes in capitalism and the British maritime state – all without losing view of the perspective of those from ‘below.’

Finally, it is necessary to take into account that a global history, especially one that proposes to combat Eurocentrism, also requires the development of the internationalization of the history of work in all quadrants. On the one hand, much has already been done in relation to this, starting with the frequent international congresses to debate and publish research about the proposal, with Marcel van der Linden and IHS being one of the leading spirits. On the other, paraphrasing the sub-title of an influential text by Carlo Ginzburg, exchanges are unequal in the historiographic market. Not always do the protagonists of global history know what is being done everywhere. It is evident that they make efforts for this, but there are limitations of a budgetary type, such as those even imposed by nation-states in the North Atlantic after the 2008 crisis, which cut resorts for programs and institutions of 'central capitalism' and limited or even made unfeasible projects in partnership between North and South.

Nonetheless, what is most important is to keep in mind what, as van der Linden noted when he referred to the German language, there are 'illegible' languages. It would not be the case of claiming here nationalist pioneerisms nor listed as immodest the numerous research studies – diverse on a transnational scale – which expanded the concept of working class, breaking for example with the traditional narratives of the transition from slave to free labor in Brazil. I would also like to emphasize that the publication of the book in Portuguese is very opportune, not just because of its proposals, but equally because of the debate it could provoke, in such a way that can help Brazilian historians think about what was done and can still be done in the sense of a global history of work, even when it does not always have this label.

REFERENCES

- FINK, Leon. *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2011.
- GLOBAL SLAVERY INDEX. Walk Free Foundation, p.7. Available at: www.globalslaveryindex.org/report/; Accessed on: 22 April 2014.
- LINEBAUGH, Peter; REDIKER, Peter. *A hidra de muitas cabeças*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2008.
- POTENZA, Alessandra. "21st Century Slavery". *The New York Times*, Mar. 17, 2014 ("Upfront Magazine", vol. 146, no. 10, pp.8-11).

Review received on 23 April 2014. Approved on 19 May 2014.