

Workers of the World? A British Liberal-Pluralist Critique of Marcel van der Linden's Global Labour History*

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ABSTRACT: Marcel van der Linden has championed Global Labour History (GLH) as a solution to the decline of Labour History as an academic field. His 2008 *Workers of the World* (and other writing) strives to transcend methodological nationalism and provides a new global framework to study labour through the ages. This British liberal-pluralist critique argues that Van der Linden's version of GLH is essentially a re-packaging of Marxism that narrows the conceptual foundations of the field and overlooks both the full political crisis of state-socialism and its limited historical appeal to working people. The article concludes by defending a national approach centred on civil society institutions, as represented in the 2016 collection edited by P. Ackers and A.J. Reid, *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century*.

INTRODUCTION

Ultimately, labour historians ought to be studying all working people, across the whole world, and through the millennia.¹

Patriotism is usually stronger than class hatred, and always stronger than any kind of internationalism. Except for a brief moment in 1920 (the 'Hands off Russia' movement) the British working class have never thought or acted internationally.²

Global Labour History (GLH) is a central theme for the *International Review of Social History*. At one, very general level, this entails little more

* An early draft of this paper was presented to the European Social Science History Conference in Valencia, 30 March 2016.

1. Marcel van der Linden, "Global Labor History: Promising Challenges", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 84 (Fall 2013), pp. 218–225, 219.

2. George Orwell, "England Your England", in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London, 1957 [1940]), p. 73.

than a plea for a larger comparative historical window. However, Marcel van der Linden makes a much stronger, sharper and more controversial case. In “Labour History Beyond Borders”, he calls for a GLH that leaves behind the “Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism” of the older institutional and Social History approaches; while his 2008 magnum opus, *Workers of the World* elaborates a detailed conceptual framework for doing this.³ The theoretical ambition and wide influence of Van der Linden’s version of GLH is my justification for addressing only his work in this article, to the exclusion of several other important contributions.⁴ Any Labour Historian or social scientist will find much of interest in his wide-ranging synthesis, but my concern is that, ultimately, Van der Linden’s version of GLH will narrow our field of historical vision and return us, once again, to a failed Marxist historical and political project.

Van der Linden’s large, complex body of work can be boiled down to four propositions. To begin with, traditional Labour History is in crisis and decline, especially since the collapse of Communism in 1989 – though, surprisingly, this does not entail the exhaustion of the associated anti-capitalist project.⁵ Next, current trends towards globalization have exposed the limitations of post-war national labour histories – defined normatively by socialism or social democracy in one country – and demand a more global perspective on not just the present, but also the past. Furthermore, this calls for a broader definition of the working class that incorporates various non-free forms of labour found particularly in the developing world. And, finally – implicit yet holding all this together – that a modified and flexible form of Marxism holds the key to understanding the history of labour everywhere, at any time.

This article will assess these four claims from my own perspective as a non-Marxist, liberal-pluralist historian of twentieth-century British labour and industrial relations; a narrow platform compared to the temporal and spatial range of Van der Linden’s scholarship. This can be justified on

3. Van der Linden, “Labour History Beyond Borders”, in J. Allen *et al*, *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, (Pontypool, 2010), pp. 353–383, 354; and *idem*, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History*, (Leiden [etc.], 2008). See reviews by M. Atzeni, *Reviews in History* (2010), available at: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/908>; last accessed 5 April 2017; L. Fink, *H/SOZ/KULT* (2010), available at: http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/e_histlit/2010-3/HTML/GA_2010-3.php#12284; last accessed 5 April 2017; B. Palmer, *Labour/La Travail*, March 22 (2010); J. Schmidt, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 53 (2010), pp. 523–526; J. Woodcock, *International Socialism*, 133, (January 2012), available at: <http://isj.org.uk/working-class-theory-is-something-to-read/>; last accessed 5 April 2017; and R. Varela, *Sozial.Geschichte online*, 4 (2010), pp. 70–81, pdf available at: https://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate-25693/06_Varela_Workers.pdf; last accessed 5 April 2017.

4. See J. Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern [etc.], 2008).

5. See also Van der Linden and J. Lucassen, *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History* (Amsterdam, 1999).

three grounds. First, the published responses to his version of GLH have been dominated either by Marxists or specialists on the developing world. Second, Britain has been a centre for the development of Labour History, both as the first industrial society with the oldest trade unions; and as the home of many founding figures, such as the Webbs, G.D.H. Cole, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson. Third, on the Black Swan principle, if Van der Linden's approach to GLH does not work for these islands, it fails as a putative new universal model. At the end of this article, I suggest some alternative directions, based on the very different trajectory of my own work. This centres on certain national labour traditions that are in danger of being forgotten: a distinctive and long-lasting religious context; and a moderate liberal-pluralist temper that fostered strong trade unions and a dynamic associational life and civil society, yet ultimately failed to sustain social democratic industrial relations. Some of these elements are quite compatible with looser readings of the new GLH. Since serving a term as co-editor of *Labour History Review* (2001–2004), I, too, have been concerned about the future of the field, and have recently co-edited a new collection that seeks to redefine British Labour History for a new generation of historians.⁶ However, I see both the problem and solution in very different terms to Van der Linden.

WHAT IS THE CRISIS OF LABOUR HISTORY?

There is little doubt about the declining popularity of Labour History, particularly in Britain, an original heartland. The collapse of a state-socialist vision for the future, shared by Marxist and Fabian historians of old, raises the fundamental question: what is Labour History for? Thus, the Amsterdam International Institute of Social History has a legitimate institutional interest in discovering an attractive contemporary theme that will renew academic and public interest in its activities and archives. Of course, whatever the current historiographical fashions are – post-modernism, globalization – the past does not change. For instance, the importance of the “labour problem”, institutional industrial relations and trade unions in twentieth-century Britain are a matter of historical record. Nor should Labour History just chase presentist concerns, unless there are real doubts about the validity of past interpretations – as I believe there are. The true Labour History problem, in my view, is that the field has been so distorted by “committed” state-socialist historians that we need to scrape the ideology and teleology from the overall picture before we can begin to visualize the working classes as they really were.

6. P. Ackers and A.J. Reid (eds), *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2016).

Hence, the end of communism and that state-socialist dystopia should be seen, not as a problem, but as a great opportunity to regain some real historical perspective. My larger intellectual fear is that GLH will become an attempt by radicals to evade these harsh political realities and resume their search for Marx and Engels's 1948 "proletariat" in the developing world. In my view, they are chasing a chimera.⁷ Moreover, there is still plenty to do in correcting and reinvigorating our understanding of the European working classes. For, from the Webbs onwards, British Labour History has been distorted by something much stronger than normal historical bias. The "new" 1960s Labour History shaped by Edward Thompson's, 1963 *The Making of the English Working Class* saw the "old" version as too institutional and top-down, stimulating an emphasis on class struggle and history from below.⁸ Often, this is regarded as an unproblematic advance. Yet, in the Anglo-Saxon world, there was another "old" Labour History, written in Britain by liberal-pluralists such as Hugh Clegg, Asa Briggs, Henry Pelling and many others, which was lost in the New Left socialist revival.⁹ So that, "when the wall came down", most Labour History was much more dominated by Marxism than it had been before and ill-prepared for the destruction of its state-socialist *raison d'être*.

In this light, we should hardly be surprised by the academic and public loss of interest, at a time when other forms of history are booming. And why should we expect a broad range of people to be attracted to popular history if this is still framed in the old language of *Workers of the World*? In this new political context, I find it strange indeed that the future of the field lies in a reinvigoration of the Marxist intellectual project that led to its downfall. As I argue below, Van der Linden presents Labour History as virtually a sub-field of Marxist social science, as it has increasingly become at the pivotal *European Social Science History Conferences*. One effect of this, of course, is to drive out other liberal, conservative and religious perspectives on labour; something we tried to correct at the Glasgow 2012 Conference, the starting-point for our recent book.¹⁰ The first step towards a new, broader and more realistic Labour History is to disentangle the history of socialist ideas – a predominantly middle-class experience in most countries – from the history of the *working classes* (plural). As we shall

7. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Moscow, 1952 [1848]).

8. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963). See also Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London, 1894) and *idem*, *Industrial Democracy* (London, 1897).

9. While Van der Linden is well versed in British Labour History, he rarely mentions this distinctive British liberal-pluralist academic tradition. See Ackers and Reid, *Alternatives*, ch. 1; and A.J. Reid, *United We Stand: A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (London, 2005).

10. Ackers and Reid, *Alternatives*. This is not to criticize the Conference organizers, who were very encouraging towards our initiative, but to suggest that non-Marxists are self-selecting out of Labour History, to find fields more congenial to their views.

see, the ambition of Van der Linden's GLH is to hold them together and, apparently, to find new anti-capitalist subjects.

“THE WORKERS HAVE NO COUNTRY”: NATIONAL NIHILISM?

What does it mean to argue that “‘Society’ thereupon becomes a global entity”?¹¹ For much of the modern period, Britain was at the centre of a global empire, which made the national state a “semi-permeable membrane”,¹² reshaped by emigration and immigration. Yet, the majority were neither immigrants, nor emigrants and developed their identity as British citizens within the nation state. Moreover, active “Labour internationalism”, to which Van der Linden devotes an entire chapter, is a largely peripheral working-class experience, restricted to middle-class idealists and a small minority of working-class activists.¹³ British trade unions and industrial relations are a classic instance of stubborn path dependency, liberal democratic values, and the durability of national institutions – until Mrs Thatcher's neo-liberal revolution. Even our post-war National Health Service and nationalized industries were shaped by a distinctive national brand of state-socialism.

While major doubts about the efficacy of *the state* have developed since the rise of neo-liberalism and the collapse of communism, *the nation* – from India and China to Russia and Brazil – seems to be alive and kicking. Moreover, in the USA and many European countries, the gap between metropolitan middle-class internationalism and the working classes is growing. So, why this simplistic claim that society has become a global entity? One reason may be the global failure of the state-socialist project. Rather than face up to the damage caused by certain core political ideas and ambitions, the temptation is to simply reboot them on a larger canvas. Clearly, there are visions of socialism without an overbearing state, such as G.D.H. Cole's guild socialism, but a century and a half after the Communist Manifesto none have come to fruition. This makes them a dubious foundation for a future emancipatory politics or history.

Strangely, Van der Linden's GLH seems to have abandoned discussion of the state altogether, in a reversion to the world before 1917 or, perhaps, an attempt to reinvent grassroots radicalism as if the twentieth century had never happened. Indeed, his reconstruction of “the historical development

11. Van der Linden, “Globalizing Labour Historiography: The IISH Approach” (Amsterdam, 2002), p. 3.

12. I have borrowed this metaphor from another social science context: P. Edwards, “The Employment Relationship and the Field of Industrial Relations”, in P. Edwards (ed.), *Industrial Relations: Theory and Practice*, ch. 1. (Oxford, 2003 [2nd ed.]), p. 29.

13. Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, ch. 12.

of ‘proletarian internationalism’” is remarkable for both conflating radical socialist ideas and the mind of the European working classes and for its silence over the twentieth-century experience of actually-existing-socialism. Thus:

In the first half of the nineteenth century, some highly-skilled wage-earners in the North-Atlantic region gradually acquired a consciousness that they formed a separate class with its own historic mission [...].¹⁴

Much later, after the Cold War split between the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1949, we hear plenty about the latter’s alleged pro-colonial bias – by advocating moderate, pluralist industrial relations – but nothing about the fate of trade unions in the then ever-expanding state-socialist world. Yet, independent trade unions and indeed labour movements only continued to exist in liberal democracies and the free labour markets of the “capitalist” world. This is a remarkable lacuna given the Third World ambitions of GLH, since the USSR’s destruction of independent civil society institutions and transformation of trade unions into state/party transmission belts was copied all over Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. The problems of many of these societies today are incomprehensible without an assessment of these post-colonial, authoritarian state-socialist experiments.

But let us return to the British scene that I know best. “Even great innovators in the discipline, such as E.P. Thompson, thought mostly in terms of “national” working classes”, criticizes Van der Linden.¹⁵ As I have argued above, there is a cold historical case for this – empirically, the nation was central – but perhaps there is also a moral and political one too. Here, it is important to distinguish the attitudes of intellectuals towards *the global* and *the national* from those of ordinary working people, present or past – something brought home by the recent Brexit debate – and to look at what this means for the relationship between the writers of history and their subjects. Labour History is written by a community of middle-class academics, many of whom have always been attracted to a globalized vision of the future, including abstract ideals of world government and socialism.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

15. Van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (Fall 2012), p. 57. The scholarly response, in *idem*, 84 (Fall 2013), includes: F. Barchiesi, “How Far From Africa’s Shore? A Response to Marcel van der Linden’s Map for Global Labor History”, pp. 77–84; P. Winn, “Global Labor History: The Future of the Field?”, pp. 85–91; J. Kocka, “Reviving Labor History on a Global Scale: Some Comments to Marcel van der Linden”, pp. 92–98; D.S. Cobble, “The Promise and Peril of the New Global Labor History”, pp. 99–107; P. Parthasarathi, “Global Labor History: A Dialogue with Marcel van der Linden”, pp. 108–113; with Van der Linden “Global Labor History” commenting on the debate, pp. 218–225.

Ordinary people have been more attached to the local and the particular, and still are. Also, as Stefan Collini has shown, twentieth-century British left-wing intellectuals were internationalist in the 1930s and 1960s, but patriotic in the social democratic era following World War II.¹⁶ Writing at the end of the first period, George Orwell complained about “the severance from the common culture” of “so many of the English intelligentsia”.

They take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow. In the general patriotism of the country they form a sort of island of dissident thought. England is the only great country whose intellectuals are ashamed of their own nationality.¹⁷

In these terms, Thompson’s “methodological nationalism” merits a strong defence. He was a child of the popular front and the World War against Fascism, at the beginning of a period in which British communists reconnected with their own working classes, without ever becoming in any way central to them. In the sectarian times before, Rajani Palme-Dutt, often living in continental exile, personified and presided over an abstract, globalized Marxism-Leninism.¹⁸ In 1935, the Stalinist head of Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, described this approach as “national nihilism”; a telling phrase, whatever its provenance. The historian of British trade unions and industrial relations specialist, Hugh Clegg, was also of Thompson’s patriotic left-wing generation. Both enlisted in World War II and developed a strong, real human bond with “our people” in the ranks, such that it was natural to trace their history. Both had Methodist ministers as fathers and Clegg was the year above Thompson at Kingswood, the clergy school in Bath. A communist from 1935 to 1947, he became a revisionist social democrat, on the opposite side of the fence to Thompson and they crossed swords during the 1970 student protests at Warwick University, as heads of the new Industrial Relations and Social History centres.¹⁹ Yet, their intellectual formations shared much in common and their commitment was not to the theoretical proletariat discovered by Palme-Dutt in the pages of the *Capital*, but to real flesh-and-blood British working people.

Seen in this light, much 1960s New Left Marxism was a regression to the abstract idealism of Palme-Dutt, as intellectuals lost interest in or despaired of the prosaic reformism of the British working classes, in favour of more

16. S. Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford, 2006).

17. Orwell, “England Your England”, p. 85. See also R. Colls, *George Orwell, English Rebel* (Oxford, 2013).

18. J. Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt: A Study in British Stalinism* (London, 2010).

19. See P. Ackers, “Collective Bargaining as Industrial Democracy: Hugh Clegg and the Political Foundations of British Industrial Relations Pluralism”, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 45:1 (2007), pp. 77–101; *idem*, “More Methodism than Methodism: Hugh Clegg at Kingswood School, Bath (1932–39)”, *Socialist History*, 38 (2011), pp. 23–46; and E.P. Thompson, *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management and the Universities* (London, 1970).

glamorous, remote and brutal figures such as Mao, Castro, and Ho Chi Minh. It is tempting to regard GLH as another intellectual expression of a continuing wider alienation of progressive intellectuals from their domestic working classes. Thus, Owen Jones's leftist polemic, *Chavs*, observes this trend:

Across the whole of the left – and by that I mean social democracy, democratic socialism and even the remnants of revolutionary socialism – there has been a shift away from class politics towards identity politics over the last thirty years. [...] In the 1950s and 1960s, left-wing intellectuals who were both inspired and informed by a powerful labour movement wrote hundreds of books and articles on working-class issues. [...] Today progressive intellectuals are far more interested in issues of identity [...] One of the “safe havens” that the left has retreated into is international politics.²⁰

To be fair, Van der Linden's GLH is all about class and shares Jones's obsession with a proletariat that never goes away. Yet, Jones also recognizes that any plausible working class is first and foremost a *national reality*. Somehow, for some GLH exponents, the local, European working classes are not interesting enough anymore.

“THE WORLD WORKING CLASS”: STILL SEARCHING FOR MARX AND ENGEL'S PROLETARIAT?

Van der Linden's reconceptualization of “the working class” (always singular) as “subaltern workers”, through “the coerced commodification of their labor power”, combines a new flexibility about who can belong with a firm restatement of pretty orthodox Marxism. Accordingly:

what all members of this redefined working class have in common is their economic exploitation by employers and the commodification of their labor power. Therefore, they share a common class interest in transcending capitalism.²¹

To the non-Marxist observer, what stands out is not the conceptual innovation, but the familiar litany and still more the political eschatology. And even the revisionism really only makes sense for a debate internal to Marxism. What other perspective would want or need to lump all these different people together? As Schmidt asks:

What, for example, do the highly skilled, elitist European printers of the nineteenth century have in common with the day laborers in slums nowadays or with plantation workers (or even slaves) in the former colonies besides their ability to develop special forms of solidarity and strategies to survive in the production process?²²

20. O. Jones, *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class* (London, 2011), pp. 255–256.

21. Van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges”, pp. 66–67.

22. Schmidt, Review of *Workers of the World*, p. 526.

Marxism pervades Van der Linden's GLH theory from "the reconstruction of commodity chains" and "the possibilities for real international solidarity", to the unbalanced characterization of "people who execute repression and violence on behalf of the state, like policemen and soldiers" – ironically, as he acknowledges, often working class professions.²³ And for Van der Linden to say, in defence, "[o]bviously, I do not want to claim that all people whose labor is commodified spontaneously form 'one big united front against world capitalism'", is not to trespass beyond the political orthodoxy of Lenin or Gramsci.²⁴ Indeed, on Western Europe, he seems to accept the state-socialist view that "Labor, social democratic and communist parties are generally considered to be political representatives of the working class" – in my view, often a questionable assumption in sociological and electoral terms – while asking more interesting questions about the developing world, such as: "Is the growing influence of evangelical and Islamic currents in poor countries an expression of class formation?"²⁵ Of course, commodification "is always embedded in an historically formed culture".²⁶ All this is flexible Marxism, but Marxism no less.

Van der Linden's "subaltern working class" extends to all those who "possess no other means of livelihood than labor power".²⁷ On its own, this extension of the field of labour history to other categories of unfree labour is very welcome, not least because it integrates gender into mainstream class analysis. But these are not new social fragments but integral elements of one big working class. And while he is lowering the floor others have raised the ceiling. For Marxian industrial relations theory, the "employment relationship" creates an exploited class that includes almost everyone, from office cleaners to Hospital Consultants and salaried senior managers.²⁸ Van der Linden responds to Cobb, "It seems utterly metaphysical and arbitrary to deny the presence of class in productive relations".²⁹ But class analysis is not the real issue; rather, this is the use of Marxist class theory. Marxism needs a global proletariat, but Labour History does not. Even in a single country, the working classes should always be plural, and usually the demarcations are more interesting than the commonalities. "My broader

23. Van der Linden, "The Promise and Challenges", pp. 68, 65.

24. *Idem*, "Global Labor History", p. 221.

25. *Idem*, "The Promise and Challenges", p. 72.

26. *Idem*, "Global Labor History", p. 220.

27. *Idem*, "The Promise and Challenges", p. 75, Endnote 34.

28. Edwards, "The Employment Relationship"; P. Ackers, "Rethinking the Employment Relationship: A Neo-Pluralist Critique of British Industrial Relations Orthodoxy", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25:18 (2014), pp. 2608–2625; P. Edwards, *Were the 40 Years of "Radical Pluralism" a Waste of Time? A Response to Peter Ackers and Patrick McGovern*, Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations, 99 (June 2014).

29. Van der Linden, "Global Labour History", p. 221.

interpretation of the working class emphasizes heterogeneity”, argues Van der Linden.³⁰ Yet, this is contained within a shared experience of exploitation (which is truly metaphysical for the senior professions), searching for post-capitalist political resolution. And, as the recent British Brexit poll and the USA Presidential election remind us, while subaltern economic classes – in a complex, fractured sense – are always present in democratic politics, they rarely dance to the simple tune of anti-capitalism.³¹

If we are looking for generic ways to talk about class, which can be adapted to different local contexts, Weber’s economic class, status, and politics would be a much more politically neutral and ecumenical place to start.³² And Van der Linden’s broad economic category of class tells us little or nothing about real “worlds of labour”, as experienced by ordinary people. Richard Hoggart’s *A Local Habitation* recalls his personal experience of class relations in a poor area of interwar Leeds; an urban proletarian setting if one ever existed. But his people do not sound much like the Marxist transition from objective class location to subjective class consciousness. “We were, though poor, clearly very much of the respectable working class”. Aunt Ethel “was trapped in those shabby street among those ‘common’ people; and she hated it all” (in English vernacular “common” means vulgar or uncouth). The family were Primitive Methodists and Uncle Walter met Jean, “a very nice and proper, very much respectable working-class, chapel-going girl from a slightly better district”. But there was “the endless risk of being ‘dragged down’ by the district and the people around” – as Uncle Walter was by drink – or condescended by “those immediately above, the genteel-upper-respectable-working class”. Mother, a single parent on benefits, was determined that “we should not sound and be Leeds working-class”. And, “If she had ever been invited to consider socialism and its aspirations her immediate reaction would have been, I suspect, quite unbelieving”. “Fraternity” was indeed “the strongest single working-class principle”. But this was class as a complex series of social graduations, inclusions and exclusions, not as a bipolar economic category. “A miner, with a council house in a miners’ village, was near the bottom of the scale we recognised”. Hoggart himself was getting on and moving up, but:

Probably most families in our kind of district at that time tended just to go on going on, to be unpolitical or slightly suspicious of politics, perhaps to be deferential Conservative voters but certainly not active socialists even if they

30. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

31. B. Hoyle, “Angry working class turned out to help Trump seal the deal”, *The Times* (London), 10 November 2016, p. 6.

32. See P. Ackers, “Trade unions as professional associations”, in S. Johnstone and P. Ackers (eds), *Finding a Voice at Work: New Perspectives on Employment Relations* (Oxford, 2015).

voted Labour [...] Most people in our area were nationalists, monarchists, unprogrammatically and unpolitically.³³

WHY MARXISM, STILL?

Van der Linden declares: “Global labour history is not a theory to which everyone must adhere, but a field of attention”.³⁴ This might be true for other, looser interpretations of GLH, but *Workers of the World* is much more than a survey of either the historical field or even of relevant social science concepts. A familiar economic Marxist topography and rational-interest logic drives the entire book. “Conceptualizations” begins with the political economy of capitalist exploitation as the *economic base* for the formation of “the working class” or “the proletariat”, before it enters any real society, only to expand this beyond free wage labour to a wider range of subordinate groups. “Varieties of mutualism” is a welcome and balanced discussion of collective self-help within capitalism, including cooperatives. However, these strategies and institutions seem to lack forward dynamism, as if they are no more than a holding job before serious anti-capitalism begins. Moreover, beyond moving sideways between employers, the individual worker appears to lack agency; incapable of becoming an entrepreneur or of climbing up the employment hierarchy – as Hoggart and so many others have done. “Forms of resistance” analyses strikes, consumer protests, and trade unions effectively, but there are no “forms of co-operation”, as if the employment relationship is entirely adversarial always. “Insights from adjacent disciplines” merely adds two Marxian sub-fields, World Systems Theory and the “Bielefeld School” of development economics, before taking us, at last, to a representative of the wider, non-Marxist social sciences, ethnology. Here, we find “The latmul experience” from Papua New Guinea so much closer to Hoggart’s rich world of flesh-and-blood lives. “Outlook” drags us back to structural abstractions, with “Capitalism” and “Classes”, updated for globalization. On a long journey, we have not travelled very far from the master. Naturally, there are broader references throughout, but we are left in no doubt where the theoretical core is: this is Marxism-plus. So the chapter on trade unions starts with Richard Hyman’s early work and the chapter on world-systems theory ends with Ernest Mandel.³⁵

Thus, as I hope I have demonstrated, Van der Linden’s GLH is underpinned by a specific Marxist theory of class oppression and political

33. R. Hoggart, *A Local Habitation (Life and Times, Vol. 1: 1918–40)*, (Oxford, 1989), pp. 10, 18, 21, 26, 46, 47, 105, 129. Hoggart also wrote the classic, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, 1957).

34. Van der Linden, “Globalizing Labour Historiography”, p. 1. See also the webpage of the International Institute of Social History on “Global Labor History”, available at: <https://socialhistory.org/en/research/global-labour-history>; last accessed 2 February 2016.

35. Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*.

emancipation – though the latter element is less obvious in the analytical *Workers of the World*. This is a technical, not a polemical point. Elsewhere, I have argued that,

political Marxism moves through three logical steps: (1) a critique of capitalist social relations, (2) a political strategy for the overthrow of these and (3) an alternative Socialist system; whereas mere Marxians tend to eschew the second and third.³⁶

Overall, Van der Linden is close to full-scale Marxism, since he takes step (1), points most of his structures and concepts at (2) and seems to assume (3), as some benign post-capitalist resolution – a very questionable historical expectation in my view. Those revisionist steps he does take, such as expanding the range of the subaltern working class or redefining “proletarian internationalism”, are attempts to recover the classical Marxist project, not move beyond it.³⁷

So it is worth asking, what has Marxism got to do with the working classes? This despite the impression, given by many Labour Historians, that Marxism owns them. While the proletariat is very important to Marxists – hence their enthusiasm for and influence in Labour History – it is clear that Marxist ideas have played a very limited part in most working class lives (where they have had a choice). This is most easily demonstrated for the English-speaking world, as Hoggart testifies above, where the influence stretches from almost zero in the USA, to a minority of activists, themselves a small minority of working people in Britain.³⁸ And even the current academic defence that Marxism was bad politics but is good analytical social science seems to me a dubious one. First, the bad politics is still there potentially, since Van der Linden’s GLH has a strong anti-capitalist normative edge, albeit without any strong sense of what comes after. Moreover, there is a fundamentalist sense of a return to the language of the Communist Manifesto; and maybe a distant echo of the old, tired Trotskyist argument about the “Revolution Betrayed” by Stalin’s national road – as if that was the only problem with the state-socialist vision. And to aver, as Van der Linden does: “I regard the Soviet Union, the Chinese People’s Republic, and other ‘socialist’ societies as elements of capitalist civilization, broadly speaking”, is to simply dodge the central intellectual problem of why post-capitalist socialism becomes totalitarian.³⁹

36. Ackers, “Rethinking”, p. 2610.

37. Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, p. 259.

38. R. McKibbin, “Why Was There No Marxism in Great Britain?”, *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), pp. 287–333.

39. Van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges”, p. 74, endnote 20. *Idem*, *Workers of the World*, p. 316 criticizes Wallerstein for “implausibly including even the former Soviet Union as ‘capitalist’”. Presumably, Van der Linden regards the twentieth-century capitalist and colonial world as the dominant “civilization”, notwithstanding islands of socialism. But this is not how it

Purer Marxists have pointed out that GLH revisionism does not deliver the necessary transition from objective class to subjective class struggle and that expanding the proletariat class beyond “free labour” plays the devil with Marxist theory.⁴⁰ For me, the real problem is that Van der Linden is still operating within the framework of political Marxism and has not learnt the real lessons of 1989. And why are Weber, Durkheim and so many others such fleeting presences in his “conceptualizations”. In short, why are the social sciences so narrow that we are drawn back to this one, tired, old, dangerous theory?

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF LABOUR HISTORY

Prasannan Parthasarathi points to two flaws in Van der Linden’s reading of GLH: the lack of “a historical problem” to address and “the analytical limitations of the term capitalism”. I have explored the latter above, by identifying a recalibrated version of Marxism, which retains the original political economy and post-capitalist goals. As Parthasarathi observes, “Van der Linden also continues to believe that capitalism shapes worker politics”. His concern is that this framework does not travel far beyond twentieth-century Europe; mine that it never explained much there either. Parthasarathi’s first point is crucial to the future of Labour History as a field, since “global labor historians must pose new questions or provide new answers to longstanding problems”.⁴¹ In truth, Van der Linden still directs GLH research to the old Marxist *political problem* of how the global proletariat can unite to defeat capitalism. Parthasarathi suggests three interesting “alternatives to capitalism as an analytic framework”: (1) the “survival strategies of workers”, including family and household; (2) a new catholic approach to “worker politics” that “must take both the utterances and actions of workers seriously and not impose upon them a historical mission”; and (3) an assessment of how “State policies and actions” shape workers’ lives.⁴²

In places, the wider GLH does speak to some of these themes. Van der Linden and Lucassen’s original 1999 *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History* is less capitalist-obsessed than some subsequent versions. They engage more with my own liberal-pluralist Industrial Relations tradition – the Wisconsin School, Oxford Institutionalists and John Dunlop – centred on the limited, practical role of trade unions and collective bargaining

appeared at the time when Soviet socialism was an expanding “world system” extending well beyond Comecon, especially into the Third World.

40. See M. Atzeni’s review of *Workers of the World*, *Reviews in History* (2010), available at: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/908>; last accessed 5 April 2017.

41. Parthasarathi, “Global Labor History”, pp. 109–110.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

within a reformed capitalism. There is more on the family and community and they declare: “our unit of analysis is the workers’ household: workers simply cannot be understood as individuals”. They also stress “private” and “public strategies”, the role of “relatives” and “personal communities”, support through “patronage”, including employer paternalism and note that “social mobility has become the exclusive domain of sociology (and social history) and is totally neglected by labour history”.⁴³ Here, we witness them re-entering the real world of the Hoggarts. Elsewhere, Van der Linden recognizes that “mutualist organizations remained a ‘stepchild’ of traditional labor history – probably because of their unheroic character”.⁴⁴ All this is the raw material for a genuinely “new” Labour History.

Removed from a Marxist straightjacket these strategies become not weak, second-rate alternatives to fighting capitalism, but an end in themselves; or a means of building better lives and a richer society. My own biographical research has addressed similar questions, through individual lives, in a local and national framework. Through my great-grandad, W.T. Miller, I have explored how a small religious sect, the Churches of Christ, produced trade union leaders and how his mining trade union used national health and safety laws to build an occupational identity and regulate employment. But I have also seen how the same religious group and a craft union propelled my grandad, Harry Ackers, into industrial management and sustained his Conservative beliefs. My current study of Hugh Clegg, the industrial relations academic, centres on the tension between voluntary collective bargaining and post-war attempts to construct a British social democratic industrial relations order. All this is just one corner of the rich tapestry of British national and local Labour History, much of it still largely unexplored.⁴⁵

Yet, no Labour Historian can refuse to cross national borders. Thus, I have followed Miller’s temporary migration to the Nova Scotia coalfield, and have constantly compared Clegg’s social democratic hopes to those in northern Europe and his industrial relations theory to that across the Atlantic. Continental Eurocommunist ideas influenced the 1984–1985 British miners’ strike – and I have also observed the legacy of British

43. Van der Linden and Lucassen, *Prolegomena*, pp. 9, 13–16.

44. Van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges”, p. 71.

45. See P. Ackers, “Colliery Deputies in the British Coal Industry Before Nationalization”, *International Review of Social History*, 39:3 (1994); *idem*, “How My Grandad, the Churches of Christ and the Steam Engine Makers Society Lifted Our Family into the Professional Classes: An Essay in Social Science Biography”, in A. Wilkinson *et al.* (eds), *Perspectives on Contemporary Professional Work*, (London, 2016); and *idem*, “Game Changer: Hugh Clegg’s Role in Drafting the 1968 Donovan Report and Redefining the British Industrial Relations Policy-Problem”, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 35 (2014), pp. 63–88.

pluralist industrial relations ideas in post-colonial India.⁴⁶ Maybe Labour History will move further in this direction. Certainly, in recent years, the world has become more global and, in Western societies, national membranes have been more permeable – who could deny this? Consequently, in an already ethnically diverse society like Britain, future generations of historians may well be more interested in the cross-national connections that GLH champions.

This said, we should distinguish between globalization as an established socio-economic fact and globalization as a normative agenda beloved of intellectuals; and recognize that, to some extent, both trends may be cyclical. Besides, globalization does not justify GLH on Van der Linden's class terms. For, there is no return to the old mythical Marxist "class politics", either at the national or international level. Terms such as "the working class" and "the labour movement", which were in everyday usage in Britain until the 1980s, have become anachronistic in Europe's complex contemporary class structure. Labour Historians can no longer hope to recreate either E.P. Thompson's socialist or Hugh Clegg's social democratic relationship with a central labour movement. However, even in a more diverse society, in which "working class" has lost its original meaning, people remain interested in their humble origins, as endless genealogical TV programmes testify. Moreover, the history of "labour", in all its dimensions, matters for the national history narrative.

In some sense, the *International Review of Social History* is duty-bound to paint on the broader canvas of GLH, by extending its spatial and temporal range through cross-border experiences. My plea is twofold: to retain intellectual pluralism and dialogue by not buying into one structural political economy; and to hold onto a proper sense of the importance of national and local identity in ordinary people's lives, especially during the classical nineteenth- and twentieth-century era of Western Labour History. Whatever current or future social trends, British historians in particular, should never forget that most twentieth-century manual workers did not live in the global. National Labour History is neither an exhausted seam, nor a dull subject. Our new collection suggests a major historical rethink of how we view both the working classes and the ideas circling around the labour movement.⁴⁷ We challenge the state-socialist version as history, but also propose a new normative vision that will draw people to Labour History, perhaps drawing on the popularity of heritage, biography and family history. In place of that lost march to state-socialism, we find a new

46. See P. Ackers, "Gramsci at the Miners' Strike: Remembering the 1984–1985 Eurocommunist Alternative Industrial Relations Strategy", *Labor History*, 55:2 (May 2014), pp. 151–172. D. Bhattacharjee and P. Ackers (eds), "Special Edition: Employment Relations in India", *Industrial Relations Journal*, 41:2 (March 2010).

47. Ackers and Reid, *Alternatives*.

Labour History grounded in Western liberal democratic values and old Christian and social democratic traditions. A history that highlights civil society associational institutions and individual and collective self-help, as means of raising the status of labour; and debates the constructive role of the state in this process of acquiring citizenship. This is British Labour History, reframed, but I believe it is an approach that can cross borders.

TRANSLATED ABSTRACTS
FRENCH – GERMAN – SPANISH

Peter Ackers. *Travailleurs du monde? Une critique libérale et pluraliste au Royaume-Uni de l'histoire globale du travail de Marcel van den Linden.*

Marcel van der Linden a défendu l'histoire globale du travail (*Global Labour History* ou GLH) comme solution au déclin de l'histoire globale du travail en tant que champ d'études universitaires. Son *Workers of the World* de 2008 (et d'autres écrits) tentent de transcender le nationalisme méthodologique et fournit un nouveau cadre global pour étudier le travail à travers les âges. La présente critique libérale et pluraliste au Royaume-Uni soutient que la version de Van der Linden de la GLH est essentiellement une remise en forme du marxisme, restreignant les fondements conceptuels du champ d'études, et négligeant à la fois l'ensemble de la crise politique du socialisme étatique et son attrait historique limité pour les travailleurs. L'article conclut en défendant une approche nationale centrée sur les institutions de la société civile, représentée dans la collection de 2016 révisée par P. Ackers et A.J. Reid, *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century*.

Traduction: *Christine Plard*

Peter Ackers. *Arbeiter der Welt? Eine britische, liberal-pluralistische Kritik der globalen Arbeitsgeschichte Marcel van der Lindens.*

Marcel van der Linden hat die globale Arbeitsgeschichte als Gegenmittel zum Niedergang des akademischen Forschungsfelds Arbeitsgeschichte propagiert. In seinem 2008 erschienenen Buch *Workers of the World* ist er (wie auch in anderen Schriften) bestrebt, über den methodologischen Nationalismus hinauszugehen und einen neuen, globalen Rahmen für die Erforschung der Arbeit über verschiedene Zeitalter hinweg zu bieten. In dieser britischen, liberal-pluralistischen Kritik wird die These vertreten, dass es sich bei der globalen Arbeitsgeschichte Van der Lindens im Wesentlichen um einen Marxismus im neuen Gewand handelt, der die begrifflichen Grundlagen des Feldes verengt und sowohl die ausgewachsene politische Krise des Staatssozialismus als auch dessen begrenzte historische Attraktivität für arbeitende Menschen ignoriert. Der Beitrag schließt mit der Verteidigung eines auf die Nation zentrierten Ansatzes, der zivilgesellschaftliche Institutionen in den Mittelpunkt stellt, wie dies in dem 2016 erschienenen, von P. Ackers und A.J. Reid

herausgegebenen Sammelband *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century* geleistet worden ist.

Übersetzung: *Max Henninger*

Peter Ackers. ¿*Trabajadores del mundo? Una crítica liberal-pluralista británica a la Historia Global del Trabajo de Marcel van der Linden.*

Marcel van der Linden ha propuesto la Historia Global del Trabajo (HGT) como una solución al declive de la Historia del trabajo en tanto disciplina académica. Su obra de 2008 *Workers of the World* (entre otros de sus muchos trabajos) es un esfuerzo por trascender el nacionalismo metodológico y por proveer un nuevo marco global para el estudio del trabajo en el transcurso del tiempo. La crítica liberal-pluralista británica considera que la versión de Van der Linden respecto a la HGT es, esencialmente, una reelaboración de un marxismo que estrecha los fundamentos conceptuales del campo de estudio y pasa por alto tanto la crisis política total del socialismo de Estado como los limitados atractivos históricos para la clase trabajadora. El artículo concluye con una defensa de una aproximación nacional centrada en las instituciones de la sociedad civil, como la que se propone en la obra colectiva de 2016 coordinada por P. Ackers y A.J. Reid, *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century*.

Traducción: *Vicent Sanz Rozalén*