

Raquel Varela

‘Who is the Working Class?’ On *Workers of the World* by Marcel van der Linden

In his word of thanks upon receiving the René Kuczynski Award in September 2009 in Linz / Austria for his *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*,¹ Marcel van der Linden attributed the development of a global labour historiography to the prolific revival of studies on labour all over the world and specifically to the efforts of historians doing research on the Global South (Asia, Africa, Latin America). Maybe he was being overly modest when he insisted in the same speech that rather than being a theory, his proposal for a *global labour history* developed a *specialised field* with the central objective of opposing the nationalism and eurocentrism engrained in the historiography of labour. While global labour history is certainly open to different interpretations, we shall see that *Workers of the World* is much more than just a proposal for specialisation, as it offers a systematic contribution to historical research and calls for the development of an ambitious theoretical approach.

Some of the theoretical proposals defended in the book are relatively uncontroversial nowadays, namely those that criticise a vision of history rooted in national frontiers and eurocentrism. The author challenges the notion that the nation state is the only feasible unit of analysis available to historical research and suggests a transnational and supranational vision. He also criticises the eurocentric approach, i.e. the notion that the world is strictly divided between ‘the West and the rest’. Yet van der Linden goes further by

¹ Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2008.

claiming that this critique lays the foundation for a global labour history, a work to which he has dedicated himself as research director of the International Institute of Social History (IISH). Even though much remains to be done, it is no exaggeration to say that the work of labour historians of the global South has never before had such strong reverberations in the academic world of the developed countries. This is largely a result of the work done by Marcel van der Linden and the IISH researchers.

Workers of the World has the explicit aim of facilitating the development of a global labour history. It is likewise a work that aims to contribute to the debate on how the working class ought to be defined from a historical point of view. Van der Linden starts by applying a Marxist critique to Marx’s work. He also acknowledges influences from other fields of thought, dedicating special attention to Wallerstein’s world systems theory in Chapters Thirteen to Fifteen. While not fully subscribing to this theory himself,² van der Linden nevertheless maintains that it contributed to the development of a transnational labour history. He further mentions the Bielefeld school, which developed in West Germany and emphasises the importance of subsistence labour; according to van der Linden, this approach is especially relevant to the study of female labour and the history of labour in peripheral countries. Finally, van der Linden assesses the contribution of ethnological studies. Taking as an example the experience of the Iatmul people (Papua New Guinea), he discusses their gradual integration into capitalism and the concomitant development of wage labour among this people during the 20th century.³

By way of introduction, two more things should be pointed out. Firstly, the book is written in clean prose and its structure reflects the clarity of the underlying ideas. As such, *Workers of the World* runs contrary to the traditions of a more conservative academic

² See the interesting discussion starting out from Ernest Mandel’s theory of capitalist development: *ibid.*, pp. 316 f.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

sector and to theoreticians close to post-modernist theory (of which van der Linden is an outspoken critic). *Workers of the World* is a manual in the best Anglo-Saxon tradition. (Van der Linden himself is of Dutch origin.) Secondly, *Workers of the World* is based on an extensive bibliography which brings together some of the world's best works on the history of labour. Despite van der Linden's lament that he does not know the languages of the Global South well enough, *Workers of the World* makes extensive use of empirical examples from all over the world: from the French women's cooperatives formed in World War One⁴ to the well-known *Quilombo dos Palmares* and the less talked about exodus of slaves in early 20th century Niger,⁵ from the rural protests in 19th century Europe⁶ to the collective desertion of Assam Valley tea plantation workers in 1921,⁷ to cite only a few examples.

Conceptualisations: Between Free Labour and Slavery

Workers of the World is divided into four parts. The first part, 'Conceptualizations', is divided into three chapters: 'Who are the workers?', 'Why 'free' wage labour?' and 'Why chattel slavery?'. These three chapters are the ones most prone to generate controversies. The author presents what he defines as "a constructive critique of Marx's definition of the working class", explaining that "in spite of several weaknesses, [Marx's] analysis is still the best we have."⁸ Van der Linden starts from Marx's statement in *Capital* that the only genuinely capitalist way for labour power to be commodified is through free wage labour, such that workers have only their labour power to sell and nothing else.⁹ Van der Linden challenges the notion that the only 'real' capitalist working class is the one that fits

⁴ Ibid., p. 161.

⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

⁷ Ibid., p. 177.

⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

⁹ Ibid.

this definition.¹⁰ He considers the definition highly restrictive, given that (1) there are various examples of workers who do not own their labour power (he cites the case of slaves who work as wage labourers and hand their wages, or at least a substantial part of them, to their owners, a common condition in, for example, 19th century Argentina) and (2) there are workers who own commodities other than their labour power (e.g. workers who own a small garden or workshop, or workers who own tools, yet work in a factory). Van der Linden also challenges the notion of ‘free’ labour, arguing that forms of physical and financial compulsion are exerted on workers, as in the case of the textile workers in 1930s Japan who were imprisoned in a dormitory.¹¹ Van der Linden also cites company-managed insurance, which renders workers more dependent on their employers.¹²

Van der Linden lists a number of what he considers “intermediate forms” between wage labour, slavery and self-employment.¹³ He also argues that the *lumpenproletariat* may frequently be hard to distinguish from the rest of the working class (as when workers pilfer part of the product to take it home).¹⁴ Throughout *Workers of the World*, ample reference is made to female labour and particularly to the role of domestic work. It is also one of the conclusions of *Workers of the World*, which begins by defining the working class in terms of labour’s *commodification*, that we should break with the classic scheme ‘labour – wages – consumer goods’. Van der Linden advocates, for example, that female labour – i.e. unremunerated labour – is essential to the reproduction of the proletariat; he also cites other forms of unremunerated labour, workers who work for more than one employer and subcontracting.

Van der Linden’s main conclusion is that the boundary between free labour and other forms of value production proper to the cap-

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹² Ibid., p. 25.

¹³ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁴ Ibid.

italist mode of production is tenuous: “[T]here is a large class of people within capitalist society, whose labour power is commodified in many *different* ways. That is why I refer to the class as a whole as the *subaltern workers*.”¹⁵ Differently from that of the ‘free’ wage labourer, the concept of the ‘subaltern worker’ is intended to include self-employment, share-cropping, indentured labour and chattel slavery. Van der Linden defines it as follows: “Every carrier of labour power whose labour power is sold (or hired out) to another person under economic (or non-economic) compulsion belongs to the class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether the carrier of labour power is him- or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him- or herself owns means of production.”¹⁶ Such workers are generally subject to the *coercive* commodification of their labour power.¹⁷ Thus the historical scope of the analysis is broadened. It is no longer sufficient to simply consider the relationship between subaltern workers and their labour power, the means of production and the product of their labour; the relationship between subaltern workers and other members of the labour force and the relationship between subaltern workers and their employers as they play out beyond the immediate labour process also need to be taken into account. In the third and fourth chapter, van der Linden explores the two outermost poles of the complex of labour relations he has identified: free wage labour and slave labour.¹⁸

The concept of the ‘subaltern worker’ is presented in order to complement Marx’s approach, not in order to refute it. To an extent, it may remind historians that even today there exists a mystified perception of the working class. Historically and geographically, the labour force has never been composed exclusively of men working as free wage labourers. However, there are some risks as-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–78.

sociated with van der Linden’s model, some of which he seems to be aware of: in his conclusion, he writes of the development of a broad concept of the working class that “by far the largest part of the work has yet to be done.”¹⁹ In what follows, I raise some issues that seem to me to require further debate.

‘Subaltern Workers’ and Social Conflicts

Marx developed a model of how to understand and transform society. Two points need to be made about this. First, a model is a model; as such it is invariably subject to perturbations. I believe that Marx showed he was aware of how limited the ‘freedom’ of workers is when he scorned the value of the legal *equality* attributed to the contract between the capitalist and the worker: “As long as the wage-labourer remains a wage-labourer, his lot is dependent upon capital.”²⁰ Marx lived in a time when laws against vagabonds were enacted that amounted to a form of compulsory labour. It also seems to me that Marx’s definition of the free wage labourer addresses a *tendency*; while the tendency may be subject to counter-tendencies or perturbations, this does not render the model doubtful. Marx’s analysis has been confirmed in that ‘free’ wage labour has effectively become predominant, as van der Linden recognises.²¹ Discussing the reasons for the abolition of slavery, van der Linden mentions productivity, the need to create an internal market and what he terms the “moral factor”.²² Van der Linden appears to suggest that combining categories such as free labour and chattel slavery within a single concept is especially useful to the study of labour during capitalism’s formative period (which differed from country to country) because it allows labour historians to examine conflicts, protests and even strikes (abandonment of the place of pro-

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 360.

²⁰ Karl Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital*, Whitefish MT: Kessinger, 2004, p. 15.

²¹ Van der Linden, *Workers of the World* (as cited in note 1), pp. 63–78.

²² Ibid., pp. 56–59.

duction) as they played out between slaves and masters. Labour history is thus taken beyond the mere description of social stratifications in the period of chattel slavery. The second point to be made about the model Marx developed to analyse and transform society concerns the role of politics, or the subjective factors in history. Marx did not limit himself to interpreting the world. His concept of the working class did not just address a historical tendency that has been verified by the facts; it was also motivated by a transformative intention. Marx's concept was not simply a historico-analytical one based on the law of value; it also contained a political and subjective analysis of reality. Van der Linden underscores that he “follow[s] those authors who give the *value form*, and not class contradictions, [the] central place in their analysis of capitalism.”²³ However, while labour is commodified in various forms, it is not clear that these forms are equally relevant politically: a strike by domestic workers does not have the same impact as one that paralyses the transport sector, and the capitalist system can stomach strikes in peripheral countries much longer than strikes in the capitalist centres. The position workers occupy within the accumulation process has political consequences. When van der Linden writes that free wage labour became important throughout Europe during the high Middle Ages but remained the exception globally,²⁴ one need not necessarily conclude that all forms of labour are equally important but can just as well draw the opposite conclusion, namely that there were and are regions of the world (the capitalist centres) with more economic and political clout than others. One of the strengths of a transnational vision of global labour history resides precisely in its emphasis on the inequality of different regions of the world. While never explicitly formulated by van der Linden, it seems to me that one of the central questions raised by *Workers of the World* is whether Marx actually “opted for value theory”.

²³ Ibid., p. 39, n. 1 (emphasis in original).

²⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

There is no room for discussing the controversy over this question here, but it seems clear that *Workers of the World* represents a weighty contribution to the debate. Van der Linden takes a critical stance vis-à-vis ‘end of work’ rhetoric; it would be highly rewarding to continue the debate on the basis of his hypotheses and findings.

Forms of Resistance

Workers of the World’s broad concept of the subaltern worker allows for analysis of various forms of collective action. Such analysis can be found in the second and third sections of the book, titled ‘Varieties of Mutualism’ and ‘Forms of Resistance’. These two sections comprise a total of eight chapters devoted to the discussion of worker organisation and collective action.

The section ‘Varieties of Mutualism’ contains four chapters devoted to the various forms assumed by mutualism. The first chapter, ‘The Mutualist Universe’, provides indispensable definitions; it is followed by the chapters ‘Mutual Insurance’, ‘Consumer Cooperatives’ and ‘Producer Cooperatives’. While pointing out that mutualism is not specific to the working class, van der Linden demonstrates that mutualist insurance and consumer and producer cooperatives are key elements of the organisation and the struggles of the proletariat. They represent forms of solidarity by which workers address such basic problems as organising funerals and supporting workers’ widows. Van der Linden analyses the evolution of mutualism, its characteristics, its limits within the capitalist system and the different forms it has assumed in various parts of the world (Europe, India, Mexico, Japan, etc.). Special attention is devoted to the relationship between mutual insurance and the state in Bismarck’s Germany, 19th century England and the Soviet Union. Van der Linden also discusses the relationship between trade unions and mutual savings banks (unions have sometimes used such savings banks to recruit members); specifically, he examines the case of the Indonesian rail-

workers' trade union, which set up a fund to support railworkers' widows in 1916. The author concludes this part of the book with some remarks on the limits of consumer cooperatives as a labour strategy. There is a tendency for such cooperatives to either be co-opted by the state or by companies or to be marginalised. Yet van der Linden also reminds us of historical examples showing that mutualism can help maintain a democratic culture and a solid social and political base. This was the case in countries where revolutionary syndicalism was strong (Italy, Spain and France), where the degeneration of cooperatives could be avoided.²⁵

'Forms of Resistance', the third part of the book, is divided into four chapters: 'Strikes', 'Consumer Protest', 'Unions' and 'Labour Internationalism'. In the chapter 'Strikes', van der Linden points out that while trade unions cannot survive without engaging in strikes or threatening to do so, strike movements may also develop in the absence of trade unions.²⁶ Several examples are cited. The largest single premeditated strike on record was organised without the participation of trade unions; this was the 1982–83 strike of 240,000 textile workers in Mumbai. Other examples include the 1877 labour insurrection in the USA and the Kenyan general strike of 1947. The chapter goes on to list methods employed by workers to impair production (lowering productivity, engaging in sabotage, providing free access to products, as in the case of bus drivers refusing to charge for tickets). Next, van der Linden focuses on the question of how strikes ought to be defined; he discusses their causes and the demands typically formulated by striking workers. He concludes by discussing strike results, which he sees as determined by a range of factors: the workers' strategic position, the employer's market position, the nature of the clients and suppliers, the position of the strikers on the labour market, the relationship between striking workers and other companies operating in the same branch of industry, the relationship between strikers and the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

general public, the morale of the strikers, their relationship with third parties (e.g. the Church), their relation with the authorities, the employer’s financial status, the relationship between the employer and other employers, the existence of forms of subsistence workers can fall back on while on strike, leadership, etc.²⁷

It may be worth adding to these factors the position of the striking workers’ country within the international state system. Brazil is currently experiencing month-long strikes in public education; such strikes have very different consequences when they take place in a central country such as Germany or France. It may also be useful to establish a hierarchy of the factors listed by van der Linden, as their impact on the outcome of strikes clearly varies. For instance, the bourgeoisie seems historically to have attributed special importance to the role of strike leaders, recognising that their elimination may nip strikes in the bud; witness the number of such leaders who have been imprisoned or assassinated.

In the chapter ‘Consumer Protest’, van der Linden analyses forms of protest related to consumption. The chapter discusses consumer boycotts, unilateral adjustment of prices and quantities, food riots, squatter movements, the boycotting of public transport fees and organised looting of food, which became a “national phenomenon” in the USA during the 1930s.²⁸

The two final chapters of the third section, ‘Unions’ and ‘Labour Internationalism’, focus most strongly on issues of worker organisation. In the chapter on unions, van der Linden discusses the origins of trade unionism and its relationship to strikes. He suggests a three-tier typology of unions. Some exist solely to organise strikes (revolutionary syndicalist trade unions), some also exercise other functions (craft associations and trade unions that opt for negotiations) and some never organise strikes or do so only very rarely (‘yellow’ trade unions). Van der Linden argues that in order to function, trade unions must dominate a sector of the la-

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 199–206.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 216.

bour market. Such dominance depends on a variety of factors, including the union's capacity to organise and the given economic relations, especially those concerning trade unions' finances.²⁹ Van der Linden also discusses the issues of collective bargaining, centralisation, bureaucratisation and internal opposition. The chapter concludes with some remarks on wildcat strikes and on the phenomenon of 'breakaway unions', which, as van der Linden argues, may contribute to "reversing the trend at certain critical moments in industrial relations."³⁰

In the chapter on 'Labour Internationalism', van der Linden considers the economic and political factors that foster, impede or indeed eliminate internationalism. Van der Linden surveys the long history of labour internationalism, dividing it into four stages: (1) the pre-1848 period, during which "the labour movement defines itself";³¹ (2) the period between 1848 and 1870, which van der Linden characterises as that of "sub-national internationalism";³² (3) the transitional period between 1879 and 1890 and (4) the period between 1890 and 1960, which the author describes as that of "national internationalism": during this last period, internationalism was essentially understood as a form of international cooperation associated with national trade unions that had constituted themselves in the Atlantic North by the end of the 19th century. The chapter ends on an optimistic note, with van der Linden arguing that a new phase of internationalism has begun, initiated by 1960s decolonisation and marked by the collapse of the USSR. Van der Linden defines this most recent phase as that of "transnational internationalism". He argues that if it is to endure, this internationalism will have to confront the changes undergone by the working class during the past

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 234 f.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266. Van der Linden cites as "one of the first written expressions of labour internationalism" the 1836 statement by William Lovett's 'London Working Men's Association' endorsing the constitution of a workers' federation for Belgium, Holland and the Rhine Province (*ibid.*, p. 268).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

decades; more specifically, he argues that the new internationalism will have to operate with a broader, less eurocentric and less male-dominated notion of the working class. It will also depend, in van der Linden’s view, on the existence of trade unions that are both less autocratic than those of the past and less concerned to rub shoulders with governments, concentrating instead on the organisation of strikes, boycotts and the like.³³

The merits of *Workers of the World* are undisputed. The book can be used as a manual that presents definitions and concepts indispensable to the social sciences while narrating both classic and less well-known instances of worker organisation and struggle culled from a range of historical periods and both hemispheres. *Workers of the World* also counteracts tendencies to mystify today’s working class. (Doesn’t the informalisation of labour in the southern hemisphere help us understand informalisation in the northern hemisphere?) The empirical data compiled in *Workers of the World* can help us refute the view that transformations undergone by labour during the past decades have brought about the ‘end of work’. Van der Linden’s book is also valuable for tackling the difficult task of reconceptualising the working class – a task that deserves to be undertaken, independently of whether or not we agree with the author. Last but not least, *Workers of the World* shares with Marcel van der Linden’s other work the indubitable merit of constituting a rigorous effort to develop a global labour history.

Translated by Lars Stubbe and Max Henninger

³³ Ibid., p. 282.