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Editorial

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Editorial

Xavier VIGNA & Michelle ZANCARINI-FOURNEL

On 24 April 2013, in a suburb of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, 1,127 workers of both sexes died when the Rana Plaza garment factory collapsed. Over 1,000 further workers were injured (many had limbs amputated). This tragic event, which was by no means inevitable, tells us that these garment workers, who were extremely badly paid (between 28 and 53 euros a month on average in 2012) were employed in appalling conditions at the risk of their lives. And yet the employers' spokesman from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association was brazen enough to declare in public that the death of the workers was less important than "the interruption to production caused by disturbances and strikes". The wage-earners of the Rana Plaza factory were the victims not only of firms sub-contracting for huge multinational companies, but also more generally of the means of production, marketing and consumption characteristic of globalization in the twenty-first century.¹ In this case however, there is a degree of complexity behind the problem. Kalpona Akhter, a former child worker from the age of twelve in the garment industry, who was sacked for her union membership and now runs the Centre for Worker Solidarity in Bangladesh, argues that despite the very low wages, working in a textile factory enables women to escape from patriarchal authority, and is thus a source of empowerment, giving them a degree of autonomy.² This example indicates, should anyone doubt it, that we have to venture outside the French or French-speaking context, if we

¹ Prashad 2013: 22.

² *Libération*, 25 May 2013, p. 4.

are to have a sense of the diversity of conditions in the world of industrial work, and prompts us to interrogate this history by considering different timescales and levels.

Labour history: a new lease of life?

After a period in the wilderness, labour and working-class history appears to have regained legitimacy in the French social sciences: two special issues of sociological journals were devoted to it in 2013,³ and the present volume is our contribution. Like all our issues, this number of *Clio FGH* has been in preparation for some time, and the original intention was to survey new developments in historical studies of working men and women during the fifteen years since the third number of *Clio* (1996) entitled “Métiers, corporations, syndicalismes” [Trades, guilds and unions]. The change of heading – from organizational structures to individuals – is significant. Until the late 1980s, the principal question being discussed within labour historiography was class formation, a topic revolutionized by studies of the nineteenth century, in books which have become classics (by E.P. Thompson, Michelle Perrot, Yves Lequin) and prolonged into the twentieth by Gérard Noiriel. Among English-language historians, research was thereafter stimulated by the debates surrounding the linguistic turn,⁴ while on both sides of the Atlantic, many studies of working people appeared, taking the form, among others, of monographs devoted to particular firms, industries, cities, or industrial areas. We intend therefore to extend the move away from the history of class formation and labour organizations, and towards that of groups and individuals caught up in the many varieties of domination and subordination. In this context, a gendered approach enables us to restore the complexity of social configurations and types of action. A further original feature of this collection of articles lies in its special attention to the use and representations of workers’ bodies.

³ “Tenir au travail”, special number of *Travail, genre et sociétés*, 29, 2013; “Usine, ouvriers, militants, intellectuels”, special number of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 196-197, 2013/1-2.

⁴ Berlanstein 1993; Sewell 1980; Kessler-Harris 1990.

The revival of labour history deserves recognition and welcome, since this field of study pioneered a historical approach aiming to rescue working men and women, their work, practices, beliefs, hopes and struggles, from “the enormous condescension of posterity”, as E.P. Thompson put it.⁵ That is why historians writing about women, in particular Michelle Perrot and Joan Scott – but also those who have worked on subaltern studies like Dipesh Chakrabarty⁶ – did their early research in this area. In a related field, one where the dynamic of gender was not initially taken into account, historians of the transition from slavery to wage labour have in recent times insisted on the importance of gender in this revolutionary change in the organization of work.⁷ Labour studies were and are indeed full of promise, through the light they can shed on certain dominated segments of social formations, but also because of the historiographical rethinking they have prompted.

This renewal of interest also allows us to dispel some confusion, fostered by the undeniable de-industrialization which for almost forty years has been taking place in Western Europe. That confusion lies in linking the numerical decline of the working class with its disintegration, for while the numbers of industrial workers of both sexes have fallen, that by no means signifies that the working class has disappeared from all branches of activity, in particular in the service sector and in publicly-owned enterprises,⁸ (difficult though the definition and borderlines of the category “working-class” may now be). We might point out too that certain countries undergoing rapid industrialization may also experience local closures and/or sectorial crises: examples include the Indian textile centre of Kanpur, once considered the Manchester of eastern India,⁹ a clothing factory in the central Mexico,¹⁰ or the traditional heavy industry region in

⁵ Thompson 1968 [1963]: 13. [The French translation of this book has recently been re-issued by Points-Seuil, with a preface by François Jarrige, 2013].

⁶ Chakrabarty 1989.

⁷ Holt 2000; Scully & Paton 2005; Glymph 2008.

⁸ Thibault 2013.

⁹ Joshi 2005.

¹⁰ Plankey-Videla 2012.

north-east China, where ironworkers, faced with unpaid wages or unemployment, have mobilized and in some cases rebelled.¹¹

On the other hand, the disintegration of the *western* working class has undoubtedly had an impact on the kind of questions historians ask. That is why, rather than specifically tackling the large, often all-male, occupational groups, from miners to dockers, printers or metal workers – the likeliest groups to make up the big battalions of the labour movement, and traditionally seen as icons of masculinity – this number of *Clio* devotes considerable space to some very contemporary phenomena, and/or to practices often disowned by the labour movement, such as hazing/ragging (*le bizutage*) or machine-breaking. Similarly, trade unions will not be analysed as such, even if in the interests of a globalized history it would no doubt have been useful to reconsider their role, as is suggested by the torture and death in April 2012 of one of the leading organizers of the Bangladeshi Centre for Worker Solidarity.¹² Nor have we moved far beyond Nayan Shah's approach in *Clio HFS*, back in 1996, to the interplay between class, gender and race:¹³ his analysis of the conflict between the US trade unions and Chinese immigrants seen as a threat to white unionized workers, brought together the ideas of racial danger, gendered roles, and the consumption practices of white women.¹⁴

Viewing labour history through the prism of gender

The French edition of this issue is entitled “*Ouvrières, ouvriers*”, [literally *Women workers, men workers*: the French term often carries the connotation of industrial or factory work]. This indicates our intention of giving gender a central place in labour history, which has not always been sensitive to it. Our original priority was to make visible the invisible, in particular women factory workers: in the first place by estimating their actual numbers – no easy matter either for

¹¹ Lee 2007: 15-37.

¹² Prashad 2013: 22.

¹³ The use of the term “race” has been the subject of an ongoing debate in the social sciences in France. See the journal *Mots*, 33, “Sans distinction de race”, 1992.

¹⁴ Shah 1996.

Latin America (Mirta Zaida Lobato) or for Western Europe;¹⁵ and also by examining their image on film (Nicolas Hatzfeld). We have further included another invisible group, the very contemporary case of Bulgarian refugees of both sexes, who have been obliged to take manual work [in France] in order to survive their move into an exile marked by suffering, although such suffering is differently experienced by men and women (Albena Tcholakova). Our dossier further includes studies of the work process itself and representations of it, with some examples from pre-industrial periods: there are articles on women weavers in Champagne in the twelfth century (Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet) and on Turin in the early modern period (Béatrice Zucca Micheletto). Secondly, we have chosen to examine how historical discourse is modified by a gendered approach. François Jarrige examines the famous episode of machine-breaking which disrupted the process of industrialization from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, showing that women played a notable part in this episode, something which had not been sufficiently brought out by even the best British historians of the working class. Laure Machu considers the process of classifying trades, skills and occupations, through a study of the discourse of trade unionists, employers and government representatives in France, from the Popular Front to the Liberation. When embarking on such studies, the question of sources is a particularly difficult one: few sources survive to tell us about the decision-making processes underlying the definitions and classifications of skill, apart from those which simply reproduce, for example, a male discourse categorizing women machine-breakers and rioters as deviants, “impulsive, irrational, uncontrolled people, naturally inclined to violence” (François Jarrige). As evidence of the male gaze, the sources themselves display a wealth of prejudices and stereotypes. First-person oral testimony from workers of both sexes in Scottish paper-making in the early twentieth-century (collected by Ian MacDougall and presented here by Siân Reynolds) is therefore precious, even if it must be subjected to the same critical analysis as written sources.

¹⁵ See the article on *Current Research* in this number of *Clio*.

Lastly, the approach through gender makes it possible to revisit the history of masculinities and to draw attention to the crisis in working-class virility. The history of masculinities – which are not necessarily always in crisis, in fact – allows us to reconsider practices either confined to a minority or disapproved of: such as machine-breaking and “ragging” or “hazing” (Xavier Vigna). The latter – the practice of subjecting new entrants to various forms of pain or humiliation – may sometimes take on a very explicitly sexual dimension, and has no doubt helped to reinforce the frequent representations of working-class masculinity as linked to virility.¹⁶ In the late 1970s, the entire factory world underwent a major transformation in this respect, as a number of processes both combined with and reinforced each other. The decline of the trade-union movement, in Europe at least, prompts us to explore the crisis of working-class virility of which it considered itself the standard-bearer. In the Italian example (Andrea Sangiovanni) men’s “natural” virtues – strength, courage, leadership, honour, aggression – were exalted, as if the only qualities which could resist and give meaning to existence were those that defined the working man as an alpha male.

New perspectives

Three contributions to this issue pose original questions about the relationship between work and the body. Despite the scarcity of sources relating to Ancient Greece, Violaine Sebillotte-Cuchet questions the connections between women wool-workers and sex-workers, slavery, and the exploitation of women’s bodies, in the Kerameika district of Athens in the fourth century BCE. The contributions by Fanny Gallot and Andrea Sangiovanni analyse ways in which the work they were doing constructed and modified representations of the bodies of male and female workers in the 1970s: in one case, through a study of the product – women’s lingerie (Gallot) – in the other, through the concern for appearances and consumerist practices (Sangiovanni).

¹⁶ Pigenet 2002.

It was also our intention that this issue would open up the dated limitations of a Franco-centric history, and we have therefore chosen articles forming concentric circles radiating outwards through Europe towards the rest of the world, edging towards a kind of global social history:¹⁷ firstly, because some developments challenge national specificities and invite re-evaluations; secondly, because major changes affecting labour history are today operating on an international scale. Similarly, the gendered history of migration and diasporas makes it possible to connect global history and world social history, ideally leading to a *global labour history*,¹⁸ which is still very much work-in-progress, with the appearance of some recent conspicuous manifestoes.¹⁹ So the very contemporary comparison between France and Bulgaria describes the Bulgarian refugees in France who have been obliged to take manual jobs, but also considers migrants to Bulgaria. Among the latter are the young black men, for whom racial stereotypes represent both an advantage – in finding work in advertising – and a source of undervaluing oneself (Albena Tcholakova). Jamie Monson, in her analysis of the memoirs of retired workers from the Tanzania-Zambia railway completed in 1976, opens a window on to a global history in which Chinese experts offered African labourers a “fraternal” example of “work well-done” by Maoist standards, and thus took part in the construction of the “new man” during the building of East African socialism.

Exploring even further-flung territories geographically, several books included in the reviews section of this number of *Clio* [available only in the French edition] describe very young Chinese women being forced to migrate to find jobs, obliged to sleep in dormitories alongside the factory, and working long hours at starvation wages – so their

¹⁷ Pomeranz 2007: 69-98.

¹⁸ NB : The English terms World or Global Labour History pose a problem in French, since *travail* denotes both “work” and “labour”. The French term more usually found is “histoire ouvrière”.

¹⁹ Cf. No 241 of *Le Mouvement social*: “Travail et mondialisations” edited by Marcel Van der Linden, December 2012, and the special number of *Workers of the World*, edited by Christian De Vito: “Global Labour History” 2013, on line at the following address (consulted 3 September 2013):

<http://workersoftheworldjournalnet/images/WW%203%20final.pdf>

situation can readily be compared with that of young female factory workers in late nineteenth-century Europe. Nevertheless, these girls were by the same token escaping the patriarchal domination typical of their native villages, and were able to develop the ability to act and adapt to different contexts. Nicolas Hatzfeld cites another case in the Far East, that of the Vietnamese woman director of the film *Rêves d'ouvrières* [*Working Women's Dreams*]. Armed with a light movie camera, she proposed to interview a worker in a dormitory in Hanoi: the response was that she should put the camera down and come and sit beside the worker so that “she could talk to her like a sister” – indicating the new relations shaped by this situation, and the dimension of sisterhood which was stressed by the film director. Alongside the Bangladeshi case cited above, such examples make visible the way in which, in the early years of the millennium, a new factory context is appearing in Asia, one that is strongly characterized by the gendered organization of work.

The analysis of labour history in Latin America (in Mirta Zaida Lobato's survey of current research) reveals – with a chronological time-lag in the industrialization process, linked to the lateness of internal colonization – a number of points in common with many European countries: the difficulty of estimating the number of women workers, spatial segregation and wage disparity between men and women, the mutually reinforcing of values of subordination and complementarity, the tensions between virtue and work. Another subject that emerges is the existence of strict moral codes which may be accepted or rejected: it would be worth re-examining one phenomenon that could be found not only in the French textile industry of the nineteenth century, marked by Catholicism, and in the secular municipal socialism of the 1930s, but also in the Peronist state in Argentina after the Second World War – the celebration of “Queens of Labour” – *Reines du travail*. We could also take another look at the slogan “equal pay for equal work”, which may have different meanings depending on who articulates the demand, men or women, and in what context. If one takes the standpoint of

“intersectionality” as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw,²⁰ (although the term itself may be challenged, as it was recently by Danièle Kergoat)²¹, gendered labour history still has plenty of sites to open up, and older questions to revisit. This number of *Clio* aims to be part of that adventure.

Note: this issue also contains an article on the major American historian, Gerda Lerner (1920-2013). The next number will carry an article on our colleague Rita Thalman, who also died in 2013.

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²⁰ Crenshaw 1991-1992: 1242-1243: “I should say at the outset that intersectionality, is not being offered here as some new totalizing theory of identity. Nor do I mean to suggest that violence against women of color can be explained only through the specific frameworks of race and gender considered here. Indeed, factors I only address only in part or not at all, such as class and sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of color. My focus on the interseptions of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed”; cf. Bilge 2009.

²¹ The French edition contains a review of Danièle Kergoat’s book *Se battre disenthées...* Paris: La Dispute. 2012.

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