Forced and coerced labour: comparing colonial spaces and global conflicts. Brussels, 19 March 2015. Preparatory Discussion Document

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Preliminary Remark about Definition and Concept

The International Labour Organization defined coercive labour in 1930 as "every kind of work or service demanded of a person under threat of punishment and which is not entered into freely". However, besides a legal category, forced and coerced labour is also a political construct as well as a social and cultural reality. As such, in its many different incarnations, it is highly dependant on specific temporal and geographical contexts: both in the way it was set up and organized, as well as how it was experienced by all those involved. We are not primarily concerned about reaching strict definitions and clear-cut distinctions; rather we accept that the many ambivalent incarnations of forced and coerced labour and the 'grey areas' are exactly what interests us and as such are at the heart of the debate. Therefore, a broad outline can suffice, in the sense that we obviously exclude slavery as understood in the 18th century practice where human beings were no longer considered as individuals and any kind of consent was irrelevant. Objects of economical exchanges, puncturing for many decades the human potential of sub-Saharan regions, they were at a certain stage key elements in the development of a global economy with new paths and networks for manpower collection.

When dealing with forced and coerced labour however the situation is much more ambivalent and complex and we should avoid to simply consider it as a 'modern' and more advanced form of older slave labour systems. In many cases, there are forms of wage compensation. Sometimes, the element of free will and consent is explicitly present with a contract signed with a thumbprint, a cross or a signature. This includes foreign workers hired to build railroads (Coolies in Uganda) and local workers settled in private concessions (fruit cutters in oil palm concessions, lumberjacks).

Forced labour also became a widespread continental phenomena during both World Wars. The latter became the paradigmatic instances of 'Total Wars' of attrition whose military outcomes largely depended on the efficient national mobilization of economic resources and exploitation of available labour forces, male or female. While imperial Germany during the First World War introduced massive schemes for forced labour – partially deported to Germany – France and Great-Britain did not need forced labour in the strict sense because they could depend and displaced labour from their colonial empires. Fascist and Communist regimes later turned forced and coerced labour into a political instrument for oppression and warfare, first towards their own (minority) population groups and later in occupied or annexed territories during the Second World War. Under occupation in WWI and WWII, recruitment programmes for voluntary labour could gradually become more repressive and at a certain point changed into forced labour. Prisoners of War or political prisoners proved a huge new recruitment pool for forced labour, already during WWI. Genocidal strategies were pre-empted by forced labour schemes, or could partially overlap in certain stages. In such contexts, elements of social exclusion, violent repression and forced deportations puncture any illusion of consent.

In principle, therefore, we would like to consider all forms of modern labour organization in which the balance between the use of force and coercion by the producers and arbiters of the employment side (private enterprises, state organisations, police and other forces or public order…) on the one hand, and the state of dependency by workers/labourers on the other hand becomes problematic and/or morphs into something new in contexts of war or colonial rule.

Aims and questions

The main aim of this workshop is to connect bodies of research and literature that are often still separated, and to investigate the practical frameworks in which such a connection might be made. This might include, for example, coerced labour during the interwar years as the outcome of interconnectedness between social configurations in colonial territories and new wage labour organisations in Europe. But it also includes from below approaches and the cultural history of experiences (of forced/coerced labourers).

One of the main overarching questions also is: to which extents is comparing legitimate, relevant, necessary or even useful? Through this initiative we seem to legitimate the existence of a framework for this type of comparative approach or at the least suggest that the search for parallels or interconnected phenomena and events is useful. However, questioning the legitimacy of actively constructing these connections can remain an underlying topic of discussion. Conceptual and methodological differences can hinder the comparative or multi-disciplinary exchange, this is why at the very least the workshop integrates attention to sources and adds reflection on their use in the discussion. Which foundations or frameworks are we comparing, is connecting the global to the local a useful approach, how should we tackle the longer-term temporal evolutions?

Some concrete focal points for the presentations and discussions might be:

- The recruitment procedures and the level of 'voluntarism' The working conditions, wages, freedom of movement, hygiene/health care, housing, mortality rates, type of contract/labour agreement, time from home/level of 'deportation'/displacement…
- The individual experiences and the way they were documented? How fundamentally different were experiences and do legal nuances in the statute of work changes everything?
- The type of work: continuity (exploitation of resources by local populations without severe disruption of existing social order) or discontinuity (deportation, social disruption, labourers used for other tasks than they are trained for). Level of technicality of the labour tasks and/or required skills: does the labourer benefit in terms of training/education, social mobility? 'Educational' work, indentured work etc.: elements of debt-dependancy by workers to the employer or state authorities.
- What was the economic rational behind the forced or coerced labour programme?
- The level of 'displacement'; were deportations used, were labourers displaced to replace local human resources that were occupied elsewhere (drafted/mobilized) or were not considered skilled or otherwise usable
- The timeframe: how long (permanent?) was a forced/coerced labour programme (specific short term goals? indefinite timeframe?) and what happened afterwards with the labourers
- What were the extra-economical factors: prisoners of war, ethnic suppression, crime prevention, social mobility and empowerment, political re-education…?
- Repression, violence, genocidal mechanisms, ideological frameworks of racial supremacy; What types of repression were used; what type of social groups were singled out; was there an overlap of the labour programme with violent repression of opposition, of ethnic/religious/political minorities; was there a paradox between ethnic killing/cleansing of able bodied men/women and the need for (skilled) labourers and how was the contradiction dealt with?

- Was there an overlap with convict labour? Were there conscious mechanisms of exclusion (criminalizing certain behaviour such as 'nomadism' for example) followed by implementation of labour programmes?
- Decision making process, argumentation, internal opposition, legitimation: did a forced labour programme lead to internal dissident voices, opposition, protest and if so: did it influence the actual implementation in any way.

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