

## Big Questions and Big Data: A Reply from the Collaboratory

KARIN HOFMEESTER

*International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam  
PO Box 2169, 1000 CD Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

E-mail: kho@iisg.nl

CHRISTINE MOLL-MURATA

*Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Fakultät für Ostasienwissenschaften  
Universitätsstr. 150, 44780 Bochum, Germany*

E-mail: Christine.Moll-Murata@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

---

**ABSTRACT:** In our reply to Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk’s “Big Questions and Big Data: The Role of Labour and Labour Relations in Recent Global Economic History”, we focus on her observations on the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations. We endorse many of her suggestions to connect global labour and economic history and to regard labour relations not only as a dependent variable. In fact, as the examples from various Collab workshops and publications show, some of these ideas are already being put into practice. These examples also show that if we seriously want to combine global labour and economic history data and join the debate on the growth (or decrease) in social inequality, workers’ individual and collective agency must be taken on board. Finally, we argue that global labour and economic historians can benefit most from each other’s disciplines by truly working together in collaborative projects, developing new theories, perhaps less grand than those with which economic historians attract so much attention, but more profound.

---

Sometimes, good ideas are in the air. In her article “Big Questions and Big Data: The Role of Labour and Labour Relations in Recent Global Economic History”, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk argues in favour of a closer connection between global labour history and economic history. This is an admirable proposition, as is her suggestion to combine insights and data from global labour history, more specifically from the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations (hereafter, Collab), with insights and data collected by economic historians, to learn from each other, and to spur global labour historians to address important issues, such as social inequality. These ideas are attractive, though not completely new. In various Collab

publications its organizers have stressed the importance of combining data on labour relations with data on the remuneration of work – including the standard of living and wages – as well as data on migration, health, and human capital to address the question of how shifts in labour relations relate to the emergence of, or increase or decrease in, social inequality.<sup>1</sup> Leo Lucassen discusses the connection between labour relations and social inequality as well as labour and the Great Divergence debate extensively in an article cited by Van Nederveen Meerkerk. Lucassen advocates combining data on labour relations with data on labour productivity, wages, skills, and the nature of the labour contract as well as the quality of labour to better understand labour as an independent variable in the grand economic theories and debates.<sup>2</sup> This (semi) simultaneousness of ideas is no coincidence, of course: paralleling societal and academic interest in debates on social inequality and unequal economic growth, large datasets on both labour relations and global inequality have recently become available; now is the time to start combining them.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, we will discuss Van Nederveen Meerkerk's ideas about this connection between global labour and economic history in more detail. In doing so, we will focus primarily on the Collab part of her argument and less so on the Global Labour History programme of the International Institute of Social History (IISH) as a whole, since she discusses that only very partially. We will start with some information on the Collab, to explain its aims, scope, and activities. The first phase of the project (2007–2012) focused on developing a taxonomy of labour relations and data collecting. During the second phase (2013–2018), data collecting has been continuing, but the focus is on explaining shifts in labour relations by looking at various explanatory factors, such as the state, economic institutions, and family and demography, as well as on mechanisms of shifts into and out of self-employment. We do this at workshops with colleagues from all over the world.<sup>4</sup> Van Nederveen Meerkerk regards as “inward looking” the initial research question posed by the Collab – “How can we explain shifts in labour relations?” – and its analyses of the topic. This judgement seems rather misplaced for a project that spans

1. Karin Hofmeester, Jan Lucassen, and Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, “No Global Labor History Without Africa: Reciprocal Comparison and Beyond”, introduction to the special section “Labor History in Africa” of *History in Africa*, 41 (2014), pp. 249–276, 256; Karin Hofmeester, Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen, Rombert Stapel and Richard Zijdeman, “The Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations, 1500–2000: Background, Set-Up, Taxonomy and Applications” (October 2015), available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10622/4OGRAD>, last accessed 5 January 2017.

2. Leo Lucassen, “Working Together: New Directions in Global Labour History”, *Journal of Global History*, 11:1 (2016), pp. 66–87, 72–83.

3. For the labour relations datasets see <https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse/labourrelations>, last accessed 5 January 2017; for the indicators of global inequality and economic growth see <https://www.clio-infra.eu/>, last accessed 5 January 2017.

4. For an overview of all workshops see <https://collab.iish.nl/web/labourrelations/about>, last accessed 5 January 2017.

five centuries and six continents. The line of argument is clear, yet it requires some refutation. Though Van Nederveen Meerkerk mentions the publications arising from the second series of workshops, we would like to shed some light on the discussions scholars from various disciplines have had during the workshops so far, to show how connections between global labour history and other disciplines, including economic history, are already being made. Also, these discussions look at labour and labour relations not only as something that has to be explained, but also as an explanatory variable. They focus not on definitions of labour relations – as one of her objections to the Collab seems to be – but on the concepts, approaches, and theories relevant within the various disciplines represented in the workshops. Before we turn to these theoretical approaches, we must stress another crucial point.

Discussions about basic assumptions – in this case, the taxonomy and the considerations it is based on – are part and parcel of doing research. If we start to find they are “hampering” us, we have a serious problem pursuing our academic research. To be useful and applicable over five centuries and six continents, the taxonomy has to be discussed, especially when continents or countries are added to the Collab – such as Africa or China – whose labour relations might, at first sight, vary considerably from those already included. New members of the Collab must look afresh at labour and labour relations in order to grapple with the way the Collab perceives these: the project looks at all kinds of labour; in line with the definition of Charles and Chris Tilly, we presume that “work includes any human effort adding use value to goods and services”.<sup>5</sup> The Collab takes the whole population into account, including women and children, as well as the question for whom people work – the household, the community, the polity, or the market – and the type of exchange – reciprocal, tributary, commodified. It acknowledges that, for many people in the world, a combination of various types of work and labour relations was and is a daily reality, rather than an exceptional situation. The global approach of the project and its taxonomy also requires an open mind among Collab members. They have to take the specificities of labour relations of continents and countries newly added to the project into consideration and see what insights from these areas tell us about our definitions of labour relations. This is what doing global labour history is all about. Reciprocal comparisons, to borrow the term Kenneth Pomeranz coined and Gareth Austin convincingly applied to African economic history, is a very helpful methodological tool.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, whoever compares the first taxonomy drafted in 2007 with the one we work with now would see real changes in

5. Charles Tilly and Chris Tilly, *Work under Capitalism* (Boulder, CO, 1998), p. 22.

6. Gareth Austin, “Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling Conceptual Eurocentrism in the Study of Africa’s Economic Past”, *African Studies Review*, 50:3 (2007), pp. 1–28, 10.

how we categorize the work done by household members both under reciprocal and commodified labour relations.

It is precisely in the categorization of labour relations of all household members that Van Nederveen Meerkerk's contribution to the various discussions on the taxonomy – which she joined from the very beginning – lies, and where she praises the Collab. Implicitly, she acknowledges this by stating that “mapping and modelling the variety of labour relations by gauging the degree to which individual household members were actually involved, with an eye to the fact that there were often simultaneously multiple labour relations, and shifts over the life course” is what global labour history can bring to economic history. This is exactly what the Collab does. During discussions with economic historians, for example with Leigh Shaw Taylor at the European Social Science History Conference in Valencia in 2016, the Collab's emphasis on including non-wage labour is often praised: for a very long time, wage labour was not the major labour relation for the largest part of the world population. The data gathered so far by the Collab (for 1800 the project has data on forty-six per cent of the total world population; for 1900 on thirty-five per cent) reveal that in 1800 some fifteen per cent of the world population covered worked in commodified labour relations, only six per cent worked for wages. In 1900, thirty-six per cent of the world population covered worked in commodified labour relations, wage workers formed some ten per cent.<sup>7</sup> Taking all other types of labour relations into account is a sensible thing to do when looking at incomes and social position. This is what economic historians can learn from labour historians, but the learning process is reciprocal of course. This goes not only for economic historians, but also for demographic historians, sociologists, and scholars from other disciplines.

The various theoretical approaches discussed during the workshops in the second phase of the project and the publications based on them make clear that even though, in its current phase, the Collab focuses on explaining shifts in labour relations in their own right, various contributions demonstrate that these shifts have an impact on the state, economic institutions, and changes in demography and family, and as such also on societal and economic development. To give just a few examples: during the first workshop on the influence of the state on labour relations, we discussed Charles Tilly's capital and coercion model to see how the state as conqueror, arbiter, and employer used either (or both) option(s) to obtain the labour it needed. The Special Issue of this journal based on that workshop contains an article by Fernando Mendiola on the role of unfree labour in the capitalist development of Spain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

7. For an interactive tool that presents Collab data as tree maps, see <https://socialhistory.org/en/projects/labourrelations/treemap>, last accessed 5 January 2017.

In this contribution, he not only looks at the legal framework of forced labour during four different political contexts (colonial Empire; civil war and fascist dictatorship; decolonization; and parliamentary democracy), he also discusses how the development of unfree labour led to capital accumulation in three of the four political contexts.<sup>8</sup>

Since it is crucial to take into consideration the various forms of labour performed by different members of the household when measuring household income and social inequality, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Jan Kok organized a workshop on changes in demography and family patterns and their influence of labour relations. One of the ideas tested during that workshop was that the first and second demographic transitions would lead to increased commodification of labour. Steve Ruggles showed that, at least for Europe and North America, the causality worked the other way round: endogenous demand for labour led to shifts in labour relations, and these had consequences for demographic developments.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, we organized a workshop on the role of economic institutions, one of the theoretical approaches Van Nederveen Meerkerk suggests as a framework for closer connections between global labour history and global economic history. That workshop, which looked more specifically at colonial economic institutions and their influence on labour relations, yielded remarkable results. The work by Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson on extractive and inclusive institutions, as well as the work by Jeffrey Williamson, was extensively discussed during the workshop and in the papers presented. One outcome of these discussions is that the New Institutional Economics approach can be usefully applied only if we take the dynamics of these institutions into account and start making serious in-depth regional comparisons of the various colonial contexts, including the availability and allocation of labour. Moreover, various contributions to the volume based on this workshop describe instances where labour relations affected economic institutions and economic development in a very specific way: through the agency of the workers involved. Rossana Barragán convincingly proves that the *mita* in the Bolivian silver mines was not the static extractive institution par excellence as Acemoglu and others

8. Fernando Mendiola, "The Role of Unfree Labour in Capitalist Development: Spain and its Empire, Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries", *International Review of Social History*, 61: S124 (2016), pp.187–211, 206–211.

9. In this hypothesis, the population growth in the first stage of the First Demographic Transition would lead to increased pressure on land, which could lead to a shift from reciprocal to commodified labour, i.e. from self-subsistence agriculture to wage labour. The Second Demographic Transition, which took place in the 1960s, leading to changes in sexual and reproductive behaviour in Western Europe and North America, would have changed attitudes towards married women working for wages; however, by that time, forty-one per cent of married women in North America were already working. See Steve Ruggles, "Demographic Transition, Marriage Patterns, and Labor Force Change", paper presented at the workshop "The Impact of Family and Demography on Labour Relations Worldwide", held at the IISH on 12–13 December 2014.

present it, but a constantly changing set of rules. She also shows that workers at some point claimed their “traditional” mining rights and started exploiting and manufacturing the minerals as self-employed producers, thereby changing the colonial government and the structure of the labour force.<sup>10</sup> In his article on the cotton industry in Malawi, Elias Mandala makes evident how British economic institutions failed to stimulate cotton production because Africans resisted the wage labour that was expected from them, leading to a failure of capitalist cotton-based agriculture.<sup>11</sup> William Clarence-Smith, in his contribution, argues that the protests of labour unions in the British metropolis stimulated the establishment of protective institutions (tariffs, import restrictions) that eventually led to the disappearance of various export-processing industries in the Global South.<sup>12</sup> In her own contribution to this volume, Van Nederveen Meerkerk shows how the Cultivation System, the Dutch colonial extractive institution, first forced a large group of Javanese women to “return” from working for the market to subsistence labour. Only a few years later, these women chose to shift to weaving and *batiking* with factory-made yarns and cloth, thereby reviving the textile industry, an unintended side effect of the institution.<sup>13</sup>

All these examples illustrate that there is another element that needs to be taken on board if we seriously want to combine global labour and economic history (data) and join the debate on the growth (or decrease) in social inequality, and that is workers’ individual and collective agency.<sup>14</sup> Global labour historians and economic historians have to start combining datasets, and they can learn from each other, perhaps not so much by the first group joining the grand debates of the other – as appealing as all the attention generated by hotly contested debates might be – but by truly working together in collaborative projects, developing new theories, perhaps less grand, but more profound.

10. Rossana Barragán Romano, “Extractive Economy and Institutions? Technology, Labour and Land in Potosí (16th–18th Centuries),” in Karin Hofmeester and Pim de Zwart (eds), *Colonialism, Institutional Change and Shifts in Global Labour Relations* (forthcoming).

11. Elias C. Mandala, “The Triumph of the Peasant Option and the Parasitic Cotton Sector in Malawi, 1891–1995,” in Hofmeester and De Zwart, *Colonialism, Institutional Change and Shifts in Global Labour Relations*.

12. William Clarence-Smith, “The Industrialization of the Developing World, 1840s to 19040s,” in Hofmeester and De Zwart, *Colonialism, Institutional Change and Shifts in Global Labour Relations*.

13. Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, “Threads of Imperialism: Colonial Institutions and Gendered Labour Relations in the Textile Industry in the Dutch Empire,” in Hofmeester and De Zwart, *Colonialism, Institutional Change and Shifts in Global Labour Relations*.

14. See also Lucassen, “Working Together”, pp. 77–78; Hofmeester *et al.*, “No Global Labor History Without Africa”, pp. 10–11.

TRANSLATED ABSTRACTS  
FRENCH – GERMAN – SPANISH

Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata. *Grandes questions et megadonnées. Une réponse du Collaboratoire.*

Dans notre réponse à “Grandes questions et megadonnées : le rôle du travail et des relations de travail dans l’histoire économique mondiale récente” d’Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, nous nous concentrons sur ses observations sur le Collaboratoire. Nous approuvons un grand nombre de ses suggestions de relier le travail mondial et l’histoire économique, et de ne pas considérer les relations de travail seulement comme une variable dépendante. En fait, comme le montrent les exemples tirés de divers ateliers-débat et publications du Collaboratoire, certaines de ces idées sont déjà en train d’être mises en pratique. Ces exemples montrent aussi que si nous voulons sérieusement combiner les données du travail mondial avec l’histoire économique et participer au débat sur la hausse (ou la baisse) des inégalités sociales. Enfin, nous soutenons que les historiens du travail mondial et les historiens économistes peuvent profiter de leurs disciplines respectives en travaillant véritablement ensemble dans des projets collaboratifs, en développant de nouvelles théories, peut-être moins chatoyantes que celles avec lesquelles les historiens économistes attirent tant d’attention, mais plus profondes.

Traduction: *Christine Plard*

Karin Hofmeester und Christine Moll-Murata, *Große Fragen und Big Data: Eine Replik aus des Collaboratory.*

In unserer Replik auf Elise van Nederveen Meerkerks “Große Fragen und Big Data. Die Rolle der Arbeit und der Arbeitsbeziehungen in der jüngeren globalen Wirtschaftsgeschichte” konzentrieren wir uns auf ihre Beobachtungen zum Collaboratory. Wir stimmen vielen ihrer Anregungen zu, globale Arbeitsgeschichte und globale Wirtschaftsgeschichte miteinander zu verbinden und Arbeitsbeziehungen nicht allein als abhängige Variable zu begreifen. Tatsächlich belegen viele von Vertretern beider Disziplinen organisierte Workshops und gemeinsame Veröffentlichungen, dass solche Überlegungen bereits praktisch umgesetzt werden. Diese Beispiele zeigen auch, dass die individuelle und kollektive Handlungsfähigkeit der Arbeiter berücksichtigt werden muss, wenn wir die Daten der globalen Arbeitsgeschichte und die der globalen Wirtschaftsgeschichte zusammenführen und uns an der Debatte über die Ausweitung (oder die Verringerung) sozialer Ungleichheit beteiligen wollen. Abschließend argumentieren wir dahingehend, dass globale Arbeits- und globale Wirtschaftshistoriker dann am stärksten von der jeweils anderen Disziplin profitieren können, wenn sie in Kooperationsprojekten zusammenarbeiten und dabei neue Theorien entwickeln, die vielleicht weniger grandios ausfallen als diejenigen, mit denen Wirtschaftshistoriker Aufsehen erregen, dafür aber auch tiefgreifender sind.

Übersetzung: *Max Henninger*

Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata. *Grandes cuestiones y grandes bases de datos: una respuesta desde el "colaboratorio"*.

En nuestra respuesta a Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk's "Grandes cuestiones y grandes bases de datos: el papel del trabajo y de las relaciones laborales en la reciente historia económica global", centramos nuestra atención en sus observaciones respecto al "colaboratorio". Compartimos muchas de sus sugerencias para poner en conexión la historia global del trabajo y la historia global y en lo que se refiere a las relaciones laborales no sólo como una variable dependiente. De hecho, como se ha puesto de manifiesto en diferentes talleres "colaborativos" y como distintas publicaciones demuestran, algunas de esas ideas ya se están poniendo en práctica. Estos ejemplos también nos permiten ver que si en serio queremos combinar la información de la historia global del trabajo y los de la historia global y compartir el debate sobre el crecimiento (o decrecimiento) de la desigualdad social. Por último, consideramos que los historiadores globales del trabajo y los historiadores globales se pueden beneficiar mucho recíprocamente de sus propias disciplinas trabajando realmente de forma conjunta en proyectos colaborativos, desarrollando nuevas teorías quizás algo menos amplias que aquellas con las que los historiadores económicos llaman tanto la atención, pero mucho más profundas.

Traducción: *Vicent Sanz Rozalén*