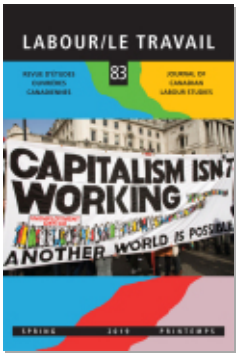
On the Road to Global Labour History: A Festschrift for Marcel van der Linden ed. by Karl Heinz Roth (review)



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Karl Heinz Roth, ed., *On the Road to Global Labour History: A Festschrift for Marcel van der Linden* (Leiden: Brill 2018)

Up to 2014 Marcel van der Linden was the Research Director at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (IISH). Since September 2014 he has served as Senior Researcher at the IISH. A prolific researcher and writer, distinguished scholar, and generous and valued colleague to many across the world, van der Linden has played a key role for the past 30 years or so in the development of comparative, transnational, and global labour history. Many labour historians, including the editor and contributors to the book under review, convincingly regard van der Linden as *the* inspiration behind the recent and current upsurge of interest in global labour history. Without doubt Marcel has played a pioneering role in writing manifestos and mapping out the promise of a new global history of the working classes and labour relations, especially in its economic aspects. He is also an extremely efficient and enthusiastic organizer and networker. Whether in Europe, Asia, the Americas, or Australasia, he has inspired a new interest in and helped to set up organizations committed to the study of labour history. In terms of theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and substantive debates van der Linden, moreover, has been a leading critic of the allegedly dominant concerns of both "old" and "new" labour history with methodological nationalism, Eurocentrism, and a narrow interest in mainly "free" male and white urban waged workers in industry. He has called for labour historians to cast their nets wider to embrace, for example, studies of the countryside, of unfree labour, of women, of race, of subsistence workers, and semi-subsistence workers since the early modern period. Perhaps most importantly he has called for more studies across national and other boundaries concerned with the ways in which transnational and global entanglements, exchanges, influences, networks, and so on have developed. Van der Linden's particular exhortation to study global commodity chains and their attendant social relations over time holds a particular appeal and considerable promise in the eyes of this reviewer.

This Festschrift, splendidly produced by Brill in its Historical Materialism book series, is a celebration of van der Linden's work in initiating and developing global labour history. As explained by the editor, Karl Heinz Roth, in the Preface, the collection is broken down into four thematic sections. The first, with contributions by Karin Hofmeester, Chitra Joshi, Prabhu P. Mohapatra and Rana P. Behal, David Mayer and Berthold Unfried, and Angelika Ebbinghaus, praises van der Linden's work as a "scientific organiser and networker." The second comprises five field and case studies, by Michael Zeuske (slavery in Spanish America), Rossana Barragan Romano (Potosi's silver and "the Global World of Trade"), Touraj Atabaki (the 1946 strike of oil workers in Iran), Gorkem Akgoz (petitioning as a form of industrial bargaining in a Turkish state factory) and Jenny Chan (working-class power in post-socialist China). These are all well researched, clearly written, and interesting in their own right. At times they draw out the wider, including global, significance of their particular studies. But they are overly descriptive and not linked in a way one would expect in a book highlighting transnational and global connexions. The third section is something of a mixed bag of "Methodological and Conceptual Aspects." The essays by Peter Alexander, on the importance of comparison in global labour history, Dirk Hoerder, on recent developments in migration research "in a

global perspective," and Christian G. De Vito on the importance of the concepts of labour flexibility and labour precariousness to the historical study of labour relations, are useful and enlightening. Once again, however, no attempt is made to link these essays. The final "aspect," that of Andrea Komlosy on "Labour and Value Transfer under Capitalism," operates at a much higher level of abstraction than the others. As such, and despite its analytical value, it sits somewhat oddly alongside the other contributions. The fourth section consists of an informative essay by Karl Heinz Roth on van der Linden's intellectual development. The book also lists van der Linden's impressive publications between 1971 and 2014.

The collection as a whole is useful and instructive. Some of the contributions, however, are insufficiently analytical and critical, while the book is not an integrated coherent whole. Its main weakness lies in the fact that is a somewhat uncritical *celebration* of van der Linden's work rather, than as one might reasonably expect, a critical, albeit comradely and respectful, *engagement* with it. In this context, it may be useful to bring to the reader's attention the following issues and questions. First, what are van der Linden and other global labour historians seeking to describe and explain in addition to establishing the important existence of transnational and global connexions? Do they have an overriding set of questions in mind, an all-important *problematic*? What is the overall *purpose* of global labour history? Is it purely academic, or does it also carry political implications and effects? If they do have such a problematic in mind, then this requires further elaboration and discussion. Second, does van der Linden present a fair and accurate picture of the state of labour history before the advent of his global and globalising concerns? The answer is surely that he has exaggerated his criticisms in order more effectively to make his case. For example, as Dorothy Sue Cobble, Leon Fink, myself and others have argued, labour historians in a variety of places and spaces have *not*, as argued by van der Linden, confined their studies to the white male urban and waged sections of the working class operating within nation states. For example, the study of slaves, women, rural workers, the unskilled in addition to the skilled, the "producing classes" and the unemployed as well as the employed have long constituted important areas of study. Some scholars, albeit a minority, have also offered transnational and even global as well as national, sub-national, and international perspectives. A firmer sense of definition and observation is in order. Third, van der Linden's work ultimately tends to be mainly economic or material in character. It arguably pays insufficient attention to the complex ways in which the "economic" is also informed by culture, by norms and values, expectations and forms of human subjectivity and consciousness. In a sense, and despite his wish to depart from Marxist orthodoxy, it smacks too much of economic determinism and would benefit from closer attention to the continuous dialogue between human agency and conditioning, or culture and structure. Fourth, I also feel a sense of unease about describing historical research as scientific or social-scientific in the ways that van der Linden, Roth and likeminded scholars do. While I applaud van der Linden's determination to avoid empiricism and to be analytical, his research carries with it the danger of a positivist tendency to be too coldly and neatly structural, classificatory, and functional with insufficient attention paid to the ways in which contingency, contradiction, complexity, and the messiness and chaos of human beings and their history inform patterned experience and structure.

In conclusion, to raise these questions and issues is not to cast doubt upon the vital importance of Marcel's work, his contribution to the discipline and the great debt of gratitude owed to him by many scholars across the globe. It is, however, to raise the continued importance of critical engagement rather than simply celebration, of shortcomings alongside strengths. Critical engagement is vital to the further development of the exciting and wide-open fields of transnational and global labour history.

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Joan Sangster, *One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2018)

Joan Sangster's *One Hundred Years of Struggle* is a remarkable inaugural volume on the centenary of the federal extension of the suffrage to white women in Canada. It is an overview of the rich diversity of suffrage histories that led to the final extension of universal suffrage in 1960. Subsequent volumes will treat the topics introduced here in greater depth, but this work will doubtless become a standard text for students of Canadian women's history. At under 300 pages, its length is manageable. It is accurate and historiographically mature, but still readable. The publisher agreed to include numerous images and primary texts, all of which will facilitate classroom integration. Most importantly, Sangster has remembered the primary task of the historian, which is to tell good stories. Every chapter employs biography to tell personal stories of individual suffragists, most of whom have escaped the traditional narratives around Canadian women's history. Because of its decentralized complexity in both space and time, the story of Canadian women's suffrage is especially difficult to tell. I can't imagine anyone having done it better.

The introduction invites us to imagine suffrage as a series of concentric circles. Those in the innermost circle were focused almost exclusively on the vote, extending their activism beyond the vote only to pursue other, related objectives like expanding women's roles in society. Beyond the first circle lies a group of activists whose objectives were broader. Whereas the first group pursued the women's vote as end unto itself – political equality as a goal with inherent justice and consequent worth – the second group may be thought of as women who viewed suffrage as a means to an end. The justice of women's equality with men, for this group, was tied up with achieving a more just society generally. The third circle looked broader still, its members organizing occasionally around suffrage, but more often around religion or social clubs. All looked to leverage women's talents to improve society. Some envisioned structural transformation that would strike at the root of injustice; others accepted the basic ordering of their society but worked to make less radical improvements.

Subsequent chapters address issues that divided women, like property, race, imperialism, and war. A loose chronology is maintained, making the dense, disparate, non-linear history easier to follow. Suffrage intersected frequently, if not universally, with other struggles. Land, labour, class, religion, language, or race play parts in every story. Party politics favoured women's enfranchisement in some circumstances and hindered it in others. Ideology inconsistently supported or opposed suffrage depending on the political moment. Assumptions around progress, the superiority of white culture and Christianity vis-à-vis Indigenous, Asian, or Afro-Canadian groups, even