

# Introduction: Labour in Transport: Histories from the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), c.1750 to 1950

STEFANO BELLUCCI

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

E-mail: sbe@iisg.nl

LARISSA ROSA CORRÊA

*Instituto Multidisciplinar, Federal Rural University of Rio de  
Janeiro (UFRRJ)  
Av. Governador Roberto Silveira S/N – CEP: 26020-740  
Centro – Nova Iguaçu-RJ, Brazil*

E-mail: larissarosacorrea@hotmail.com

JAN-GEORG DEUTSCH

*St Cross College, University of Oxford  
Oxford, OX1 3LZ, UK*

E-mail: jan-georg.deutsch@stx.ox.ac.uk

CHITRA JOSHI

*Indraprastha College, Delhi University  
31, Sham Nath Marg, Delhi-110054, India*

E-mail: chitrajoshi@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: This introduction highlights the main subjects and research questions addressed in the articles making up this special issue on the labour histories of transport in the Global South. Although historiographical interest in the history of transport labour is growing, scientific knowledge on the subject is still very limited. This is especially true for histories from outside Europe and North America. Important topics and research problems covered here are: (1) transport labour as facilitating the exchange and mobility of goods but also of peoples and ideas – as such transport constitutes a noteworthy element of social history; (2) transport labour as a factor of production which is relevant for industrial and agrarian societies, as well as for market-driven and socialist economies; (3) the extent to which the processes of globalization, imperial expansion, and the emergence of global capitalism owe a debt to transport labour of the Global South and its micro-histories.

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This special issue 22 of the *International Review of Social History (IRSH)* seeks to explore new frontiers in the labour history of different transport sectors from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The contributions to this volume focus on what one might loosely call the “Global South” – the colonial and semi-colonial societies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that were once part of European empires.

Connecting people and markets is a prerequisite for the functioning of capitalist economies. For this purpose, commodities need to be transported and thus transport is a “necessary moment” (Marx) in the exchange process. As many contributors to this special issue have shown, this is true whether the seller is an industrial capitalist or a merchant who has bought to resell: transport is needed for the buyer of a commodity to acquire its use value.

The labour involved in moving people and commodities, in loading and unloading vehicles, and in driving or sailing them should be counted as productive labour in the same sense as artisanal or industrial labour. In both cases, entrepreneurs invest their capital in new kinds of machines and new kinds of labour in order to put people to work and exact profit. Labour creates products that realize a surplus value when (profitably) exchanged, irrespective of whether such labour occurs in “the sphere of production” or in “the sphere of circulation”, such as transport labour. There exist several historical works on labour in transport, but they focus mainly on the so-called West or “Global North”.<sup>1</sup> Very little attention has been paid so far to studying the history of transport labour in the Global South, both as a subject on its own or in a comparative or global perspective.<sup>2</sup> One of the main questions that immediately arise in the

1. For a recent example, see the study by Margaret Makepeace, *The East India Company's London Workers: Management of the Warehouse Labourers, 1800–1858* (Woodbridge, 2010). For a comprehensive bibliography on the history of labour in global perspective, including transport labour, see Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern, 2006), pp. 649–746.

2. Comparative or global transport labour studies are still very few in number. See, for instance, Sam Davies *et al.* (eds), *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790–1970* (Aldershot, 2000). See also in Lucassen, *Global Labour History*, the contributions of Lex Heerma van Voss, “‘Nothing to Lose but a Harsh and Miserable Life Here on Earth’: Dock Work as a Global Occupation, 1790–1970”, pp. 591–621, and Shelton Stromquist, “Railroad Labor and the Global Economy: Historical Patterns”, pp. 623–647. A considerable part of the transport labour literature actually illuminates US labour history. On railroad labour see, for example, David E. Bernstein, “Racism, Railroad Unions, and Labor Regulations”, *Independent Review*, 5 (2000), pp. 237–247; James B. Burns, *Railroad Mergers and the Language of Unification* (Westport, CT, 1998); Joseph Kelly, “Showing Agency on the Margins: African American Railway Workers in the South and Their Unions, 1917–1930”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 71 (Spring 2013), pp. 123–148; and Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, MA, 2001). On truck drivers see Jane Stern, *Trucker: A Portrait of the Last American Cowboy* (New York, 1975); Shirley K.

historical study of transport labour in the Global South concerns the degree to which the coloniality of the labour situation has shaped the structure of work and the formation of collective identities. It is also questionable to what extent analytical categories such as “free labour” that have their origin in the specific historical experience of European industrial societies can be applied without modification in the historical study of non-industrial societies in other parts of the world, especially in the nineteenth century, where a significant part of the work was undertaken by servile labourers and slaves. This special issue tries to address these concerns and to fill in this historiographical gap.

Transport labour exists everywhere and has been a feature in every epoch of humanity, in both what has now become the Global North as well as the Global South. “Global” North and South are not mere geographical expressions. The adjective “global” highlights connectivities within regions as well as between regions. According to Marcel van der Linden, global connections do not necessarily occur between continents and countries separated by thousands of kilometres; global connection can also materialize between places that are close in geographical terms.<sup>3</sup> Any kind of connection – whether social, economic, or political – will have been facilitated by transport and transport labour. “Global” also refers to “globalization”, of course. In our view this process is related mostly to the relentless expansion of the capitalist economy, from the Global North to the Global South.

The general issues that emerge from the studies selected for this special issue are threefold. Firstly, transport labour facilitates the exchange of goods and the related movement of peoples, ideas, plants, and pathogens and thus constitutes a fundamental part of economic and social history. As this volume demonstrates, transport-related activities have been conducted in a great variety of forms, ranging from porters to mail runners, from railway workers to seafarers, and from rickshaw pullers to motor drivers.

Secondly, transport labour has always been a necessary feature of production; it appears in industrial and agrarian societies, in capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production, as well as in supposedly socialist economies; transport labour was part and parcel of the processes of globalization, imperial expansion, and the emergence of global capitalism,

Drew, *Dirty Work: The Social Construction of Taint* (Waco, TX, 2007); Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America's Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2008). Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861–1901* (New York, 1934), is also still relevant for the subject.

3. See Marcel van der Linden, “The National Integration of European Working Classes (1871–1914): Exploring the Causal Configuration”, *International Review of Social History*, 33 (1988), pp. 285–311.

regardless of the specific definition of these concepts. Transport labour was often the first form of regulated wage labour that the colonized experienced on a significant scale. Transportation can be realized through complex technological or capital-intensive as well as labour-intensive means. In the past five or six decades, a significant number of studies have been published on the history of transport and transport routes,<sup>4</sup> but only a few on the history of labour in transport. Just a handful of such studies have actually addressed issues related to the history of transport labour in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. With a few notable exceptions,<sup>5</sup> it is only comparatively recently that scholarly works have started to appear that focus exclusively on the Global South.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, through a focus on transport labour, the contributions to this volume show how it is possible to expand the boundaries of labour history, and explore ideas that new critical histories have posed.<sup>7</sup> This they do in several different ways. First: they reaffirm the need to move away from classical Eurocentric orthodoxies towards a more inclusive and complex understanding of labour relations, identifying the relationship between local forms and the operation of global capital. Second: they reinforce an important trend in labour history over the past two decades,

4. See, for instance, the studies on shipping companies, such as Freda Harcourt's work on P&O: *Flagships of Imperialism: The P&O Company and the Politics of Empire from its Origins to 1867* (Manchester, 2006). For maritime labour, however, see Ravi Ahuja, "The Age of the 'Lascar': South Asian Seafarers in the Times of Imperial Steam Shipping", in Joya Chatterji and David Washbrook (eds), *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 110–122.

5. See, for instance, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Paul E. Lovejoy (eds), *The Workers of African Trade* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1985), and Timothy Oberst, "Transport Workers, Strikes and the 'Imperial Response': Africa and the Post World War II Conjunction", *African Studies Review*, 31 (1988), pp. 117–133. For more recent studies, see Stephen J. Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-Century East Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, 2006), and Jan-Bart Gewald, Sabine Luning, and Klaas van Walraven (eds), *The Speed of Change: Motor Vehicles and People in Africa, 1890–2000* (Leiden, 2009). On India, see Ian Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850–1900* (Delhi, 1995).

6. The lack of studies on Latin American transport labour that take into account transnational and comparative perspectives as well as the free and unfree labour, ethnic, gender, and class connections has been slowly corrected by some recent and valuable investigations in this field. See, for instance, Silvana A. Palermo, "En nombre del hogar proletario: Engendering the 1917 Great Railroad Strike in Argentina", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 93 (2013), pp. 585–620; Vitor W. de Oliveira, *Nas águas do Prata: os trabalhadores da rota fluvial entre Buenos Aires e Corumbá (1910–1930)* (Campinas, 2009); Jaime Rodrigues, "Mariners-Slavers and Slave Ships in Atlantic, 18th and 19th Centuries: The Perspective of Captives and the Slaveholders Logic", *Africana Studia*, 18 (2012), pp. 205–222.

7. Rana P. Behal, Chitra Joshi, and Prabhu P. Mohapatra, "India", in Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, and John McIlroy (eds), *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (Pontypool, 2010), pp. 290–314; see also Leo Lucassen, "Writing Global Labour History c.1800–1940: A Historiography of Concepts, Periods, and Geographical Scope", in Lucassen, *Global Labour History*, pp. 39–90.

a trend that shifts the focus away from factory labour – which in any case always constituted a small minority of the labour force – to the study of varieties of forms of labour. Third: the essays show the limits of working with the standard binaries between coercion and freedom, oppositions that have now been widely criticized by new labour histories in different countries. Fourth: the essays in this volume also reassert the significance of non-economic factors to the understanding of labour relations: they show how articulations of class were crucially shaped by notions of caste, gender, race, age, and other cultural mediations.

As noted above, it is not possible to understand the colonization process in the Global South without considering the complex connections between free and unfree labour. For a good part of the nineteenth century, the provision of transport services in Rio de Janeiro, as Terra's piece in the collection shows, depended to a significant degree on "wage-earning slaves" – unfree workers who had to pay a fixed income to their owners. Similarly, in the north-eastern borderlands of India, "impressed" coolie labour was widely employed in portering and construction work (Sinha and Dzüvichü). As the essays show, we can understand the logic of such labour forms only by exploring the entangled histories of freedom and force, coercion and consent.

Transport labour is a particularly promising field for the production of challenging theoretical insights into labour history.<sup>8</sup> Above all, the studies in this volume emphasize the dual nature of the role of transport labour, extending the reach of colonial states as much as of capitalist markets. Porters, runners, boatmen, and construction workers building roads were all crucial to the processes through which territories were spatialized, unified, and extended. Porters in the Naga Hills in India or flag-post runners in the Cameroons penetrated interiors, accessed hilly and difficult terrain, and made possible interconnections across regions. Similarly, Mongolian lama porters provided the mobile labour force underlining the transnational connections between Russia and China. Connecting places and people, rural and urban areas, transport labourers facilitated the rapid expansion of both commerce and imperial power in diverse places such as late nineteenth-century Mongolia and early twentieth-century West Africa (Dear and Hart).

The crucial role transport labour played in commerce defined its position in relation to capital. At different points in time, compared with other forms of labour, say agricultural or industrial labour, the particular position of transport workers and their mobility gave them greater manoeuvrability in negotiating their wages and conditions of work. By

8. For a recent survey, see Marcel van der Linden, "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (Fall 2012), pp. 57–76.

the nature of their work, transport workers occupied a central location in the commodity chain and thus they could not easily be replaced by their employers. Similarly, the nation state (no matter the varied forms of state-building processes) has depended very much on transport workers. Therefore, governments have tried both to control and to gain the support of these workers, sometimes conceding better labour conditions and creating specific laws.

For those dependent on transport workers, the menace of disruption was always on the horizon and they had to deal with it. There was the constant threat of flight, desertion, go-slows, and strikes. This is why, in many cases, the work was done by self-employed workers who often assumed the role of small-scale entrepreneurs (Sinha and Hart), were able to extract comparatively high wages for their work (Nkwi and de Bruijn), or were leaders of strike movements (Grandi). In periods of great economic expansion and urban development, transport workers were able to struggle for better wages and working conditions. In many cases, such as, in various countries railway workers, they created a strong tradition of militancy and insubordination.<sup>9</sup>

In the extreme, there was always the possibility of flight (Dzüvichü). Conversely, when such mobility was severely limited or the transport workers' bargaining power particularly weak, as in the case of seamen (lascars) on ships operated by the British East India Company, transport workers were subjected to coercion and appalling violence and treated no better than slaves by their employers (Frey). At the same time, the element of mobility involved in transport always gave workers some specific leeway. Shipping on the Ganges, for example, allowed steersmen (*manjhees*) to use their control over the space of the deck to store items that they then traded "illicitly", despite the legal monopoly of the East India Company over the trade in these commodities (Sinha). Similarly, the rowers (*dandies*) would often use the terms of subcontracts to their advantage, pressing their own demands on travellers on the boat.

The specificity of the position of transport labour is also revealed in the manner in which transport workers dealt with novel transport technologies. Rather than being completely subjected to the will of their potential employers, transport workers were sometimes able to negotiate, if not resist outright, the introduction of new technologies, when the conditions

9. In this sense, the history of railway workers in many countries of Latin America is quite representative. In Brazil, for instance, until the first half of the twentieth century, railway workers were considered to be one of the most active and combative factions in the labour movement. Highly visible as a sort of "elite" within the national labour movement, railway workers secured important labour rights that were subsequently extended to groups of other industrial workers.

of work attached to these new technologies were unacceptable to them. Technology, as we know, is laden with symbolic meanings: a defence of a particular technology gets linked up with notions of dignity, independence, and identity. In colonial Manila, for example, opposition to technology came to be associated with questions of race and nationalism. The attempt to introduce rickshaws into the American-occupied Philippines in the early 1900s failed utterly, because the potential rickshaw drivers perceived the kind of work involved in pulling rickshaws as a new form of enslavement. Consequently, they boycotted the introduction of this new form of urban transport (Pante). This might be an extreme case, but other articles in this volume hint at the possibility that transport companies at times attempted to undermine local resistance to technological change by lending support to the immigration of foreign workers, often under the auspices of both the distant imperial power and national states (Grandi and Terra).

For self-employed driver-workers on the outskirts of Accra, rickshaw pullers and *cocheros* (carriage drivers) in Manila, and railway workers in São Paulo, the *savoir-faire* as well as the notions of autonomy and dignity are pointed to in this volume as key elements for the process of forming their collective identity and of class organization (Hart, Grandi, and Pante). In the same way, the metaphor of slavery used by some groups of transport workers to denounce the precariousness of their working conditions represented a strategic argument that enabled them to challenge the system of discipline imposed by the employers and gain the support of public opinion (Pante and Terra).

At the same time, however, locally defined notions of dignity and what constitutes “honourable” work could be mobilized to expedite rapid change. Monasteries and monks (lamas), for instance, played a crucial role in facilitating the massive expansion of the tea trade between imperial Russia and the Qing empire in the later nineteenth century. These monks, especially the poorer ones, took enthusiastically to transport labour, partly because there was no attractive alternative available to them, but also because they (and everyone else involved in the trade) apparently believed that the expansion in trade would merely replicate traditional transport working patterns that, according to contemporary observers, had supposedly existed in the steppe since time immemorial. Yet in this part of central Asia geopolitics, commercial activities, and thus transport labour practices underwent dramatic changes in the second half of the nineteenth century (Dear). Thus, what can be learnt from this example in more abstract terms is that rather than being an obstacle to “progress and development”, perceived “traditions” (invented or otherwise) can serve as a handmaiden of rapid change.

Transport workers are, of course, also directly connected with urban mobility, one of the main controversial political issues in global cities



currently, particularly in the Global South. In countries such as Brazil, better and cheaper transportation in megalopolises such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro has been at the heart of the demands of massive demonstrations recently. Terra's article in this special issue demonstrates how this topic has had a long and contentious history since the colonial period in Brazil. In contrast to factory labour, transport workers in urban areas are in constant contact with the population. They can play an important role in the mobilization of working-class people and act as their spokespersons (as Grandi shows in his article). But they have also been well-known until today for being involved in daily conflicts in the urban spaces, provoking accidents and quarrelling with their passengers (see Terra's article). For people who commute every day in the Global South, drivers are sometimes seen as heroes, at other times they are considered to be the worst kind of daily nuisance.

At the same time, the relative autonomy and mobility of transport workers has often been accounted for by their invisibility, making it difficult for historians to recover their histories. As mobile transport workers were frequently hidden from central authority, they were also hidden from official records. This is particularly noticeable with regard to their social life. Colonial archives are excellent in revealing estimates about, for instance, the number of flag-post mail runners employed in British Southern Cameroons between 1916 and 1955 (Nkwi and de Bruijn). However, they tell us little about what people thought about their work, how they lived, whether they took pride in their work or despised it, whether they felt an affinity to those engaged in similar work or merely saw them as faceless competitors in the market place.

Still, as demonstrated in this volume, a set of "traditional" sources may illuminate many aspects of the transport workers' world. The analysis of reports written by colonial and government officials, as well as local newspapers, police records, travel diaries, among others, are key to revealing the living and working conditions of the transport workers. These records also provide us a glimpse of different conflicts, strategies, and resistance actions conducted by these workers in order to challenge the colonial power (see the examples in Frey, Pante, Sinha, and Hart). Official sources, as Sinha shows, can even tell us about the minutiae of the eating habits of river transport workers in late eighteenth-century India.

Altogether, the transport labour studies in this volume show that the entangled processes of globalization, imperial expansion, and the emergence of global capitalism were negotiated through the prism of the "local" (see, in particular, Dear, Hart, and Dzüvichü). Reconstructing the "remote" worlds of Mongolian monks and monasteries in the late nineteenth century or self-employed motor drivers in West Africa in the mid-twentieth century (let alone fierce railway union struggles in metropolitan São Paulo in the early twentieth century) has a value of its own. This is arguably one reason



why transport labour histories in the Global South are such admirable and rewarding objects of comparative study. However, it also poses the challenge of not losing sight of the wider implications of such studies, especially of the fact of how deeply entangled the global processes mentioned above actually were, particularly in those parts of the world that appeared to be “remote” when seen from an imperial perspective.

Finally, an important scholarly debate on labour history centres on the appraisal that transport workers have been historically essential for the dissemination of ideas and the expansion of labour movements, especially in the colonized world. Several papers in this special issue challenge this view. Transport workers have been interesting for historians because of their high level of unionization. Owing to their crucial role in economies where the movement of goods and people is fundamental, transport workers often possessed significant bargaining power vis-à-vis capital and the state. For these reasons, and the fact that transport workers in the Global South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were highly specialized, the demands of transport workers were often conceded. This led to the idea, held by many historians, that transport workers represented a force of internationalist practice.

Some articles in this volume show how these assumptions or clichés do not apply to all cases and categories of transport workers. For example, in the case of the transport workers in Brazil analysed by Terra, between 1870 and 1906 transport workers were the group holding most of the strikes in the city. Of a total of twenty-two stoppages initiated by transport workers, five were motivated mainly by local and federal laws and police regulations. Of the three most important strikes involving the greatest numbers of strikers and having the greatest impact (in 1890, 1900, and 1906), two were directly related to regulations. The mobilization organized in 1890, for example, was against Article 298 of the Penal Code, which regulated the question of accidents.

These were not internationalist claims, geared towards a radical change of society. They were demands aimed at improving specific labour conditions. It is not even clear if they served as examples to workers in other sectors. This example is quite interesting as it might explain why in early colonial Kenya – as revealed by Frederick Cooper<sup>10</sup> – the wages of transport workers were significantly higher than those of other wage workers, let alone of workers who were not earning stable wages in the so-called informal sector. Jennifer Hart’s article argues that the appropriation by drivers of the language of trade unionism in colonial Ghana drew to a considerable degree on the trade unionism of interwar British

10. Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven, CT, 1987), p. 243.

colonial governance, and not only on African traditions of radicalism and reform. These multiple influences resulted in a unique understanding and practice of unionism among drivers, which positioned them well both in their own profession and in relation to the state in both urban and rural areas. Ghanaian drivers never became explicitly involved in politics. These two case studies help to de-romanticize the role of wage workers as a progressive force in underdeveloped economies, and indeed reinforce the idea of transport workers as potentially and specifically prone to be what was once called the “labour aristocracy”.

This volume makes no claim to be a comprehensive study of labour history in different transport sectors in the Global South. Such a claim would greatly exceed the scope of any single special issue. However, as we have seen, the essays help us to understand some of the specificities of transport labour, and to see how the fluidity and mobility of labour – rather than the fixity of their location – shapes the working of capital as well as the nature of labour resistance. Some of the insights may be specific to the history of transport labour in the Global South, but many others are also applicable to global labour history in general.

The contributions in this collection have concentrated on male workers in transport. We know from other studies, however, that the work of men in transport was predicated crucially on the services provided by women in maintaining their rural linkages to where they had come from, in managing domestic arrangements, or in the actual task of carrying, as with caravan women in East Africa.<sup>11</sup> In writing the history of transport labour these linkages need to be explored in greater detail. That ought to be one of the aims of future work on the history of transport labour.

11. Rockel, *Carriers of Culture*, pp. 117–130.