Health and Safety at Work: An Issue in Transnational History – Introduction

History of social policies is moving from comparative to transnational approaches as the idea that social insurances and Welfare States are the outcome of an interactive process between nations gets more and more recognition. This shift, though, often remains programmatic. Beyond a few individual remarkable cases, declarations of intent are still dominant. By contrast, to date there have been few consistent collective attempts to constitute an articulate body of knowledge to grasp one single issue in the history of social protection. The present volume tries to provide such an analysis in the case of health and safety at work.

This issue not only articulates social and sanitary questions. It concerns a field that has been historiographically booming for about the last two decades. History of risks at work allows one to look anew at classical topics of social history, such as migration, trade unions’ strategies or workers’ agency. It also engages with the growing worries about the human-created global hazards that threaten the viability of the planet, and with the increasing hygienic sensitisation to the sparing of the body over the life cycle. Nicolas Hatzfeld illustrates this concern in the present volume with the spectacular case of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDS), a range of troubles attributed to the nature of a job. MSDS are the fastest growing occupational diseases today. Additionally, the focusing on occupational hazards is a way for historians to explore forms of the politicisation that have become most visible since the end of the twentieth century. They are less based on wide-ranging, abstract or eschatological ideologies, and more rooted in day-to-day experience, local action and protest.

Finally, health and safety at work highlight one grey zone of Welfare States that has been neglected for too long. In all industrialised countries, in spite of deep national variations among systems of financial compensation, occupational injuries

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and diseases are a weak link of social and sanitary protection. Massive statistical underregistration, acknowledged by Eurogip for the European Union, only allows one to suspect the extent to which bad working conditions affect a large section of the workforce. The exposure of millions of workers to potentially carcinogenic substances for instance, can only have a detrimental effect on mortality, morbidity and invalidity, as well as on social security spending.

Beyond single national cases, what is at stake is the test of power between companies and the States. Playing a regulatory role, optimising the balance between workers’ safety on the one hand, and economic competitiveness and employment on the other, is difficult for governments. They act under the pressure of employers’ lobbies, which among other things benefit from a higher ability to mobilise the best legal and medical experts. This equation is not only a matter of maximising profit: Emanuela Macek and Paul-André Rosental show how similar it looked in socialist Czechoslovakia behind the showcase of official discourses.

Let us now go back to transnational history. Julia Moses demonstrates how the treatment of occupational health and safety paved the way for liberal Western legislations to penetrate the private world of companies and change the conception of employers’ and workers’ respective liabilities. This was not only a decisive move towards the model of «insurantial society», coined by François Ewald two decades ago. To a large extent, this sector of public policy has constituted the foundation stone above which, through a transnational process, social protection and labour law have been constructed.

The present volume studies how nations, companies, trade unions, international organisations and associations fought and tried to reach agreement around the issue of occupational diseases and work injuries. Far from traditional, often commemorative, institutional history, the paper by Cayet, Rosental and Thébaud-Sorger studies international organisations in action and interaction. They analyse how, all over the twentieth century, the main models of health and safety at work successively emerged from the rivalry and balance of power between the main international agencies, from the International Labour Organisation to the League of Nations, and from the World Health Organisation to the European Coal and Steel Community. Simultaneously, the authors establish how this fight against work illnesses and accidents shaped the internal structure of these organisations. Their study suggests that European Union social policies in this field share many similarities with the dynamics implemented by the ILO during the interwar period, which progressively raised and extended the level of social protection in the name of the free market: imposing comparable social obligations on the companies from various countries was legitimised by securing fair economic competition.\(^3\)

The secret of this articulation was probably lost in the 1980s when moderate left parties had to give it up under the ideological pressure of neo-liberalism, which struggled to monopolise the reference to free-market economy. The way to combine social protection and utilitarianism had been conceived by transnational networks of social reformers at the end of the nineteenth century and diffused all over the industrialised countries by a process of constant mutual observation. Many papers in this volume go back to this conceptual root. Martin Lengwiler in particular, in his study of Germany and Switzerland, details how this process was understood and reinterpreted on national scenes. He shows how the interplay between international conventions, bilateral agreements and local or sectorial reappropriations finally produced national specificities, a dialectic that is also at the core of Julia Moses’s paper. Nicolas Hatzfeld adds a level of complexity to the volume by documenting the role of the European Union in the recognition of MSDS, and therefore contributes to the history of «Social Europe».

All in all, this volume offers three big conclusions.

First, regarding occupational hazards, the main models of action were conceived and diffused in the transnational arena under the pressure of international reform networks, associations and organisations. In the case of health at work, for instance, three successive waves followed each other during the century. The first one, at the end of the nineteenth century, was the forensic «occupational diseases» model, which was advocated after 1906 by the «Commission Internationale Permanente pour l’Étude des Maladies du Travail». Its aim was to build the legal grounds to compensate workers made sick by their activity. One generation later, around 1930, the Commission helped the ILO to promote the «occupational medicine» model, which combined social medicine and work organisation in an ideology based on the legitimacy of expertise. Finally, since the 1970s, the ILO and the European Union have been diffusing the concept of «health at work», which refers to an integrated and interdisciplinary idea of sanitary well-being.

Measuring to what extent these international models shaped (or did not shape) national conceptions and legislation on occupational hazards is the second result of this volume. All papers indeed converge to claim that national debates had to take into account those transnational models, and in most cases evolved around them. At the same time, national compensation schemes, medical or engineering traditions, but also diplomatic positioning, among other factors, bring about such distinctive appropriation processes that a single formula or law can be understood in totally different ways from one country to another. Transnational processes fashion the vocabulary of social and sanitary action, while national ones condition its understanding: Ludwik Fleck probably would have endorsed a model of analysis that resembles the one he
applied to interparadigmatic dialogs in science, where misunderstandings are a pre-condition for evolution.\footnote{L. Fleck, \textit{Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact} [\textit{Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache}, 1935] (Chicago 1979).}

A third, most unexpected, conclusion of the present volume is that migration and the colonies were two of the key parameters in this process of national distinction. Did a given country import or export manpower, or both? Could it rely on a colonial empire and if so, how? On the one hand, foreign workers have been and still are those most exposed to occupational hazards: to some extent, one can claim that migration is about allowing the companies to minimise the cost of manpower’s safety. The socialist Czechoslovakian mining industry, where such a resort was impossible, provides an experimental case here. In the absence of immigrants, we will see in the present volume which segments of the workforce were appointed to the deadliest work stations.

But on the other hand, migrants’ protection by their country of origin exerted a pressure on States and companies. Although it only concerned a (sometimes substantial) minority of manpower, migration therefore played a crucial role in the history of health and safety at work and, more generally, in the development of the Welfare State. As Julia Moses demonstrates, this process went through various channels: prioritization of foreign and colonial workers, protection of skilled workers hired abroad or in the colonies, and management of human resources within multinational firms.

Unlike today, circulation of labour and circulation of capital were instrumental in the constitution of Welfare States in, grossly speaking, the first half of the twentieth century. At that time, each country started from the same (low) level of social protection: social reformers’ contribution was to design a conceptual model that was able to increase it progressively in the name of free market principles. In the long run, keeping the colonial possessions outside of this virtuous circle proved disastrous. It created such a wide economic and social gap that after the decolonisation era, globalisation and Welfare State dismantling became synonymous. It was only because new independent countries had to catch up economically before implementing social regulation that the initial model stopped being instrumental. But this historical inflexion is unduly understood as an analytical flaw. Combining utilitarian and humanitarian logic rather than opposing them has until now been the most systematic way to provide workers with some protection, and it should not be forgotten too quickly: a lesson can definitely be drawn here from history.\footnote{L. Fontaine, \textit{L’Économie morale. Pauvreté, crédit et confiance dans l’Europe préindustrielle} (Paris, 2008), shows how the roots of this combination go down deeply into the early modern history.}

In the very same way, the present volume confirms that twentieth century history has not been the univocal rise of the «tyrannie du national», but about its structural interplay with transnational processes. Far from being exclusive, bureaucratization of the States and self-limitation of sovereignty through bilateral or multilateral con-
ventions have gone hand in hand. Never the understanding of this complex dialectic between nationalisation and globalisation processes has been such an urgent task for historians, in order to foil the simplifications that haunt the ideological fantasies of the present time.

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