

NYE PERSPEKTIVER PÅ ARBEJDERHISTORIE I NORDISK KONTEKST

*Rapport fra XIV Nordic Labour History Conference, 28.-30. november, 2016,
på University of Iceland, Reykjavík*

Af Nina Trige Andersen

Ikke blot lever arbejderhistorie i bedste velgående, det er også et forskningsfelt, der udvikler og udvider sig radikalt i disse år. Det blev tydeligt på den 14. nordiske arbejderhistoriekonference, der i november 2016 blev afholdt på Island i et samarbejde mellem arbejderhistoriske institutioner i Island, Sverige, Danmark, Norge og Finland. Med temaer som fascisme og anti-fascisme, husarbejde og tvangsarbejde, entreprenører og vandrende småhandlende, migration, køn og hverdagsbeskrivelser, blev der åbnet nye perspektiver på tværs af tid, rum, forskningsobjekter og -subjekter. Netop udvidelse og gentænkning af arbejderhistorie som felt var også den tråd, der løb igennem konferencens keynotes og fælles sessioner. Konferencen pegede ikke mindst på potentialet i transnationale og translokale arkivpraksisser og forskningsspørgsmål – og i samarbejder på tværs af grænser. Det var konferencen helt praktisk også selv et eksempel på. Den finske delegation – der var bemærkelsesværdig stor – fremhævede, at for dem havde den nordiske konference fungeret som en samlende platform, idet flere af dem slet ikke kendte hinanden før konferencen, og konferencens sessioner var opbygget omkring bidrag fra mindst to og ofte flere lande, hvilke gav mulighed for at diskutere

temaer, begivenheder, organiseringsformer, arbejdsmarkedsstrukturer mm. på tværs af nationale grænser. For at gøre banen mere jævn at spille på for alle nordiske deltagere og for at gøre det muligt for arbejderhistorikere fra resten af verden at deltage, var det primære fællesprog engelsk. De nordiske sprog blev dog stadig flittigt brugt i diskussionerne både inden for og uden for det formelle program. Under den afsluttende fællessession “The Future of Labour History in the Nordic Countries – Conferences, Networks, Research” var der bred enighed om, at konferencen havde været særdeles frugtbar og at der gerne skulle afholdes en XV Nordic Labour History Conference inden for nær fremtid. Det har Arbejdermuseet, ABA og SFAH umiddelbart givet tilsagn til at påtage sig værtskabet for, og om alt går vel bliver det i 2019 i København.

Arbejderhistorie bringer her bidraget fra Danmark til den afsluttende session, og flere oplysninger om konferencen kan findes på <http://www.nordiclabourhistory.org/>

Nina Trige Andersen, cand.mag
Historiker og journalist
Email: Nina.Trige.Andersen@gmail.com

Nina Trige Andersen's presentation for the closing plenary session "The Future of Labour History in the Nordic Countries – Conferences, Networks, Research", XIV Nordic Labour Conference, Reykjavik, 28-30 November, 2016

I speak from outside but not disconnected from the research- and archive institutions, being a self-employed historian and journalist as well as being an active member of the Society for Labour History in Denmark (SFAH); as you heard yesterday at the plenary session on Migration, I also speak from the experience of engaging with historical inquiries into a field which had not prior been historicized – labor migration from the Philippines to Denmark from the mid 20th century onwards – and which had also not prior been documented in the traditional archival sense.

Mary Hilson, Silke Neunsinger, and Iben Vyff note in the introduction to a forthcoming book on labor, unions and politics in the Nordic countries from 1700 to 2000 – which they introduced at the book boxing yesterday – that the availability of sources has always structured the ways in which history has been written (Hilson, Neunsinger, and Vyff 2017, 2). This will be the point of departure for my contribution to this panel, because I believe that attention to this simple, but fundamental fact might well be crucial for our capacity to rethink the ways in which we build archives as well as write history, or histories.

Marcel van der Linden in his keynote Monday pointed out that while our research field might be in decline in the North, it is on the rise in the global South (van der Linden 2016). One might also add that while it seems that social and labor history is on the one hand being depleted of resources institutionally, at least in Denmark (whereas in Iceland, as we have learned during this conference, the heyday of labor history has not yet even occurred), it is on the other hand – also in the North, including Denmark – flourishing in terms of emergence of new perspectives, new methods, new

agents engaging in the field, and new objects of inquiry, new types of questions, as this conference so clearly has shown. There seems to be a window of opportunity rather than a crisis of social and labor history, but the extent to which we will be able to utilize these opportunities might rest on our capacity to bridge research and archival tradition and institutions with new ways of creating historical accounts.

I will argue that one of the endeavors we need to undertake in the coming years is to interweave more closely, temporally as well as spatially, the act of archiving and the act of researching and narrating. This entails decentralizing archival practices, and expanding our ideas of sources and where to find them. Historians – especially those who have challenged existing paradigms, for instance from the field of women's history – have always also challenged prevailing ideas of sources and how they can be used. Out of conversations in the Nordic women's history network came in 1991 the collection "Søg, og I skal finde: veje til kvinders historie i arkiver og samlinger" (Hjorth, Ilsø & Possing 1991) from women historians who were fed up with the argument that women were absent from historical accounts because there simply were no sources or not sufficient sources about women's lives. Historians and archivists have also, particularly since the 1980s, and in Finland systematically already from the 1960s, begun collecting oral narratives as a way of widening our access to studying the lives, not least the working lives, of people who are not otherwise well represented in the archives.

The act of archiving as well as the act of writing history has always been institutionally biased, with the main attention focused on those unions, organizations and associations which had the resources and self-awareness to document and archive and thus treat their past as history. As the institutional backing for maintaining and expanding archives of social and labor movements – as well as funding for historical research in general – is waning, we are forced to revisit our practices as historians and

archivists; instead of lamenting this, we might view it as a momentum. One way forward could be to rely less on what has already been archived, and what would conventionally be archived, and more on what could possibly be collected and archived in the course of particular historical inquiries. Inquiries which, as Dorothy Sue Cobble argued in her keynote yesterday, continue to expand whom we study and how we do it, thus expanding ideas of what is counted as work, labor, organizing and movements (Cobble 2016).

I'm not suggesting that we stop inquiring into existing archives, or that source collection is not already an ongoing and creative process – I'm suggesting, perhaps, a shift in perspective and work practices. By not accepting what is already counted as sources as the delineation of inquiry, but instead seeking out sources in odd-size places, the research and collection process inevitably renders visible aspects that you might not otherwise had thought to investigate.

Another reason for expanding our idea of what sources are and where these sources might be is the need to complicate the narratives that structure our field. Narratives of how our labor markets have been organized historically, for instance. As Marcel van der Linden pointed out, Standard Employment Relations is not a norm of capitalism but rather a historical exception, an anomaly that lasted perhaps 40 years in a particular part of the world. One could add to this that it might not even have been a norm – at least not as dominant and widespread as we tend to take for granted – during those 40 years, and not even in the Nordic states. In a Danish context, it seems that Standard Employment Relations were for instance never dominant when looking at private service jobs, and one might find that also in the industries that became formative to a trade union understanding of what “the Nordic model” is, it was always only some who were employed in this so-called standard way. Also, as Dorothy Sue Cobble pointed out yesterday

– and as the themes of the sessions throughout this conference have pointed to – there is much more to labor history than what takes place in the formal waged labor market.

I think one way of complicating our existing narratives and common understandings is to study social and labor history from the margins – for instance from the vantage point of migrants and other forms of itinerants; as one of the sessions on Monday did, from the perspective of petty traders, entrepreneurs and peddlers (who by the way were also often migrants). Such studies from the margins could complicate narratives of the prototype worker in the Nordic countries as male, white and straight, narratives of the manufacturing industry as formative to labor organizing and labor conflicts, narratives of concepts such as social dumping, narratives of who is a recognizable labor activist, as well as more broadly what can be counted as work and labor and how it can be understood. Such endeavors to complicate dominant narratives and frameworks for understanding social and labor history would also, I think, entail decentering and translocalizing not only our historical inquiries but also our archives and archival practices. Encounters such as those we have in the context of the Nordic Labor History Conference can be a fruitful platform for exchanging ideas on how to go about it. Thank you and looking forward to the discussion.

References

- Cobble, Dorothy Sue. 2016. *New Movements, New Paradigms: Reimagining Labour History for Our Future*. Keynote lecture, XIV Nordic Labour Conference.
- Hilson, Mary, Silke Neunsinger & Iben Vyff (eds). 2017. *Labor, Unions, and Politics under the North Star. The Nordic Countries 1700-2000*. Berghahn Books.
- Hjorth, Karen, Grethe Ilsøe & Birgitte Possing (eds). 1991. *Søg, og I skal finde: veje til kvinders historie i arkiver og samlinger*. ARKI-varia.
- van der Linden, Marcel. 2016. “Labour History Goes Global: Exploring Some New Developments in the Study of Work, Workers and Workers’ Movements”. Keynote lecture, XIV Nordic Labour Conference.