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Editorial

Work Semantics. In Search of an Alternative Conceptual Matrix for Labour and Social Historians

The idea for the project presented in this volume began with an encounter and a discovery. When we – a medievalist and a sinologist – first met in autumn 2017, we realised that although we came from different disciplines and worked on different regions and time periods, we were struggling with the same problem: As historians working on slaving practices in the Venetian empire (14th–16th centuries) respectively servitude in late imperial China (15th–19th centuries), we were both spending much of our time explaining the contextual differences and similarities between the social configurations we were studying to the broader community of social, labour, and global historians. We both felt that our objects of study did not fit well within the much-debated subfield of “free and unfree labour”, and that the postcolonial critiques and the so-called global turn in history did not solve the conceptual problem we were facing. Integrating a medieval or Chinese case study into a conference panel or a special journal issue on household service or slavery helped to enlarge the horizon of the historiographical debates on the history of unfree labour relations, but the umbrella terms of these subfields of study and the limited conceptual references available did little to help us understand and properly convey the social taxonomies shaping the power relations we were studying.

We wanted to move from the criticism of concepts marked by eurocentrism and presentism – as provided by scholars of global history and global studies including ourselves until now – to a more creative way of dealing with the conceptual matrix of the modern West as the master model for all histories. Our desire was to address the inner logic of the terms and concepts of less familiar contexts in more effective ways, and we thus decided to invert the procedure. Instead of enlarging and compli-

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cating the common understanding of concepts like ‘slavery’ or ‘servitude’ by adding pre-modern and non-European variations, we chose to start with the terms used in the source documents themselves and deduce our analytical categories and umbrella terms from there. The idea was to challenge the established scholarly language “from the margins” – that is, from contexts taking place before the rise of the so-called modern West (late medieval Venice) or beyond its reach (late imperial China) – by teaching ourselves a new analytical language of labour and power relations. Yet we knew that to put this idea into practice, we needed time to experiment; and we needed to be many.

When the COST Action “Worlds of Related Coercions in Work” (WORCK) was approved in summer 2019, a unique opportunity arose to transition from a somewhat utopian idea to a phase of exploration. As COST is an EU funding tool that does not finance research itself but the development of networks and the exchange of people and ideas, the prospect of four years of funding (2019–2023) allowed us to think of our idea in a more operational mode. Since its official start in November 2019, the WORCK network grew quickly, and today it includes as members around 250 scholars from history, anthropology, sociology, and political sciences, all addressing logics of labour and coercion in social and power relations within different time periods and world regions. Within the WORCK network, we established several working groups. One of them was dedicated to the idea of building a “Grammar of Coercion” from the trans-corpora analysis of pertinent documents across time and space.¹

Only a few weeks after the official start of the COST Action and an initial WORCK meeting in Lyon (France), the pandemic suddenly forced everybody to stay at home and devise new ways of connecting and exchange with colleagues from near and far. By consequence, from March 2020 onwards, a small group of 15 to 20 people met once a month via Zoom to talk about historical documents from all sorts of contexts that reflected coercion in worksites. We discussed the materiality and tradition of these documents as well as their perspective and language use, and we analysed their semantics of coercion with its social meanings.

These two-hour online meetings soon acquired the character of intense sessions of self-training. Explaining the grammar and semantic meanings of an Ottoman or Serbian text to an audience that doesn’t understand a single word of Turkish or has no knowledge of Slavic languages is a challenge in itself – for the presenter as much as for the listening colleagues. We quickly realised that we needed professional assistance from two sides: from the field of historical semantics and from that of digital humanities. Both have been booming over the last couple of years thanks to being

1 Worlds of Related Coercions in Work: <https://worck.eu/> (10 May 2023).

related to each other in various respects. We invited experts from both fields, from within the WORCK network and beyond, to deliver online training sessions. We participated in workshops and conferences from both disciplines and discussed the possibility of developing a prototype model for historical comparison across time and space that goes beyond current attempts in global history to challenge the theoretical mindset of the modern West.

Four names are of the utmost importance in this context: Tobias Hodel (Berne, Switzerland) and Silke Schwandt with her team (Bielefeld, Germany) closely followed our discussions as computational historians. They have created a demand-oriented and requirement-based digital infrastructure by implementing DKAN as a data publication platform and nopaque as a workflow tool for recognising and processing texts.² By allowing both the exchange of information and data sets as well as analysis of (textual) data, this research infrastructure enabled the participants of our working group to publish commented datasets and more elaborated data stories of the documents selected for interdisciplinary discussion on labour and coercion.³ On the other hand, since automatic text recognition tools like Transkribus and annotation tools like CATMA are integrated into the digital workflow of nopaque, exploratory attempts could be made to create a joint vocabulary for a cross-corpora matrix of analysis; several contributions included in this special issue are results of engagement with these digital tools.⁴ The other two colleagues guiding and supporting our collective efforts as professional advisors and critical friends were Ludolf Kuchenbuch (Berlin, Germany) and Thomas Wallnig (Vienna, Austria). Ludolf Kuchenbuch, a social and economic historian of the Early Middle Ages who began develo-

2 DKAN is a community-driven, free, and open-source open data platform that gives organisations and individuals ultimate freedom to publish and consume structured information. See DKAN Open Data Platform, <https://getdkan.org/> (10 May 2023). Nopaque (which stands for “not opaque”) is a “custom-built web application for researchers who want to get out more of their images and texts without having to bother about the technical side of things”. See <https://nopaque.uni-bielefeld.de/> (10 May 2023).

3 So far, ten data stories have been published. The cases discussed within them range from the interrogation of a runaway convict in eighteenth-century Denmark to the prosecution of a murderous female slave in Qing China; they deal with Latin Roman Law addressing duties and rights of landowners and tenants and study the fate of a runaway domestic worker in Late Ottoman Istanbul. See *Worlds of Related Coercions in Work*, “Data Stories”: <https://dkan.worck.digital-history.uni-bielefeld.de/?q=stories> (10 May 2023).

4 For Transkribus, see Guenter Muehlberger et al., *Transforming Scholarship in the Archives through Handwritten Text Recognition. Transkribus as a Case Study*, in: *Journal of Documentation* 75/5 (2019), 954–976. For CATMA, see Gius Evelyn/Jan Christoph Meister/Malte Meister et al., *forTEXT/catma: 6.2.0*, 2021. Online: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4728256> (10 May 2023). The authors are aware that the epistemological value of computer-generated analyses in history is an object of heated debate. For a recent overview, see Tobias Hodel, *Konsequenzen der Handschriftenerkennung und des menschlichen Lernens für die Geschichtswissenschaft. Anwendung, Einordnung und Methodenkritik*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 316 (2023), 151–180.

ping and applying historical semantics long before it became a recognised approach in history, never tired of sensitising our group of labour historians to the challenging relation between the emic level of language used by historical actors and the etic level of abstraction that historians need to attain while analysing and comparing their specific contexts of study. Thomas Wallnig, a scholar of the intellectual history of early modern Europe and digital humanist, has indefatigably acted as mediator between the scholarly language of the humanities and the fast-growing world of data scientists. He read and commented on nearly every working paper produced by the working group, enabling the editors of this issue to progressively develop their own ontology for a future “grammar of coercion”.

Given the current state of our joint endeavours, the purpose of this OeZG issue is twofold: On the one hand, it introduces the reader to the historical semantics approach in its range and variety as a way of studying historical documents from an emic perspective and shedding new light on conceptual debates and concerns of historiography after the global turn. On the other hand, it presents research from the field of global labour history that investigates coercion in worksites without using the binary mindset of the modern West (free/unfree, paid/unpaid, productive/reproductive, modern/premodern, capitalist/non-capitalist, colonial/non-colonial, etc.) as a misleading means of translation.

The structure of the issue reflects this twofold aim: The vade mecum and the interview following this editorial provide the reader with general reflections and practical guidance on how to apply the historical semantics approach and which digital tools are available or under development. The vade mecum is co-authored by an assembly of medievalist historians and philologists called the “HiSem Group” who met on a regular basis between 2012 and 2018 to experiment with different approaches to historical semantics and have supported the WORCK working group as trainers. Their paper is a synthesis of their experiments and includes a clear pledge to follow the emic perspective of historical actors. A number of brief vignettes demonstrate the many possible ways of doing historical semantics: examples of document-centred, onomasiological approaches to conceptualising social power relations stand side by side with semasiological or word-centred examples; methods of hermeneutic close reading and possibilities of corpus-driven computational analysis show the relevance of the approach to both micro-corpora and digital mass corpora, as well as to in-depth and long-term studies. The interview with Ludolf Kuchenbuch offers what might be called a Q&A for newcomers to the field and paints a vivid image of one of the seminal figures of the historical semantics approach for social history. The interview was prepared and conducted by master students of history attending a methods and theories class on historical semantics with Juliane Schiel at the University of Vienna.

The main section of the special issue presents a series of research papers by members of the working group “Grammars of Coercion” within the COST Action WORCK. These research papers cover a long period of time (from antiquity to contemporary examples) and a wide geographical scope. They work with legal and juridical documents as well as administrative, narrative, and fictional texts in different languages and scripts. They study rural and urban settings, public and domestic matters, and structural as well as life-course phenomena.

Each paper in the main section deals with an existing “problem” in labour history. What is new in this context is the collaborative endeavour to experiment with approaches inspired by historical semantics and/or digital humanities in order to revisit labour and coercion from a different perspective. While this joint experiment is only a first step toward a new semantics of work, we argue that it is already a significant step forward. It underscores the benefits of setting aside the established meanings of nominal categories and labels to propose a more dynamic and contextual rendering of power relations through the study of work. The articles gathered here are thus not merely a collection of methodology case studies or a collective illustration of the promises and the agility of historical semantics. Each article is also an innovative contribution to a particular topic or problem in the history of labour and coercion in its own right.

Ella Karev conducts a semasiological inquiry of the “oft-muddled Egyptian term” related to dependent labour, *nemeh*, whose various meanings and translations have long posed a conundrum for historians and philologists. Pointing to our contemporary inability to imagine a shared semantic scope behind the array of lexical meanings associated with the term *nemeh* (which range from ‘orphan’ to ‘unclaimed cow’ and ‘unenslaved person’), Karev proposes resolving this seemingly paradoxical semantic overlap by foregrounding the social value attached to the concept of ‘protection’ in ancient Egypt, where the opposite of enslavement was not a desirable freedom, as we may instinctively presume, but rather an undesirable state of ‘unprotection’. As a result, she emphasises the necessity to study semantic ranges as a whole and in relation to representations and social structures. Historical semantics, she argues, helps to understand how people in past societies classified their world more accurately by deriving meaning “from the social implications of semantic range” instead of from the context alone, as philology usually prescribes.

Colin Arnaud addresses another historiographical “paradox”, namely the apparently antagonistic intersection of remuneration and coerced labour described in two different European sources from the twelfth century: one dealing with remunerated captive weavers in the Arthurian romance *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, the other with hired workers forced to perform a humiliating task unrelated to their work recorded in the chronicle of the Abbey of Sint-Truiden. Rather than charac-

terising this combination as a transitional mixture produced by the passage from one mode of production to another, Arnaud combines a detailed semantic analysis of the action phrases contained in the sources with a wider corpus-based analysis.⁵ The onomasiological analysis of the term ‘poverty’ conducted to “measure the gradient of agency of the actors and the nature of coercion” demonstrates that while ‘poverty’ certainly had an economic dimension, the “mental frame” of the twelfth century saw it primarily related to a lack of agency and social recognition, and thus to social marginality – which in turn explains the possibility of such a coexistence of coercion and wages.

Clara Almagro Vidal adopts a similar action- and actor-centred approach to disentangle the nature of the bonds of dependence established when Muslims were incorporated as settlers into the lordship of Christian military orders in late medieval Iberia. Almagro Vidal analyses standardised and elusive source documents known as population charters. Methods inspired by historical semantics are combined with an examination of the form and structure of the sources to draw inferences on the unspoken distribution of power and the levels of subjugation lying behind the language of the charters. A more grammatical analysis helps her to foreground structural relations of subordination between the action phrases which, she argues, are reflective of imbalances between the actors involved and their respective levels of agency. In addition, Almagro Vidal sheds light on the formal aspects of the documents and proposes a broader evaluation of the roles assigned to each party as embedded in the charters. This approach leads to the conclusion that “content and container reinforced each other to transmit a message that would be clear to the reader”, meaning that the Muslims, though not unfree, were subject to a wide range of restrictions shaped by the interests of their new lords.

Whereas the analyses conducted by Arnaud and Almagro Vidal focus on the grammatical roles of the actors mentioned in action phrases, Corinna Peres goes one step further by combining a “role ontology” and an attribute-oriented approach with Maria Ågren’s verb-oriented method. Applied to a sample of fifty-three episto-

5 This method was developed through text annotation activities with CATMA according to an annotation model derived from the “verb-oriented” method developed by Maria Ågren and the “Gender and Work” project team combined with Marcel van der Linden’s proposal to dissect relations of coercions into moments of entry, extraction, and exit from a labour relation. See Maria Ågren, *Making Her Turn Around: The Verb-Oriented Method, the Two-Supporter Model, and the Focus on Practice*, in: *Early Modern Women* 13/1 (2018), 144–152, doi:10.1353/emw.2018.0057; Marcel van der Linden, *Dissecting Coerced Labor*, in: Marcel M. van der Linden/Magaly Rodríguez García (eds.), *On Coerced Labor. Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Leiden 2016, 291–322, doi:10.1163/9789004316386_014. The method developed by the “Grammars of Coercion” working group is described in Claude Chevalyere/Johan Lund Heinsen/Juliane Schiel, *Grammars of Coercion: Towards a Cross-Corpora Annotation Model*, WORCK Working Papers Series, doi:10.4119/unibi/2948493.

lary exchanges between the Tuscan merchant Francesco di Marco Datini, his wife Francesca, and several of their acquaintances, this trio of methods, Peres argues, “can help to understand group-related and individual degrees of (non-)control over actions in the arrangement of labour relations” – notably in the often elusive and marginal arrangements involving female slaves, servants, and wet nurses that are the focus of her study. The Datini letters contain information of variable density about the moment of entry into a labour relation and preceding negotiations. A carefully crafted combination of historical semantic approaches and distant reading contributes to evaluating levels of control over actions and bring the “negotiating scopes of the ‘marginalised’” to the “epistolary surface”. As a result, it shows how notions usually associated with slaves also applied to this larger group of women caught in the process of “negotiating and being negotiated” for work.

Josef Köstlbauer subsequently takes us to the Holy Roman Empire in 1754. Following the unusually well-documented case of the “fugitive slave” Samuel Johannes throughout the archives of the Moravian Church, Köstlbauer provides further evidence of the persistence of slavery on European soil in early modern times. A “micro-semantics” analysis based on determining the frequency of the emic labels applied to Samuel Johannes reveals how ill-circumscribed categories and polysemic labels like ‘slave’, ‘serf’, ‘servant’, or ‘Moor’ as well as their antonyms were fluidly mobilised to claim or refute authority and ownership over (formerly) enslaved individuals in a context where there was “no well-established legal categorisation and procedure applicable to enslaved people brought from colonial slaving zones”. Köstlbauer calls this practice “subjugation by labelling”, by which he means that labels “had to be constantly translated into actual practices and filled with meaning” to generate a convincing legal narrative of Samuel Johannes’ (natural) subservience. Perhaps more than any other article in this issue, Köstlbauer’s is a stark reminder of the pitfalls of label-driven analyses of labour and power relations, as well as of the need to “look behind” concepts like slavery.

Finally, Massimiliano Livi examines the profound transformations which the Italian “ideology of labour” underwent as a result of the crisis of the 1970s, along with the complex legacies of the theoretical and practical responses to the soaring unemployment and the erosion of the social model centred on factory wage labour that followed. Focusing on the reconfiguration of ideas and discourses concerning the relation between labour, emancipation, individual freedom, profit, and consumerism as conveyed in magazines close to the *Autonomia* movement between 1974 and 1979, Livi adopts an onomasiological and document-centred approach driven by computational network analysis. This thorough analysis brings the subjectivity of the “new youth proletariat” and its changed perception of labour to the fore. Besides illustrating the well-studied rejection of (capitalist) wage labour as something that

individuals should be liberated from, Livi also highlights a semantic redefinition of labour as an “object to be freed in order to make it part of a personal dimension of self-realisation”, which resulted in experimentation with new, more flexible and individualised forms of work. As his analysis reveals, this redefinition subsequently triggered another shift “away from the criticising of capitalism and towards a postmodern political claim to the satisfaction of needs and desires”. This ultimately laid the foundations for a further development during the 1990s “into the neoliberal ‘myth of independence and self-entrepreneurship’”. In the process, Livi underlines several of the benefits of historical semantics for the study of contemporary history – in particular, its ability to help historians foreground “the performative capacity of individual semantic elements in the formation of new cultural patterns and standards of orientation for society, both at the level of discourse and of practices”.

Let us conclude with a status quo observation: The reader of this issue will easily notice that even though the COST Action WORCK includes scholars from all historical periods and world regions, the composition of the contributions to this volume features a clear focus on Europe and premodern times, with a majority of the contributors from German-speaking academia. Besides the fact that the genealogy of this volume is closely connected to the “HiSem Group” of primarily German-speaking medievalists, there are presumably three reasons for this. First, the history of concepts and semantics has a very strong and long tradition in German-speaking academia going back to the mammoth postwar project of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* by Reinhart Koselleck and others.⁶ The achievements of this historiography are still little known in anglophone academia. Second, the digitisation of historical documents written in other languages than those of the so-called West is still in its infancy. The effort required from a sinologist, a scholar of Ottoman history, or an Eastern European historian to contribute to this volume are disproportionately higher – not only because the number of digitally available documents is oftentimes much lower, but also because most of the existing digital word processing and text analysis tools have been developed and trained with and for the more dominant source and research languages of the academic world and are less efficient (for now) at recognising non-Latin characters. And third, the historical semantics approach seems more intuitive for scholars working on periods before 1800 or on regions outside the colonial history of the West than for our colleagues working on the modern world and contemporary societies. Nevertheless, questioning the semantic meaning of the words used by or in the respective actors and testimonies as well as reflecting

6 Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols., Stuttgart 1972–1997. On the international impact, see Iain Hampsher-Monk/Karin Tilmans/Frank van Vree (eds.), *History of Concepts. Comparative Perspectives*, Amsterdam 1998.

our own language of analysis to describe and categorise should be one of the primary goals of our joint endeavour to do social history from below after the “global turn”. This volume is therefore an invitation to modern and contemporary historians, anthropologists, and sociologists of the modern era to join this debate and the collaborative efforts for a “Grammar of Coercion”.

Claude Chevalyere and Juliane Schiel