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**L'Afrique et les défis du XXIème siècle
Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century
A África e os desafios do Século XXI**

إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

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**Archives on Social and Labour History:
The International Institute of Social History and Africa"**

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**Archives on Social and Labour History: The International
Institute of Social History and Africa**

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In a book edited by Antoniette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, the different contributing authors present their own method of interaction with archives,¹ explaining and analysing how archives are constructed, policed, manipulated, and experienced. These multiple approaches challenge the claims to objectivity associated with the traditional archive. At the International Institute of Social History (IISH) we collect archives with the aim of securing a historical record for those sectors of society that are not traditionally represented in State-owned archives, and this is what the IISH understands as “social history”. This brings with it a subjective element to the collecting process of archives and collections in Africa. Records relating to trade unions, political movements, rebel organisations, oral histories, cyberspace, etc. are collected to ensure that this historical testimony is not lost.

In short, the IISH collects African materials relating to movements with a “cause”, and it is then up to the historians who make use of these materials to highlight their meaning and value, in particular in terms of building a social and labour history. What is the “deep register” of archives?² Archives can be illuminating not only in terms of shedding light on the policy decisions and course of action followed by different movements, but also in terms of revealing the contradictions of labour or social history: at times laying bear the anxieties and failures of these movements and peoples. The IISH’s attitude is to embrace these aspects as well and not to impose a glorified vision of worker and rebel movements or seek to find a forced cohesion where the reality shows a tangle of different ideologies and power struggles.

¹A. Burton (ed.) *Archives Stories: Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History*, Duke University Press, Durham 2005.

² On the idea of “deep register” Stoler *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009.

1. A Brief History of the IISH

The International Institute of Social History (IISH) is one of the world's largest documentation and research centres in the field of social history. Since its foundation in 1935, the Institute has dedicated itself to collecting, preserving and rendering accessible the heritage of social movements worldwide. The archive centre of the Institute is independent from the Dutch Government as it constitutes an autonomous foundation – the IISH Foundation. This makes it a natural depository for materials relating to the threatened cultural heritage of labour movements and other freedom and opposition movements (including extremist groups, such as Anarchist or terrorist groups like the German Rode Armee Fraktion).

The research department of the Institute, instead, focuses on the history of labour relations and organizes international projects and conferences in this field. The collection (archives, library and audio-visual materials) of the IISH takes up well over 50 kilometres of shelf room of books, organisational and personal archives, audio-visual, volumes of grey literature, pamphlets, propaganda material, posters, etc.

The available collections are accessible through an online catalogue, and an online index of archives and inventories visible on the webpage of the institute³. Apart from the archive itself (which, as already mentioned, belongs to the IISH Foundation), the IISH is an institute that comes under the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

The IISH was founded by Prof. Posthumus (1880-1960), the first Dutch professor of Economic History. He initially founded the Netherlands Economic History Archive (NEHA) in 1914, which was dedicated to collecting, preserving, arranging and processing source materials relevant to economic history. In addition to a great many corporate archives, which have been entrusted to municipal or State repositories since the 1970s, and an important collection of memorabilia, manuscripts, and documents, the Netherlands Economic History Archive has accumulated an impressive book collection. Today, the IISH-NEHA library ranks very high in the world in the field of economic history.

In 1935, Prof. Posthumus founded the International Institute of Social History in order to collect material on the history of labour and labour movements. The original idea was to save books and archives from destruction during the Nazi and Fascist

³ See: www.iisg.nl

periods of domination. This is why, for example, the IISH holds the Marx and Engels archives, the archives of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, as well as Anarchist collections, and others.

In 1989, the collections of the Netherlands Economic History Archives and the International Institute of Social History were brought together under a single organisational structure and housed within the same building and took the sole name of the International Institute of Social History.

Initially, the geographical emphasis was primarily on Western Europe, the Netherlands and the Dutch colonies. The Institute stood almost alone in its efforts to rescue the literary heritage of the European labour movement from dictatorships of every shade and hue, prior to the outbreak of World War II. After the war it remained for a long time an indispensable repository for the archives of numerous organisations and individuals within and outside the Netherlands. In more recent times, the Institute has gradually expanded to cover archives and collections of labour and social movements from all over the world.

2. The IISH, Archives and Global Labour History

Today, although it still remains a very important resource for international movements and organisations, the Institute is less involved with local representatives in Europe, the main reason being that almost all European countries now have excellent national archive institutions which gather their own local material on labour and social matters.

This development has provided an opportunity for the Institute to concentrate on other parts of the world where its expertise may be valuable. Thus, in recent years, the Institute has taken the initiative of going beyond the borders of traditional, Eurocentred labour history. From the 1990s onward, there has been an increasing collaboration with historians from other continents, initially in Eastern Europe and South-East Asia, and more recently in North-Africa. In 2002, the International Institute of Social History established a permanent regional office in South-East Asia. More precisely the Regional Office is located in Bangkok, Thailand. A few years later, another office was established in Moscow. In the last fifteen years, many non-European archives have been rescued for posterity. To promote these archives and

collections, the Institute has organised an extensive international network of regional correspondents.

Underpinning this initiative was the objective of giving the mission of the Institute a truly international remit. Today collecting and digitalising archives at the IISH coincides happily with new trends in historical research, notably the growing interest in labour history worldwide (as mentioned before the IISH is also a research centre on social history).

An important tool of historical research was a series of comparative (and often interdisciplinary) projects, in which specialists from some fifty countries have taken part. More recently, this activity was combined with collective long-term research projects, providing support for conferences and research activities in the so-called Global South - Asia, Latin America, and Africa - as well as the construction of transcontinental databases.

These developments in historical research have been reinforced and strengthened by the infrastructural support of the IISH (its archives and library). Through the integration of historical research and collecting and documentation activities, the Institute has become the epicentre for the construction of so-called “meta-data sources”, web services, and publications on social and labour history.

In order to better understand the relationship between collection and research on labour history, please allow me to spend a few words on the issues of collection on global history and meta-sources. The mission of the IISH, as social history research centre, consists in promoting a transition to global labour history: that is to say a history of worldwide labour relations as well as keeping a record of grassroots protests and organisational forms over the last centuries.

It is believed by the group of researchers who are working at the Institute, or in collaboration with it, that such a historiography not only has an intrinsic scientific and cultural value, but provides some social orientations in these times of accelerating globalisation. The historical research carried out at the Institute therefore concentrates on the archival, documentation and library material that is already available at the Institute. Furthermore, the research on global labour history guides the profile of new collections in this area. This is why, increasingly, researchers at the IISH are also collectors (like myself).

On global labour history, the International Institute of Social History is the official repository of global organisations such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (which constitutes one of the most frequently consulted sources for the historical development of trade unions in the Global South since the 1950s). Other “minor” archives (or *fonds*), such as for example the archives of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, and General Workers’ Unions, contain a wealth of material on labour throughout the globe; the same applies to organisations which promote human rights, such as Amnesty International.

The Institute also actively creates documentation sources itself. For example, a project group from Islamabad, in 2003, produced a large quantity of photographic and audio material, documenting the harsh working conditions of those who labour in the coal, salt, and other mines in Pakistan, but also the living conditions of their families. A documentary and photographic project was commissioned earlier in Afghanistan on migrant workers in Iran. Currently, oral history projects are being realised relating to Myanmar and Indonesia, among others.

3. A Few Words on “Meta-sources”...

Since the very beginning, it has become evident that global labour history is in need of new databases. There are two closely interconnected tasks here. On the one hand, there is the collection of large quantities of quantitative and qualitative data, on such themes as the structure of the world labour force, real wages, demographic developments and workers movements. On the other hand, we have the task of developing techniques and methodologies making it possible to compare data gathered from different contexts.

The Institute is actively engaged in constructing several global databases, while other databases are in preparation. An important project in this area regards historical wages and prices⁴. Such data are among the most important sources of information regarding social and economic historical research, especially for the so-called pre-statistical period.

The Institute has taken the initiative of setting up a network of scholars working with this kind of data, and establishing a moderated list of data-files of historical prices and wages. Three kinds of sources have been made available to

⁴ See: www.iisg.nl/hpw

researchers. A list of data files available online: an index to other website containing statistical data; an overview of the value of the guilder from 1450 onwards with links to the sites of the values of the US dollar since 1665 and the British pound since 1660. Other databases under construction focus on strikes, guilds and labour contracts.

The Historical Sample of the Netherlands (HSN) – a representative sample of life-history of about 80.000 people born in the Netherlands between 1812 and 1922 – is a national meta-data source, created in collaboration with other databases (such as for example Taiwan) trying to make it possible transcontinental comparisons.

One attempt to make comparisons of data from different contexts possible is the Historical International Standard Classification of Occupations (HISCO) project. This is an occupational information system that is both international and historical, and simultaneously links to the existing classifications used for present-day living and working conditions.

Currently the HISCO standard is based on coding the thousand most frequent male and female occupational titles in datasets from eight different countries (Canada plus seven other European nations), spanning the period 1670 to 1970, but mostly from the Nineteenth century. The coding of new data is now undertaken in Latina America, Oceania, Asia (and possibly Africa).

4. The TOCO project: Africa comes into the picture at the IISH

TOCO, which is the acronym in Dutch of Future (or Upcoming) Organsiation of IISH's Collection and Research (ToekomstigeOrganisatie IISG Collectievorming en Onderzoek), is a programme that has been running since 2010. The TOCO programme aims at strengthening the collection building activity of the IISH in the field of social movements in six regions of the world: 1) Eastern Europe and Russia (Moscow); 2) the Middle-East and Central Asia (Istanbul); 3) South Asia (Ranchi, India); 4) South-East Asia (Bangkok); 5) Latin-America; and of course 6) Sub-Sahara Africa.

At this point in time the TOCO is still in its infancy. In Ethiopia the IISH is on the point of opening its regional office for Sub-Sahara Africa. In Africa, we have already started collecting materials relating to the Sudanese Communist Party and the Republican Brothers. In Ethiopia we have an agreement to digitise some of the collections at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, such as for example the so-called "subversive movements collection" (which although is kept tucked away in the

basement of the building, is nonetheless at risk of natural deterioration, and therefore a candidate for safekeeping). Also in Ethiopia the IISH is looking into how it can participate in the safeguarding of the Archives of the "Patriotic front" made up of anti-Italian occupation activists in the 1930s, and the IISH is collaborating with archivists and collectors of the Red Terror Museum of Addis Ababa (where there is a repository of Ethiopian oppositional movements, especially students' one, against the Derg Regime).

In Senegal, the IISH is looking into the possibility of organising the digitalisation of regional archives of labour unions and socialist parties. In Senegal, the Archives Nationales already possess the so-called "S-series", where there are collections of Senegalese Socialist and Trade Unionist's movements. The IISH wishes to concentrate its efforts on safeguarding the regional repositories of the *Partie socialiste* or local offices of trade unions, which are more vulnerable to natural deterioration and vandalism. In Ghana, the IISH is seeking to digitalise the files of the Bureau of African Affairs at George Padmore Library in Accra. The BAA files are important because they contain a wealth of historical information on the organisational support given by the neo-independent Ghana to other brotherly anti-colonial movements throughout Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. Letter, pamphlets, reports etc. are at risk of natural deterioration and the IISH intends to collaborate with local historians and archivists for this not to occur and this history to be preserved. In Kenya, the Confederation of Trade Unions (COTU) has offered support to the IISH to digitalise Trade Union materials, not only at its headquarters at the Solidarity House in Nairobi but also in regional offices (Kisumu, Mombasa, Nakuru etc.). As labour history lies at the centre of the research activities of the IISH - where the subject of "Global Labour History" has been developed and divulged - collaborations with Trade Unions and other types of labour movements and organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa is of particular importance to the IISH.

These are only few examples of colonial and nascent post-postcolonial archives that the Africa Desk of the IISH is looking to protect and safeguard. The general principle here is that archives of labour and social movements should stay where they are, and as much as possible be protected in situ. For this reason the IISH strategy is that of placing much emphasis on the digitalisation of materials. This also allows the IISH to use resources and forces in loco for the digitalising, describing and recording

processes. This transfer of technology is essential to the IISH mission. Africa – like other places all over the world – is much in need of know-how on digitalisation, maintenance and protection of collections. Sometimes States can provide enough support for their own archives, but what happens to the peoples’ histories? The IISH aims at diffusing a sense that archiving and collecting historical material is not only a “State business” but also a people’s or social mission (this is what is meant by the expression: the “deep register” of Social History).

The African Desk’s headquarters is located in Amsterdam. From here it organises the process of transfer of technological knowledge in Africa by supporting, training and equipping its “regional desk” located in Addis Ababa. The regional desk is managed by a regional representative of the IISH and it organises the monitoring of collections that need to be preserved. With time it is hoped that the regional desk will also play a role in terms of being a point of reference for social historians in Africa that seek support and collaboration for the safeguarding of collections of labour and social history they may encounter when undertaking their research.

In this respect, the regional office and the headquarters office also support regional correspondents from different countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. The correspondents are usually academics or activists (especially labour activists) that act as eyes and ears in different countries. They too are trained in state-of-the-art archival techniques (especially digitalisation). Where possible the correspondents take regular trips to Amsterdam or Addis Ababa (which was chosen in part for its facilities as air transport hub). The countries in which existing correspondents are already present are: Ghana, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Sudan. Many more should hopefully follow.

5. In conclusion

The regional desk in Africa is a new initiative of the IISH that grew from the longstanding philosophy underscoring the activities of the Institute. The work of the Africa desk is in its early stages – as is the case with the Latin America desk. The future will surely present many challenges that cannot yet be fully foreseen. In any event, the Institute’s mission is clear: to assist, with the help of local historians, in identifying and preserving archives relating to the people’s history – often relating to groups that have acted as a thorn in the side of Governments and which as a result are

not included in State archives and which might be at risk of being forgotten or even destroyed.

If history is made by a continuous struggle between social groups or classes, we must make every effort to ensure that the records of the dispossessed are also brought to light, and not just the records of those in power (recorded in State archives). The forces that throughout history have had the courage to challenge that power, the rebels of the world, must also be remembered and studied – with their successes, flaws and their idiosyncrasies. The IISH Africa desk hopes to make a small but valuable contribution in this respect and to encourage researchers and academics to use the archive collection to inform their own research on labour matters in Africa.

This is our challenge!