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## Longer, broader, deeper, and more personal – the renewal of labour history in the Nordic countries

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### ABSTRACT

This article deals with the recent developments of labour history in and about the Nordic countries. We identify patterns, problems and possibilities in these recent developments in the field – roughly within the last two decades. Our main source of analysis is the research presented and exchanged in the Nordic labour history journals, the Nordic Labour History Network, the labour history associations, the archives and libraries. We relate current trends to developments in European and Global labour history. We claim that the revival and expansion of Nordic labour history must also be understood through its exchange with labour history outside the Nordic sphere and with other disciplines and research fields. The expansion of the field occurred through increased attention and sensitivity to the specificities of various forms of labour, the lived lives of those who work, the places in which work takes place, the various ways in which workers form collective practices and structures, and how they understand themselves in relation to as well as within and outside the parties and institutions that organise and claim to represent workers and labour interests.

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## Introduction

This article examines recent developments in labour history in (and about) the Nordic countries. We define labour history as the history of those who work(ed), of what work was and how it was organised, as the history of workers' struggles, and the structures that aided and limited those struggles. Labour history, therefore, includes the history of work and the history of workers' movements in all its dimensions.

As Fredrick Cooper stated, labour history has been closely connected with the development of labour movements (Cooper, 2019). In the Nordic countries, this has taken a particular route as labour history there is linked not only with the establishment of an institutional infrastructure that has sought to politically and socially support the working class but also with the establishment of institutions – archives and libraries – that preserve and curate the legacy of those struggles. The archives and libraries of the labour movements in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are the oldest existing labour history institutes in the world. They were founded to counter the nationalist

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history production of the universities at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since then, there has been a longstanding tradition of generating and facilitating labour history inside the Nordic labour movements. In addition, the outcome of the Nordic labour movements' struggles for equality had drawn the interest of scholars since at least the 1930s, an interest which intensified from the 1950s on, when labour history increasingly became a field of academic research (Hilson et al., 2017a).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the emerging neo-liberal turn in the Nordic countries and Europe, the left parties and the labour movement went through a crisis. This also included the institutional weakening of labour history and a decline in research on work and research employing a class perspective. Instead, the focus shifted toward the Nordic welfare states' history and the Cold War (Knudsen, 2020). During the 1990s and early 2000s, the history of trade unions was commonly narrated through what could be called the centenary genre: chronologically organised publications about labour movement organisations, many of them paradoxically celebratory at a time when many trade unions were starting to lose members and responding to their weakness at the base by mergers (Misgeld et al., 1989; Johansson & Magnusson, 1998; Due, Madsen, Johansen, & Søndergård, 2007; Olstad, 2009; Bjørnhaug & Halvorsen, 2009; Bergh, 2009; Ísleifsson, 2013; Pétursson, 2011-2015; Smidt, 2022; Ala-Kapee & Valkonen, 1982; Valkonen, 1987; Bergholm, 2005, 2007, 2012, 2018). At the same time, while communist organisations were disintegrating, research on communism in the Nordic countries thrived from the 1990s due, among other factors, to the increased access to archives of the international communist movement in Moscow (Knudsen, 2020, pp. 116-117).

Since the turn of the millennium, labour history has slowly entered a revival. This revival is characterised by expanding the field generationally, institutionally, and thematically through a sprawling sub-terrain of new generations of researchers working within and outside academic and labour history institutions. Many look at labour history from fresh perspectives, moving beyond the history of labour institutions and organisations and the more traditional theoretical framework of modernisation theory and Marxism. What is understood as (belonging to) labour history, with regards to definitions (of work, workers, workplace, organisational structures, etc.) as well as with regard to time and space, has broadened. This is epitomised in the revival of the Nordic Labour History Conferences in 2016, held regularly for three decades from 1974 to 2004.

This article identifies patterns, problems, and possibilities of these recent developments in the field – roughly within the last two decades. It is, therefore, not a comprehensive account of the development of Nordic labour history nor a complete survey of the literature on labour history from the last twenty years. This has already been done recently in a comprehensive historiographical overview which aimed, amongst other things, to take stock of 'the dominant directions in Nordic labour history, as well as its blind spots.' The 2017 overview draws attention to how previous research (with notable exceptions) tended to highlight a particular type of worker, namely one who was 'white, male and employed in the industry' (Hilson et al., 2017a, p. 4). It also indicated that the last few decades have witnessed a renaissance in research on labour history in the Nordic countries, which has broadened the subject in terms of temporal and spatial scope and with new shifts in analytical focus foregrounding historical actors previously marginal or ignored (Hilson et al., 2017a, pp. 3-4). In this article, we direct our focus on these recent trends. We show that the expansion of Nordic labour history has particularly occurred through increased attention and sensitivity to the specificities of various forms of labour, to the lived lives of those who work, the places in which work takes place, the multiple ways in which workers form collective practices and structures, and how they understand themselves in relation to in and outside the parties and institutions that organise and claim to represent workers and labour interests. Our primary source of analysis is the research presented and exchanged in the Nordic labour history journals, the activities taking place within the Nordic Labour History Network founded in 2017, such as

conferences and seminars, within the Nordic labour history associations and societies, and the labour movement archives and libraries.<sup>1</sup>

Though the article focuses on research that deals specifically with the Nordic context, we connect this research to European and global labour history developments. This is, in fact, part of our argument as such: we claim that the revival and expansion of Nordic labour history must be understood through its exchange with labour history outside the Nordic sphere – as well as the interaction between labour history and other disciplines and research fields bordering labour history. The authors of this article represent perspectives from the national contexts of five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and operate within, across, and beyond the research infrastructure of these countries: university institutions, archives, labour history societies, and journals. We all work on labour history in the Nordic countries, but also beyond them, through our research and research exchanges with colleagues outside the Nordic region, such as the European Labour History Network and the Global Labour History Network. We start with a short outline of the specificities of recent and ongoing labour history research in each country before we turn to feminist influences, followed by the recent expansion in space, time and content of labour history. Finally, we discuss the consequences of methods, theory, and concepts and point to some of the main perspectives and connections still underexplored in Nordic Labour History, such as the absence of indigenous people and colonial legacies in the historiography.

### Institutional landscapes of Nordic labour history

Today, the field of labour history looks different in the various Nordic countries. While its position in the academic landscapes in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden is strong, it is less so in Norway and particularly in Iceland, where, with no labour history journal nor a specific labour history archive, the infrastructure for labour history is considerably weaker than in the other Nordic countries. The Icelandic language also lacks a specific term for labour history. The term used is ‘verkalýðssaga’, a word that directly translates to ‘proletarian history,’ which does not sit well with many contemporary practitioners of labour history in Iceland. Individual Icelandic historians have, however, made some significant contributions to the development of labour history in the Nordic countries. The 2016 Nordic Labour History Conference took place in Reykjavík. It attracted Icelandic scholars who would typically not regard themselves as labour historians and actively participated in the revival and further development of the Nordic Labour History Network. Traditional labour history is also alive and well in Iceland. A two-volume history of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour was published in 2013 (Ísleifsson, 2013), and several other works have been published within the centenary genre on specific craft unions such as pharmacists and net-makers (Gunnarsdóttir, 2020; Guðjónsson, 2021). Also, since the 1990s, Icelandic researchers have contributed to the history of communism, social democracy, and antifascism in the Nordic countries (e.g. Egge & Rybner, 2015; Jónsson, 2019; Kristjánsdóttir & Järvstad, 2019). Finally, Icelandic historians have contributed to the broadening of the field by looking outside the traditional topics of labour history, focusing instead on labour relations, work, and workers’ lives in pre-industrial Iceland (Vilhelmsson, 2017; Vilhelmsson, 2020; Hallgrímsdóttir, 2021; Gunnlaugsson, 2020; Ásmundsdóttir, 2021) and studying previously ignored workers such as female domestic workers in rural Iceland in the latter half of the twentieth century (Eygerðardóttir, 2022).

Norway has a well-established infrastructure for labour history, with the Norwegian Labour Movement Archives and Library (ARBARK) playing an active role and drawing on a long tradition of interest in the working classes dating back to the interwar period. ARBARK’s yearbook *Arbeiderhistorie* (published since 1987) publishes articles on a wide variety of topics, illustrated, for example, by the latest number (2022), which includes research on diverse issues such as whalers’ football interest, seafarers’ experiences during World War II, and legislation on industrial homework.

<sup>1</sup>For the conferences see <http://www.nordiclbourhistory.org/> latest accessed 28 June 2022

The 2022-issue also initiated a debate on the future of labour history in Norway, a discussion that was subsequently continued at the meeting of historians in Norway, *Norske historiedager* in June 2022. Contributors to the debate generally describe the field as less popular today than ‘some decades ago.’ (Knudsen, 2020, p.190). However, it is also emphasised that numerous historians still work within the field of labour history. Many of the proposals for where labour history should go in the future reflect trends from global labour history or the discipline in general, such as expanding the concept of work to include non-market-oriented work (Hagemann, 2022) and including previously overlooked groups, such as the marginalised poor (Kjeldstadli, 2022; Bergkvist, 2022) and immigrants (Bals, 2022). In addition, labour history still plays a vital role in local history. For instance, labour historians are employed at local museums that display the labour history of specific industries and their entanglements with other historical contexts (Meyer, 2012).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, labour history in Denmark primarily focused on the history of the Cold War, trade unions and the Danish workers’ parties, and the development of the welfare state. Lately, however, the fields of interest have expanded. Knud Knudsen notes in a historiographic article written on the 50th anniversary of the Society for Labour History (SFAH) that, for instance, in the more recent trade union centennial literature, interest seems to have shifted from the workers’ organisations to workplaces and the workers themselves (Knudsen, 2020, p. 112). The SFAH has, together with the Workers Museum and the Workers Movement’s Archive and Library (ABA) in Denmark, been fundamental for maintaining an infrastructure for labour history in a Danish context, also in the years when labour history was marginal in the academic institutions. Since 1999 the SFAH has annually (except in the years 2004, 2012, and 2014) awarded a prize – *Arbejderhistorieprisen* – to one or several masters or Ph.D. theses in labour history. The recipients of this prize illustrate the broad scope of labour history research done by young scholars in the last two decades: from the more established fields of communism studies and history of Social Democracy, the welfare state, the Cold War, and biographical research on ‘famous’ (often male) figures from the labour movement to more marginalised areas such as individual and collective memory, workers’ housing, women in labour struggles, working women’s daily lives, rural workers’ nutrition, de-industrialisation, and politics of the street.<sup>2</sup> The Workers Museum – to which members of more than 40 Danish trade unions have free access – similarly reflects this combination of ‘traditional’ labour history and a broadened scope of labour history in their exhibitions and events. The same can be said about the annual labour history festival – *Arbejderhistoriefestival* – which has been organised by the SFAH since 2014 and is attended by up to 500 people. One of the latest initiatives of SFAH is to integrate the podcast medium in its activities, which – partly due to the nature of the medium’s strengths and weaknesses – gives priority to *story* and *narrative*, thus contributing to the heightened attention to lived lives and odd sized stories from labour history rather than institutional and organisational history. In addition, there has been a renewed interest in workers’ literature, fuelled, among other things, by the 150th anniversary of the writer Martin Andersen Nexø’s birth in 2019. Social history as a part of the broader field of labour history is still a strong current in recent research (Knudsen, 2020, pp. 120–121). From a social history perspective and related to welfare state history, there also seems to be a renewed interest in the institutions established to manage the working class and its offspring, poverty institutions, and institutions for children and youth (e.g. Bjerre, 2021; Larsen, 2020).

The Swedish labour movement archives and library (ARAB) has had a research department since the beginning of the 1980s, which has served as an essential infrastructure for seminars and conferences, the Swedish labour history journal, and as a meeting place for academics and activists with a straightforward approach of a co-production of knowledge. The term *arbetarhistoria* – labour history – has been used as the title of the journal since 1984 (the journal was founded in 1977) and covers both the history of workers, the history of working life (*arbetslivshistoria*) and

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<sup>2</sup>The list of prizes can be found here: <https://sfah.dk/aktuelt/arbejderhistorieprisen/tidligere-prismodtagere/> (last accessed October 20, 2022)

the history of the labour movement (*arbetarrörelsens historia*). ARAB has strongly influenced the expansion of labour history to global labour history and has actively worked to broaden the content and definitions of labour history. Until 2007, when the Swedish Institute for Working Life (*Arbetslivsinstitutet*) was closed, it had also been an essential institution for labour history. The Centre for Labour History at Lund university (*Centrum för Arbetarhistoria*) was the result of the labour history seminar at Lund university, bringing together scholars and workers in study circles to write their history; this has been an essential contribution to Swedish labour history, as well as the biannual national labour history conferences organised by the Centre (Hillborn et al., 2022).

ARAB has hosted many international conferences and workshops since 1980, amongst them many about transnational and global labour history and several global collaborative research projects. Feminist history, local history, radical history, and global labour history, especially under the influence of the International Institute of Social History and labour historians from the global South, have been essential for developing labour history in Sweden during the last two decades. The journal *Arbetarhistoria* has illustrated these trends with thematic issues on global and feminist labour history, discussing long-term perspectives, free and unfree labour and labour migration. It has also published translated articles dealing with transnational, global, and foreign labour history to inspire Swedish scholars to look beyond their national borders.

Unlike the developments in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, the Finnish labour memory institutions were separated into individual archives, libraries, and a museum in the 1980s to acquire targeted public funding for each sector. The Finnish Society for Labour History (*Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura*) was founded in 1984 to establish labour history research. The disciplines of ethnology and folklore have had a greater impact on developing the subdiscipline of labour history in Finland than in other Nordic countries. This can be noted in the society's original name in Finnish<sup>3</sup>, which is longer than the English translation because it includes the disciplines of ethnology and folklore (Markkola, 2013, p. 33).

There have been two yearly publications on labour history in Finland: The Finnish Labour Studies Yearbook (*Työväentutkimus vuosikirja* since 1987) and *Väki Voimakas* (The yearbook of The Society of Finnish Labour History, since 1985). The Finnish Labour Studies Yearbook is co-published by all labour memory institutions and the Finnish Society for Labour History. It was modelled on the Swedish labour history yearbook (Pesonen, 2019, p. 162–163) and published academic and amateur historians' articles. *Väki Voimakas* concentrates on publishing research articles. The society's yearly summer seminar is organised by member researchers and is based on alternating themes. The seminar has recently changed its language policy by inviting foreign keynote lectures. The workers' literature group has two similar events in Finland, the workers' literature day in Tampere, which the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas have organised since 2010, and the workers' literature days in Helsinki (since 2014), which is hosted by the Labour Movement Library and managed by volunteers.

Several pan-Nordic projects have emerged in recent years, for instance, dealing with Nordic labour history in general (Hilson et al., 2017a), the history of communism (Egge & Rybner, 2015), the history of antifascism in the Nordic countries (Braskén, Copsey, & Lundin, 2020), and the history of social movements in the Nordic countries (Mikkelsen, Kjeldstadli, & Nyzell, 2018). Furthermore, a Nordic network for research in worker's literature has been established. Research has been conducted on the political tourism of members of the labour movement *Arbetarhistoria/Arbejderhistorie* 137 (2011:1). Nevertheless, even though some of these publications and projects try to synthesise the developments throughout the Nordic region, most of the contributions have been written in specific national contexts. In line with a well-established tradition in the Nordic countries and, to a large extent, motivated by the similarities between the welfare

<sup>3</sup>The Finnish title was originally translated in English as the Finnish Society for Labour History and Cultural Traditions, but it was later the Society's website assumed the shorter version of the name.

states of these countries, they mostly offer the first step to comparisons. In contrast, the entanglements and connections between the different contexts in the Nordic countries often remain underexplored.

### ***The influence of feminist labour history***

In 2008 the second international ‘Labouring Feminism Conference,’ a conference with an outspoken feminist perspective attracting more than 180 feminist historians from all over the world, took place in Stockholm. This conference marked a change in labour history. Studies of women’s work and women in labour movements in the Nordic countries had been elements of labour history when the field was growing in the 1970s and 1980s but, during the 1990s, many feminist labour historians moved to the field of gender history and were not very active within the field of labour history. Since the 2008 conference, however, we have seen a reversal of this trend as gender historians again have moved to labour history. The history of the lives and agency of women workers is becoming ever more prominent within labour history, often with both a feminist and a global perspective. It can even be argued that feminist labour history has been a major driving force in the transformations of Nordic labour history in the last 10–15 years, a trend that has also occurred in other regions of the world (Betti et al., 2022).

This trend has gone hand in hand with a change in the gender balance among Nordic labour historians during the past couple of decades, as can be seen in the increased number of female historians contributing to the labour history journals, as well as their participation at the renewed Nordic labour histories conferences, first in Reykjavík 2016, then in Copenhagen 2022. Both meetings had an equal gender balance among their participants, and several keynotes dealt with feminist labour history.

Since the turn of the millennium, feminist labour historians have made women’s work visible, for instance, through research on non-market-oriented work. Here Gro Hagemann’s project on the history of housewives in Norway has been important (Hagemann & Roll-Hansen, 2005). In Finland, feminist labour historians have contributed to the research on the Finnish civil war (Lintunen, 2015), the politicisation of family, marriage, and gender in the Finnish Communist movement before 1930 (Katainen, 2013), and reinterpretations of the early days of Finnish socialism (Kempainen, 2020).

Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen broadened the labour history perspective to nineteenth-century sex work (2018, 2022). Unlike earlier research traditions of prostitutes, Vainio-Korhonen framed sex work as a labour history instead of criminal history. Sex work was one of the many ways in which poor women earned subsistence and food, and it did not stigmatise its performers among the people and was not primarily a subject of moralising and shaming. Feminist labour historians have also touched upon issues of labour migration and translocal entanglements, such as the history of the Filipino chambermaids of the 1970s Copenhagen (Andersen, 2013, 2019) or the German single women sent to Sweden through a labour migration programme to work in Swedish textile factories (Svanberg, 2016). Other groups have remained remarkably absent from feminist labour history; for example, as far as we know, there has been no research focusing on queer labour history in the Nordic countries.

Feminist labour historians have changed the methodological approaches to labour history, for example, through analysis of family budgets and the financial strategies of organisations (Nilsson, 2015; Jonsson & Neunsinger, 2012). Moreover, using feminist methodologies to find women’s unpaid work inspired others to study topics that had been invisible for a long time in labour history, such as the history of domestic workers (Hoerder, Nederveen Meerkerk, & Neunsinger, 2015) and the history of home-based workers (Nilsson, Mazumdar, & Neunsinger, 2022).

Labour historians have shown that the international arena was important for women to influence the agenda of governments and labour organisations at home and has contributed to global labour history (e.g. Jonsson & Neunsinger, 2012). In addition, feminist labour historians have

investigated the role of coalition-building with women from other parts of society. A recent project on the everyday life and politics of women in Iceland has contributed to a change in perspective to a focus on alliances of working women with groups and organisations outside the labour movement to understand the struggles of working women – a perspective that has also been used in the history of international women’s organising, including in the labour movement (Halldórsdóttir, Tómasdóttir, Kristjánsdóttir, and Þorvaldsdóttir, & H, 2020; Jonsson, Neunsinger, & Sangster, 2007).

The importance of a gendered perspective is also illustrated by the recent biographical turn in Nordic labour history (Ekdahl, 2001; Östberg, 2008; Björk, 2017; Hallgrímsdóttir, 2019; Magnúsdóttir, 2021). At the most recent Nordic Labour History Conference in Copenhagen in 2022, this biographical turn was even represented in the conference’s title, ‘Labouring Lives and Political Protest Across and Beyond the Nordic Countries’. In addition, the conference track on ‘Communism studies’ explicitly focused on the individual and collective life trajectories of individual communists. This biographical turn has been developed significantly through the collaboration between feminist historians in the Nordic countries (Possing, 2015; Possing, 2016; Halldórsdóttir, Kinnunen, Leskelä-Kärki, & Possing, 2016) but has also been applied to labour history and provided a new way of looking at the complicated entanglements of gender and labour in the lives of individuals.

### *Changing spatial perspectives*

The recent surge in labour history in the Nordic countries is in many ways connected to the emergence of the new global labour history initiated by colleagues from the Global South, namely, India, Brazil, and South Africa, as well as colleagues at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam (Lucassen & van der Linden, 1999). Historians in the Northern transatlantic region started to discuss the limitations of comparisons and transfer analysis at the end of the 1990s, a debate that took place much later in the Nordic countries and was spearheaded by labour and gender historians (Jonsson & Neunsinger, 2007; Neunsinger, 2010).

Internationalism has been ideologically crucial for the labour movement from its beginning. International solidarity with workers, especially in the global South, has been on the agenda of the Nordic trade union movements since the end of the 1960s. Entanglements in production, the re-localization of production and deindustrialisation, and global production chains have been the bread and butter of most workers for a long time. This has been mirrored in the Ph.D. theses published since the beginning of the new millennium in Sweden when transnational perspectives became part of the curriculum for Ph.D. students (Olsson, 2021). The critique of methodological nationalism – e.g. is, explanations of historical developments analysed in a national framework without taking transnational dimensions into account (van der Linden, 2008) – that is inherent to global labour history fell on the fertile ground amongst labour historians and gave momentum to global labour history projects in the Nordic countries. These projects offered an opportunity to connect to workers and the labour movements and new forms of organising workers in and outside the Nordic countries.

Collaborative research projects with a global perspective have focused on underrepresented groups in labour history, such as domestic and care workers and home-based workers. Both groups gained public attention during their struggles for an international convention to recognise these workers and to regulate their working conditions and incomes (Hoerder et al., 2015; Nilsson et al., 2022). Inspired by current debates about consumption and consumer power, the global history of consumer co-operatives showed that Nordic consumer co-operatives had become models in different parts of the world, a fact that had received very little interest among labour historians earlier despite the close connection to the labour movement (Hilson, Neunsinger, & Patmore, 2017b).

In addition, this development has moved labour history and some labour historians closer to trade union activists, as they share their knowledge and connections to the international labour movements. Activists have influenced the topics of research, and researchers have turned to the activists to disseminate their results. A recent ARAB-project on home-based workers and home-based work illustrates this very well. Home-based workers had worked to organise internationally



for some time when ARAB held a conference on the history of home-based work in 2018. In connection with the conference, home-based workers held a meeting in Stockholm to write the statutes for a future international network which became Home-Net International in 2021. Home-net International and the involved researchers have followed each other's projects closely and have been organising shared events and exchanging information about recent developments, which has fuelled research (Nilsson et al., 2022).

These collaborative global projects have broadened the geographical scope of labour history. However, they are still usually the products of national organisational research frameworks. Even though some projects intended to investigate entanglements between historical contexts, the studies often remained classical comparative studies (Hilson & Neunsinger, 2013). Christian De Vito criticised such approaches in his keynote at the Global Labour History Network workshop in Stockholm in 2020. De Vito is critical of the macro-level focus of global labour history as it goes against the idea of entanglements between cultures. He maintains that the approach of global history refers to the entire world of space, creating a historiography that reproduces the importance of comparable political and economic institutions. He argues instead in favour of a micro-spatial approach that focuses on the simultaneity of connected spaces, which entails following traces that connect multiple contexts through the circulation of ideas, goods, and ideas (De Vito & Geritsen, 2018).

We have also seen a shift to the micro level in Nordic labour history, a move from national and general to local and personal, which began in the 1990s but has regained traction in recent years. This has allowed for some previously ignored types of working people to appear, for example, with the KoKo-project at Åbo University, which traces the histories of itinerant petty traders in Finland,<sup>4</sup> the research on labour performed by vagrants and day labourers in pre-industrial Iceland (Vilhelmsson, 2017, 2020) and on the so-called 'nightmen' in eighteenth century Denmark (Krogh, 2019).

With a long tradition of ethnographic methods in academic research, the local has always been more important in Finland and Norway than in the other Nordic countries. In Norway, a large-scale collection and publication project of workers' stories was already conducted in the 1950s and early 1960s, and the biographical and ethnographic perspectives have played a role in much of Norwegian labour history for a long time (Bull, 1953; Bull, 1955; Bull, 1961). In Sweden, the local was essential for 'the dig where you stand' movement, where workers and, sometimes, historians wrote the history of their workplaces and factories closing during the 1970s and 1980s. Microlevel history has been revived in Finland since the turn of the millennium. The focus has been on local production and factory communities, political mobilisation and action of individuals in specific historical contexts. Matias Kaihovirta's study (Kaihovirta, 2015) on popular political activity among the mill workers in Billnäs, but also in the Swedish case Stefan Nyzell's study on the contentious politics in Malmö (2009) are examples of these micro-level studies, which have shown a much more militant labour movement than the description of consensus-oriented workers and workers movements that have characterised the general historiographies of labour in Sweden and Finland. An example is Tiina Lintunen's study (2015) on women's roles in Pori in the Finnish civil war and their survival after the war. Another example of a versatile micro perspective is Sakari Saaritsa's research on the meaning of the informal economy for worker households in early twentieth-century Finland (Saaritsa, 2008, 2011, 2019.). The micro perspective was also used in the recent research project of Åbo Akademi that studied labour activists in the Finnish-Swedish minority and how their identities were constructed in the tension between the socialistic class community and the Swedishness movement (Kaihovirta & Holm 2022). This current emphasis on microhistorical studies in Finnish labour history correlates with the sources used. Besides oral history sources, diaries, autobiographies, and other ego documents are popular sources. Ego-documents allow the scholar to scrutinise the

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<sup>4</sup><https://research.abo.fi/en/projects/kommunicerande-konsumtion-kringvandrande-f%C3%B6rs%C3%A4ljare-och-kultur%C3%B6t> (last accessed June 8, 2022)

experiences of contemporaries. This orientation has culminated in the Academy of Finland's Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences.<sup>5</sup>

Only some of this research follows the entanglements of linked spaces as encouraged by De Vito. However, several studies in the Nordic context, which start from a global perspective, have connected the global and the local level. An example starting from the global level is the project on the global history of equal pay. Focusing on the connection between the local and the global in equal pay struggles, Kristjansdottir and Neunsinger (forthcoming) show that local equal pay struggles have turned into an international demand and, since post World War 2, into a truly global concept of equal remuneration that has been used to support local equal pay struggles and changed national legislation. Another example of research that links spaces is a study on the Swedish bruk, which follows the commodity chain of iron ore from the North of Uppland to the global market in the eighteenth century to show the importance of this for the slave trade, as the iron ore was used to produce the chains and tools for slaves in overseas colonies (Evans & Rydén, 2007).

### **Changing time frames and long-term perspectives**

The subject of work in early-modern Nordic countries is currently receiving considerable attention. This interest has mainly manifested as research on four groups; servants, prisoners, slaves, and the labouring poor, as well as on intersections of gender, work, and, to some extent, race. Inspiration has come from older and newer trends within the discipline, especially from gender studies, the history of slavery, and, more recently, global labour history, which has led to an enlargement of the history of work beyond the working-class labourer of the industrial age.

Research on ordinary people and their work has a long history within the Nordic countries, and rural non-elites were given central roles in the nation-building histories of the 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This has expressed itself both in meta-narratives on the development of the modern states and in interest in the lives of peasants, workers, and poor people in the medieval and early modern periods (Bull, 1929; Montgomery, 1933). With the emergence of social history from the 1970s onwards, research on urban and rural workers, women, the poor, and the marginalised became popular topics for historians of the early-modern Nordic countries. In the 1980s and 1990s, several Nordic comparative projects on such groups were conducted, such as eighteenth-century poverty and poor relief and ordinary people's experiences with the law (Andersson et al., 1983; Österberg & Sogner, 2000). While it seems that Nordic comparisons have lost ground in favour of European or, more rarely, global contexts, many of the previously explored perspectives still influence current research: for example, interest in the relationship between the state and the population, between law and legal practice, and on the gendering of work and social relations.

As mentioned above, recent research mainly focuses on four groups: servants, prisoners, the labouring poor, and slaves. Current work on servants has examined, in particular, the law and practice(s) of compulsory service, which required that landless youth hire themselves out on yearly or half-yearly service contracts (Uppenberg & Østhus, 2021). Such research has covered all the Nordic countries, but little has been done to move across today's national boundaries. Apparent legal similarities, however, hint at interesting possibilities for comparison. However, recent work on prison labour has utilised insights from colonial history that emphasise connections and links across space (Heinsen, 2017; Heinsen, 2018b; Heinsen, 2021). Both research on servants and prisoners have positioned their subjects within broader histories of labour. Both have also been influenced by Marcel van der Linden's call to look at moments of coercion and hence particularly been preoccupied

<sup>5</sup>(<https://research.tuni.fi/hex/>). The history of experiences was scrutinized widely by labour history-oriented scholars years before the academy project started. For example, Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto's dissertation (2013) examines female labourers' experiences related to work, class, and gender. The dissertation concentrates on Koskinen-Koivisto's grandmother and the narrated oral history of her life story.

with examining practices and localised contexts (special issue of *Arbetarhistoria*, 2017:3-4; Uppen-berg, 2018; van der Linden, 2016; Vilhelmsson, 2017). A similar development is apparent in research on landless groups, often socially marginalised and itinerant workers, who comprise a large portion of the labouring poor in early modern Nordic history. Recent studies indicate that these were more numerous and important to local economies than previously assumed, and scholars have emphasised the importance of everyday practices and local cultural traditions when analyzing these groups (Johnsson, 2016; Wassholm & Sundelin, 2018; Lindström, 2019; Krogh, 2019; Vilhelmsson, 2020).

The analytical concepts of agency and practices also inform much research on Nordic involvement in slave trading and slavery (Simonsen, 2017). Research on Nordic slavery has concentrated on two periods, Viking-Age slavery and Atlantic slavery, though the first is less in vogue among today's historians (Toplak, Østhus, & Simek, 2021). Research on Atlantic slavery, however, is vibrant with several recent and ongoing projects.<sup>6</sup> This also includes less traditional projects such as the Fireburn Files project that, among other things, highlight the organising efforts by enslaved and formerly enslaved people in the former Danish colony that is now the US Virgin Islands.<sup>7</sup> This part of labour history in the (former) Danish territories had previously been made invisible, despite the existing contacts between worker activists from the colonised territories and Danish trade unionists and the close relations between economies and labour organisations in these closely connected territories. Work on slavery and colonialism also influences other research on early modern labour by emphasising connections across time and space and challenging simplified interpretations of historical change that equates industrialisation with eliminating unfree labour (Stanziani, 2018). Instead, a more complicated picture of different labour regimes is emerging, which stresses practices rather than emancipation as a legal concept (Heinsen, 2017). Similarly, current research on globalised trade in the early modern period cuts across any perceived pre-industrial/industrial divide. It often includes research on how changes in trade and consumption affected work relations and labour organisations (Bruland & Ranestad, 2020).

Three major research projects that do not study specific groups but investigate broader patterns, particularly gendered patterns, in the early-modern Nordic countries also deserve mention: the Gender and Work project (G&W) at Uppsala University, the Centre for the Study of Lutheran Theology and Confessional Societies (LUMEN) at Aarhus University and the Icelandic *Undirstöður landbúnaðarsamfélagsins* project (Eng. 'The pillars of rural society').<sup>8</sup> G&W's innovative research has uncovered new patterns and practices of men's and women's work in early-modern Sweden (Ågren, 2017), while LUMEN examines Danish early-modern society through the lens of the Lutheran Reformation, including exploring views on and practices of work (Koefoed, 2019). The last project, *The pillars of the rural society*, investigates the social and economic significance of rural households in eighteenth-century Iceland, including patterns of labour relations and work practices. All three projects are involved in ground-breaking digitisation efforts that make the world of early-modern labour and social relations available to the broader public. This is explored in more depth in the next section. These and other digitisation efforts stemming from research on early-modern labour and social relations are notable contributions to current historical knowledge. They have also led to an increased focus on social relations, including on labour and work, fostered new methodological insights, and facilitated a renewed emphasis on empirical analysis, which has led to many previous assumptions being revised or even cast away (Vilhelmsson, 2015; Ågren, 2018; Heinsen, 2018a; Lindström, 2019).

<sup>6</sup>'Centre for the Study of the Literatures and Cultures of Slavery', Aarhus University; «In the Same Sea», ERC-funded project led by Gunvor Simonsen, University of Copenhagen (not only on but including slavery); the five-book project on Denmark and the colonies, Gad forlag 2017.

<sup>7</sup><https://fireburnfiles.dk/> (last accessed June 8, 2022). See also the documentary *We Carry It Within Us - fragments of a shared colonial past* by Helle Stenum: <https://wecarryitwithinus.com/home/>

<sup>8</sup>For general information, see the websites of the respective projects. G&W: <https://gaw.hist.uu.se/vad-ar-gaw/>. LUMEN: <https://lumen.au.dk>. The pillars of rural society: <https://1703.hi.is/en/278-2/> (Accessed 20 April 2022).

Compared to many previous studies, however, much of the newer research seldom examines pre-industrial labour as a precursor of industrial labour. The exception here is work on proto-industrialisation and the putting-out system. In general, however, this means that pre-industrial labour relations are not first and foremost interpreted as an antecedent of, or something different from, the working classes of the industrial era. Instead, recent studies have focused more on power dynamics within labour relations in everyday practices and their embeddedness in multiple regimes of authority, gender roles, and social regulation. By consciously avoiding the inherent teleology of the previous preoccupation with ‘the proletarianisation process’ and the ‘development of capitalism’, recent histories of early-modern labour have provided a more nuanced understanding of labour relations in the pre-industrial Nordic countries. These studies, however, are more of a synchronic nature, and there is still a need for a broader diachronic analysis of long-term development that considers these new histories.

### *New tools and methods for studying labour history*

The expansion of Nordic labour history in time and space has implied a broadening of the definition of labour history from a history of workers’ movements, organisations, and institutions (and their representatives) into a history of work and workers. This includes – but is not limited to – studying what we have become accustomed to understanding as organised labour and workers’ parties. Instead, there is a shift to the history of earning a livelihood (whether through remuneration or forms of sustenance practices) and workers’ everyday life, as well as the variety of ways in which working people have formed networks, collectives, and social and political infrastructures, and have been protesting and struggling for better working and living conditions. This has also allowed for increased interest in the work and organising experiences of migrants, who have so far received very little attention from scholars in, for example, the centennial literature on trade unions, even in the cases of unions that counted substantial numbers of migrant members (Andersen, 2019).

Today specific topics are less pronounced than they used to be, for example, research on pre-industrial artisans and guilds<sup>9</sup> and, with some notable exceptions, early-modern peasants and crofters.<sup>10</sup> But as the expansion of labour history has directed research towards local and global levels, we find that studies on workers’ agency and actions have gained ground. Unlike traditional labour history, theories on social movements and activism have become a popular theoretical framework for labour historians (Nyzell, 2009; Jonsson & Neunsinger, 2012; Ericsson & Brink Pinto, 2016). This approach has also opened up a space for translocal studies and for the inclusion of other social movements that work to improve the situation of workers, such as WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) and that often collaborate with more traditional labour movement organisations.

The expansion of Nordic labour history in time, space, and content is highly work-intensive, especially for the early modern period. In recent years, however, new digital tools have facilitated this expansion. Research on early-modern work and social relations is currently leading the digital and methodological developments within the discipline of labour history in the Nordic countries. The Gender and Work project at Uppsala University (presented above) has developed large-scale publicly available databases and a new method to overcome the biases of previously much-used primary sources, such as official statistics. The verb-oriented method, as G&W has called it, examines what people did rather than studying the occupational titles they were given. Importantly, by using this method and their substantial database, G&W researchers have uncovered patterns of work that

<sup>9</sup>There was quite a substantial literature on this from the 1980s and 1990s, see, among others, Dybdahl, 1982-84; Edgren, 1987; Lindström, 1991. For a more recent contribution, see Bloch Ravn, 2008.

<sup>10</sup>Malin Nilsson and Carolina Uppenbergs projects on crofters, “Hushåll i arbete. Genus, arbetsorganisation och ekonomisk omvandling studerat genom 1800- talets torparhushåll”, Lund University, and the previously mentioned Icelandic project, The Pillars of Rural Society.

partly go against previous findings, and this has led them to argue that marital status might have been more critical in determining who performed what type of work in 17th and eighteenth century Sweden than gender (Ågren, 2017). Moreover, taking prison workhouse records as its starting point, the Aarhus University project ‘Making the eighteenth century accessible’ is developing a programme for digital machine reading eighteenth-century handwritten sources (Koefoed, 2021, Nov. 23). At Aalborg University, innovative use of digital tools including network analysis, database collection, mapping and quantitative conceptual analysis of early-modern prison labour in Denmark has given new insights into prisoner escape routes and early modern mobility, among other things.<sup>11</sup> Another example of innovative uses of digitisation within labour and social history is the ongoing research project Link-Lives that began in 2019 in a collaboration between the University of Copenhagen, The National Archive in Denmark, and Copenhagen City Archives that combines historical research methods with deep learning techniques to ‘reconstruct life courses and family relations of almost everyone who lived in Denmark from 1787 until the introduction of the modern Danish Civil Registration System in 1968’.<sup>12</sup>

These digital projects are not all born out of a labour history perspective but are nonetheless highly relevant to and represent possibilities for labour history. For example, Link-Lives makes it possible to track the internal migration of various workers from the late eighteenth century onwards, thus allowing us to revisit earlier assumptions on women workers’ trajectories. The Labour’s Memory project at ARAB, in collaboration with the Folkrörelsearkivet (local people’s movement archive in Uppsala), The Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung in Bonn, and the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, is currently working on digitising the annual reports of trade unions from the local to the international level to create a text corpus to make it digitally searchable – a request from both trade unions and scholars (*Arbetarhistoria* 2021:1-2).

These digital efforts are at the forefront of original developments within the subject of history in the Nordic countries today and show how sources that have been championed since the 1970s, especially legal sources and census records, can be successfully explored in novel ways utilising digital tools. For the 19th and 20th centuries, a couple of studies have used the text corpus analysis on the more traditional fields of labour history, such as the study of concepts and ideologies, and led to interesting new knowledge (for example, Bech Vilstrup, 2017; Lundström, 2017 and Turunen, 2021).

### **What needs to be done?**

In this article, we have argued that after the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a revival and expansion of Nordic labour history influenced and driven by new fields of research, first and foremost global and feminist studies, but also studies of early modern and pre-industrial work. These have brought other methodological, theoretical, and conceptual dimensions that have contributed to transforming the study of Nordic labour history. These include theories on social movements and social movement activism, digital tools and database development, a broadened temporal and spatial scope of the study, an increased focus on non-market production and unofficial forms of labour relations, and in some instances, increasing use of oral history and a biographical approach. As is evident, for example, in the programmes of the revived Nordic Labour History Conferences in Reykjavik 2016 and Copenhagen 2022, this shift coincided with the emergence of a new generation of labour historians, as younger scholars have increasingly begun to identify as labour historians although their methodology, analytical focus and conceptual ‘tool-chest’ is significantly (or essentially) different from the labour historiography of previous decades.

Yet, while we argue that we are currently experiencing a shift of sorts in Nordic labour history, we need to reflect on the absences and silences in the historiography, the possible causes, and how

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<sup>11</sup>See much of the recent work of Johan Heinsen, for example the on the use of CATMA “Grammars of Coercion Towards a cross-corpora annotation model”, with Juliane Schiel and Claude Chevalerey, Working paper, WORCK (accessed 19 April 2022).

<sup>12</sup><https://link-lives.dk/en/about-link-lives/>

these problems can be resolved. Some of the labour history archives in the Nordic countries have been working on adding groups, people, and documentation of events through special collections to create a more democratic and accurate representation in the archives. Still, as these archives are closely connected to the labour movements, there are limitations to this strategy.

One of the structural absences in the labour movement archives has been migrant workers. Trade unions and workers' parties were late starters in attempts to include migrants in the practical organising work and leadership. This has resulted in the absence of migrant workers in the archival material and, consequently, in the histories written.

Furthermore, the reluctance to deal with the concept of class speaks to a continued tension with research on early-modern work, that is, whether one can write about labour history before the emergence of an industrial working class. Much of the research on early-modern labour in the Nordic countries has been labelled as something other than labour history and more easily described as social history, cultural history, or gender history. A recent development within the historiography of early-modern work in the Nordic countries is the identification of historians of early-modern relations of work as labour historians. This derives from the enlargement of labour history championed by global labour history to include more than industrial labour. Additionally, it results from the emergence of several international research networks that have purposefully sought to recruit historians of pre-industrial labour.<sup>13</sup> This has also brought historians of early-modern work in the Nordic countries together. Despite this, many might be more comfortable with the term history of work rather than labour history.

Even if the development in labour history in the Nordic countries has included more groups of workers, some still need to be included in our histories. Labour historians have hardly focused on settler colonialism in the North, in Sapmi and Greenland and its consequences for indigenous people's everyday lives, their struggles to earn a livelihood, and their resistance against colonialism. As historian Åsa Nordin Jonsson put it during a Nordic Labour History Network seminar on indigenous labour in June 2020, we need to look at the classical period of industrialisation from a non-racist perspective and rewrite it, including the history of indigenous people in the North. Their absence has been a blind spot in the grand narrative of industrialisation. Such a history needs to be written from a regional, not a national, perspective. Similarly, much would be gained if research from colonial history before 1850 were used more by labour historians.

The current and ongoing renewal of Nordic labour history has thus transformed the field, broadened and deepened its subject matter and its approaches while at the same time highlighting the glaring absences and silences in the historiography which need to be addressed to write a more inclusive history of work and workers throughout history in the Nordic countries.

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