**European Labour History Network – ELHN**

**Working Group on “Pre-industrial Labour”**

*The European Labour History Network (ELHN)*

The founding meeting of the ELHN took place at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) on 12 October 2013. The forty scholars who gathered in Amsterdam, belonging to research institutions, archives and journals based in various European countries, felt the need to increase the cooperation among labour history scholars, share knowledge and (digital) material, create a platform for future collective research, and organize conferences and seminars. The Network will primarily include Europe-based scholars (professors, post-doc and PhD researchers, post-graduate students) but will also seek to connect with scholars based outside Europe.

It was agreed to circulate information through Labnet (<http://www.iisg.nl/labnet/>), the Social History Portal (<http://www.socialhistoryportal.org/>) and a virtual environment electronic discussion platform (forthcoming); a meeting of the journals group in Vienna will be held during the ESSHC; a first broad conference will be organized, probably in 2015, in conjunction with another event in the field.

A provisional coordination committee was appointed, whose members are: Marcel van der Linden, Stefano Musso, Silke Neunsinger, Leda Papastefanaki, Tibor Valuch, Xavier Vigna, Donald Weber and Susan Zimmermann.

In order to structure the network and overcome fragmentation, the key-role of working groups was underlined. Some working groups were proposed and are now taking shape. Among others: Long term perspectives on remuneration; Pre-industrial labour; Feminist Labour History; Factory/worksite history; Industrial heritage and structural change; workers politics and social movements; Imperial labour history.

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Recent economic and social transformations suggest that historical investigations on labour move back beyond the boundaries of the first industrial revolution. Indeed, the study of the preindustrial work and labour relations allows us to understand better historical processes as the commodification of labour and the varieties and interconnection of labour relations, that include wage labour as well as reciprocal labour and non-work. Secondly, research on pre-industrial societies across the world can stimulate contemporary debates on labour history thanks to comparisons and sharing of methodologies, research objects and, especially, the use of source.

At the same time, over the last decades the studies on pre-industrial labour, including those on the high Middle ages and Ancient worlds, have been widespread in various parts of the European and non-European countries. At various levels and across regions, many scholars have addressed debates concerning the ‘industrious revolution’, the ‘free and unfree labour’, the functioning of the ‘labour markets’, ‘paid and unpaid work’, etc., etc. Finally, during international congresses and seminars, sessions or papers on the preindustrial world of labour now tend to be less scattered and more and more present.

Starting from this background, the establishment of a working group on the ‘preindustrial labour’ within the ELHN is necessary. The working group has three main goals.

The first goal is to strengthen the presence of scholars interested in the pre-1800 period in conferences and meetings on labour history worldwide, contributing to the debate on the variety of labour relations before the industrialization and beyond wage-labour. For this reason, a database will be built and systematically updated. Responses to the **questionnaire** circulated together with this presentation letter will be the main sources for the database. The network will also assist the communication and the circulation of Calls for Papers and research proposals among various countries, facilitating the creation of session-proposals across themes and topics and beyond limited regions, countries, and already established groups.

The second aim of the group is to enlarge the study of the ‘pre-industrial’ period moving back beyond the late medieval and early modern period (1350-1800), including scholars from the early middle age and antiquity.

Finally, the group will also act as ‘hub’ to organize and design research, collective projects, etc., connecting the European network to national ones.

Because the aim is to include as many interested scholars as possible, organizers will decide the language to be used in each event and meeting involving some participants in the working groups. However, English will be used for general communication and general events.

In order to become acquainted with each other and discuss about the future activities of the working group, the proposal is to meet during the next major continental conference, the ESSHC in Vienna. The exact place and time will be communicated some weeks before the conference.

For any comments and suggestions, please contact the provisional coordinators of the working group:

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