

A century with and against the market.

The ILO and 'global social justice'

Review: Daniel Maul – *The International Labour Organization. 100 Years of Global Social Policy*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019

Nils Exner (nils.exner.1@hu-berlin.de)
Humboldt Universität Berlin, Germany

The author's project is ambitious. As the subtitle of Daniel Maul's *The International Labour Organization* hints, with his recently published book the author intends to take a close look at no less than "100 years of global social policy". The consideration of such a broad period (the ILO celebrated its centenary in 2019) makes Maul's book stand out from the field of numerous publications that have discovered the ILO as a research object in recent years. These include among others the three anthologies organized by the ILO, namely *Globalizing social rights. The International Labour Organization and beyond* (Sandrine Kott & Joëlle Droux, eds., 2013), *The ILO from Geneva to the Pacific Rim: West meets East* (Jill M. Jensen & Nelson Lichtenstein, eds., 2015) and *Women's ILO: Transnational networks, global labour standards and gender equality, 1919 to the present* (Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehtker & Susan Zimmermann, eds., 2018). Also, worth mentioning is the special issue *La justice sociale dans un monde global. L'Organisation Internationale du Travail (1919-2019)*, edited by Sandrine Kott for *Le Mouvement Social*, which addresses 100 years of ILO history. While the vast majority of studies focus on specific fields of ILO activities, such as unemployment, food policy or children's welfare, Maul widens the perspective distinctly. His background as a historian, who has most notably been concerned with the history of development aid, decolonization and internationalism, is clearly visible. In fact, this very perspective proves to be particularly fruitful, as Maul addresses several blind spots of ILO research: He does not only point to the scarcity of studies targeting the ILO after 1945 (and even more so from the 1970s onwards) but also regional or spatial omissions, such as the history of the ILO in Africa or East/Southeast Asia.

Daniel Maul's book is published at a time when international organizations striving for co-operation and harmonization of standards are under enormous pressure. The strengthening of nationalist politics and the return of unilateralism in international affairs also pose difficult challenges for the ILO. At the same time, the issues addressed by the ILO could not be more relevant today. The question of the effects of trade liberalization on working conditions, deregulation and flexibilization as a result of the internationalization of production are just some of the keywords pointing to the social dimension of globalization. On the one hand, the history of the ILO has given expression to the various interests of trade unions, companies and governments. On the other hand, the organization mirrors both the power struggles and the global socio-economic transformations these players are confronted with. The ILO's special tripartite structure through which decisions are taken by

governments, employers and workers has made the international organization a forum for direct debate and deliberation. At the same time, the actors themselves pursue their own economic and (geo)political interests and also follow ideological motives. Daniel Maul shows how this context of competition between power and influence has always shaped the struggle to define what the ILO is and what purposes it should serve.

These questions affected the entire centennial history of the ILO and are therefore consequently present throughout the book, which follows a chronological structure. It starts with an introduction to the prehistory of the organization and is then divided into four major phases: 1. the inter-war period (33-108), 2. the period from 1940-49 as the “second founding” (Maul) of the ILO, with the Philadelphia Declaration of 1944 as central event (109-57), 3. decolonization and Cold War (158-214) and 4. the new insecurities and challenges of the ILO, or as Maul points out, the ILO’s “shifting ground” from the 1970s onwards (215-64). At the end of the book, Maul refers to the recent period and draws possible lines that could be used to write future accounts of the ILO (265-76).

The book is highly accessible and well written. Readers benefit from three guiding questions that are taken up repeatedly throughout the chapters: Whose organization was and is the ILO? What characterizes the ILO as an international organization? What has been the ILO’s specific contribution to the social justice debates in the 20th and 21st century? Through these questions, the various periods – ultimately different ‘political’ epochs – are connected or held together. Most importantly, Maul thereby draws attention to the central negotiating processes of the ILO, which had to assert itself again and again both to the out- and the inside.

Maul shows that – although the ILO itself did always uphold a universalist aspiration or approach – it has never represented ‘work’ in all its dimensions and multiple aspects. The question of ‘who’ was always connected with the question of ‘what’: Who could be found in the ILO mandate depended on what activity was identified as ‘work’. This discussion is ongoing, which becomes apparent in the recent discussions surrounding an inclusion of domestic work (and domestic workers) into the ILO’s field of expertise (269-72). Maul clearly shows how the history of the ILO has been shaped by dichotomies: industrialized and developing countries had different conceptions, economies were organized as free markets or planned economies, and also the contrast between formal and informal work, the work of men and women, and industrial and rural work could not be clearer.

The question of what characterizes the ILO as an international organization is ultimately also a question of whether and to what extent the ILO is an international organization among others. Maul situates the ILO within the context of a broader history of internationalism. According to the author, the ILO’s internationalism emerges not only as an idea, but also as a strategy grounded in two internationalist traditions: the socialist labor movement and the transnational network of liberal social reformers at the turn of the century (15-30). At the center of these discussions was the International Association for Labour Legislation (IALL), both as a testing ground for ILO practices and in terms of personal continuity. Also, IALL and ILO shared the nation state as crucial point of reference. But Maul also illustrates how the ILO often served as a platform for alternative approaches to internationalism and how it created space for the debate of alternative ideas at the regional level. For states of the global South and transnational movements, the ILO after 1945 was therefore also a forum for international solidarity. However, Maul also shows how the dissolution of the European colonial empires ultimately strengthened national sovereignty as a guiding principle for international affairs.

Emerging directly from the Paris Peace Conference, the ILO began its work as part of the system of the League of Nations (33-84). While the ILO was thus institutionally linked to the larger network of international organizations, it was able to maintain a certain degree of autonomy. Maul shows that the ILO’s unique position within this framework was

primarily due to its special tripartite structure, which turned into a unique characteristic feature: Tripartism worked as a corrective to the influence of the nation states, enabled the ILO to adapt to changing historical circumstances and provided a certain degree of flexibility regarding structural and technological transformations. The author shows how the democratic approach of tripartism was maintained throughout the decades after its foundation – through wartimes, the ideological struggles of the Cold War and the phase of decolonization. Ultimately, Maul argues, tripartism proved to be an advantage for the ILO at the national level as well, as it allowed to adapt to the particular situations of trade unions and employers.

While the book's subtitle seems to suggest a sense of continuity in a hundred-year history of global social policy, it quickly becomes clear that *social justice* has been interpreted quite differently over the course of the organization's history. Maul himself uses mainly the (more normative) term of social justice, and not the rather sociological one of *social (in)equality*. Also, the ILO had used "social justice" in the preamble of its founding document in 1919: „[...] peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice [...]" . By adopting this term, Maul, on the one hand, expresses the political ambition and agenda-setting of the ILO. On the other hand, from an analytical viewpoint it might have been at some points more convincing to contextualize this term stronger along the lines of recent approaches regarding a new history of ideas. As Maul himself underscores quite correctly already in the introduction: The fact that social justice has been the ILO's central point of reference may have to do with the fact that the term evokes and contains very different (normative) sets of ideas (6).

Unlike other anniversary publications, Maul's analysis demonstrates that the ILO has never been a blessed stronghold of pure internationalist ideals. This becomes apparent in the ILO's compromises regarding definitions of 'work' in the colonies (especially due to pressure from France and Great Britain; 79-84) as well as in the use of the United States' strong power position, who demonstrated with their temporary withdrawal (1977-1980; 219-25) also the ILO's dependence on its financial contributors. Nevertheless, Maul shows that the ILO was (and still is) an important player in the debate on how broad the scope of social policy should be defined and on how practical fields of activity should look like. Many of the 190 conventions and over 200 recommendations of the ILO turned out to be milestones in the improvement of working conditions for laborers around the globe.

The profound consideration of technical assistance and training provided by the ILO is definitely a distinguishing feature of the book. Maul shows how, in the interwar period, the ILO started accumulating expertise in this field and sent technical assistance missions to Latin America, Southeast Europe, Asia and North Africa (103-08). The Second World War served as a catalyst and strengthened the ILO's position as an important source of technical knowledge in this field. Here, again, the book benefits from the authors background as a historian; Maul highlights that it was the very specific historical context of the immediate post-war period that formed the basis for the practical implementation of this mandate (144-53). He then shows how the ILO advanced to become a development agency from the early 1950s on and how its Technical Assistance Program (TAP) was based on the assumption of a modernization theory, in which the so called *developing countries* should repeat the development of the industrialized at an accelerated speed (159-67). Here, Maul also describes how for example at the first Asian Regional Conference in Delhi (1947), states such as India and Burma (both were just shaking off colonial rule) demanded support to overcome their „state of underdevelopment“ (143); additionally, now losing its colonial connotations, the new working area of "indigenous labour" was seen, at least for South America, as a chance for a „modernization beyond development“ (167-71). Ultimately, and triggered by decolonization processes, technical cooperation did indeed become the ILO's main focus in the 1960s and turned into an operational field which clearly

surpassed all other practical activities of the ILO. While Maul expresses that the ILO is still based on a blend of the originating socialist and social liberal internationalisms, it would in that regard also be interesting to discuss further to what extent decolonization and the 'national liberations' (often also the glorification of the ideas of nation, state and people) have added further internationalisms (or anti-internationalisms). Pan-Americanism, for example, is taken up in the book as a competitor of the ILO (104f.).

The emergence and resurgence of nationalist movements in recent years – often also based on the experience of social inequality – is an impressive reminder that social justice is a core condition for the stability of democracies. Also, the ILO had to recognize in recent decades that the notion of *social progress* has undergone major changes. The focus is no longer only on a fair distribution of economic growth, but also on massive ecological challenges. Climate change and environmental destruction are accompanied by the digital revolution, increased global migration and a growing informal labor sector. All of these issues have massive effects on the world of work. Against this background, the future role of the ILO depends crucially on the space it can claim in this complicated discourse: On the one hand, globalization is predominantly understood as an inevitable path, while on the other hand the ILO itself is dependent on the willingness of states to counter or limit the threats of open market economies. Despite all this, Maul's rather positively formulated outlook on the future of the ILO may also be read as a call for even stronger and more flexible global engagement.

The current coronavirus pandemic may turn out to be an occasion to respond to this call in the form of a new consensus in the spirit of the Philadelphia Declaration of 1944 – this time within a globalized context that not only sheds light on existing inequalities but also creates new ones. The economic lockdowns imposed by the governments will put even greater pressure on the most vulnerable. After the Great Depression, with the *New Deal* (the ideas of which were encapsulated in the Philadelphia Declaration), the necessity was recognized to offer a comprehensive social contract. Such foresight is also necessary today, as the greatest social disruptions of this crisis are still to come. The ILO's potential to make a significant contribution to this debate becomes also evident in Maul's book. It shows that the ILO has been a global forum to address these issues for 100 years and illustrates the many ways in which the ILO helped to structure the debates and became practically active itself. The history of the ILO is neither linear in its direction nor should it be told as a simple success story. Rather, Maul takes the ILO especially seriously in its struggle to mediate between different interests. Analyzing the ILO as a discursive forum, Maul thus also creates a panorama of competing concepts of order and governance, including their practical implementation attempts. The ILO is part of a broader international/internationalist environment that always remains related to the world of nation states. This concerns the specific founding background as well as the period of the *New Deal*, when the alternative of an active state was proclaimed together with the primacy of the political. The ILO is hereby part of the history of capitalism, or rather capitalisms insofar as Maul works out how the organization faced and reacted to the different historical and spatial forms of capitalism and the governing of (open) economies.

Daniel Maul's 100-year history of the ILO is a very meritorious contribution to the history of internationalism, social policy in a transnational and global dimension, and the history of decolonization, development policy and human rights. As the first comprehensive account of the organization, the book offers solid footing for many works to come.

References

Boris, Eileen; Hoehtker, Dorothea & Zimmermann, Susan (Eds.), *Women's ILO: Transnational networks, global labour standards and gender equality, 1919 to the present*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018.

Jensen, Jill M. & Lichtenstein, Nelson (Eds.), *The ILO from Geneva to the Pacific Rim: West meets East*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Kott, Sandrine & Droux, Joëlle (Eds.), *Globalizing Social Rights. The International Labour Organization and beyond*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Kott, Sandrine (Eds.), *La justice sociale dans un monde global. L'Organisation Internationale du Travail*, Special Issue of *Le Mouvement Social*, 263, no. 2 (2018).