

Let's Get to Work: Bringing Labor History and the History of Science Together Call for Conference Papers

From the *labor in laboratory* to the *science in scientific management*, the histories of science and labor are marked by intimate connections. Given the pressing scholarly and political questions they share, the disciplines of labor history and the history of science could benefit from engaging in more robust conversation. To foster new insights and methodological departures in both subfields, the Science History Institute's 2022 Gordon Cain Conference will explore the entanglements of science and labor as they have emerged around the globe. Organized by Lissa Roberts (editor-in-chief, *History of Science*), Seth Rockman (editorial committee, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History*), and Alexandra Hui (co-editor-in-chief, *Isis*), the conference will take place at the Science History Institute in Philadelphia on June 2-4, 2022.

Scholarship in both fields has expanded our understanding of what constitutes labor and what counts as science: performed, produced and governed in a variety of settings by various practitioners across a spectrum of terms, and embedded within multiple political economies and ecological relationships. This has made it easier to see labor and science as co-constructed, recognizing, for example, workers as the objects of scientific inquiry *and* as the producers of scientific knowledge. The insights of history of science have allowed labor historians to better understand the struggle for workplace control against management's technologies of regimentation and surveillance. Likewise, the sensibilities of labor history have prompted historians of science to reevaluate scientific practice as labor, reorienting the field's understanding of *who* is a scientific worker and focusing attention on vernacular and tacit forms of knowledge mobilized both within and beyond the relations of the marketplace.

The conference will build on these overlapping commitments to open new lines of inquiry in both fields and historicize urgent questions of the present. The capitalist context of modern science, for example, demands attention to "research" as a historical site of labor conflict, casualization, and unionization. The technological regimes of identification that police the mobility of workers across national boundaries need to be understood within longer histories of science in the service of state power and race-making. Automation continues to link spectacular scientific advances with deepening working-class precarity, while the gendered division of labor in specific sectors like computing and robotics has consequences for economic inequality and class reproduction. Attention to maintenance, waste, and recycling brings issues of environmental justice and sustainability to the foreground of labor history and history of science alike. These are just a few ways that these fields productively coalesce.

At the same time, a number of longstanding questions warrant new research. By continuing to approach scientific work *as work*, we can recover additional histories of non-elite laborers and those not formally recognized as scientific practitioners. With fields, kitchens, and workshops functioning as humanity's most enduring sites of experimentation, there are new opportunities to link the imperatives of production to the patterns of social and cultural reproduction that define expertise, generate authority, and shape identities. The parallel emergence of the laboratory, plantation, and factory points to lengthy struggles over the formalization and codification of working people's knowledges and practices, as well as to the dynamics of "deskilling" that have characterized labor processes over the last several centuries. As we expand our sense of where and how science is practiced, we might locate a comparable history of contestation over whose knowledge and labor is valorized in such settings as nursing homes, rare earth mining complexes, call centers, hazardous waste

facilities, and poultry processing plants. We anticipate new insights from putting these spaces into the same frame as the more traditional sites of scientific labor such as biomedical research laboratories and drawing attention to both the shared and divergent experiences of work—as both mental and embodied labor—in such settings.

Second, the classic “labor question” of *who works for whom, on what terms, and to whose benefit* applies to science as readily as to any other arena in which markets and states allocate resources and set the rules under which capital and labor interact. From the role of Indigenous and enslaved workers at the forefront of colonial botany to the outsourcing of academic journal production and instrument manufacture to locales of “cheap labor,” science in action has fueled and extended long-distance supply chains, deepened the interdependencies of “advanced” and “developing” economies, and (re-)produced global inequalities. Environmental regulations, intellectual property regimes, safety standards, and labor laws have historically structured scientific work, while capital markets and publicly funded granting agencies often determine the direction of future scientific inquiry. In this light, we see an opportunity to bring history of science and labor history together under the umbrella of political economy.

Third, the category of the laborer has historically emerged as a product of scientific knowledge production. From the medicalization of West Africans as a means of legitimating their enslavement to fantasies of docile workers toiling robot-like along a factory assembly line, labor has constituted an object of study in the behavioral, biological, and social sciences. The disciplinary regimes of management and business administration have subjected laboring bodies to measurement and manipulation in the service of efficiency, ergonomics, and “industrial relations.” We envision relocating histories of Taylorism’s rationalizing impulses to the recent “gig economy,” as well as to sites of extractive industry, military labor, and agricultural production within the “plantationocene.” The metrics that have assigned value to labor and laborers also merit historicizing, particularly as they have facilitated the transformation of skill, strength, and expertise into “human resources” and “human capital.”

Finally, bringing the histories of science and labor together emphasizes both the historical entanglements of material and knowledge production and the primary fact that work of all kinds entails transformative engagement with the material world. This, in turn, underscores the ways in which the history of science and labor history meet in the field of environmental history. So too does it invite us to trace their interactions through the lens of materials ranging from sand and agricultural products to lithium, cobalt and uranium. More often than not, these “material biographies” unfold as dramas that promise progress while requiring devastating exploitation of labor and the earth.

We welcome proposals for conference papers that either present new research at the intersection between labor history and history of science or that critically reflect on the benefits and challenges of bringing labor history and the history of science into closer contact with each other. We invite proposals that focus on historical episodes from the early modern period onward and hope to include the broadest geographical coverage possible. Plans have been made for post-conference publication of selected papers. Some financial support is available for travel and accommodation costs. Further (competitive) travel grants are available for those who plan to do research using SHI’s archives. **Interested applicants should submit an abstract of no more than 300 words and brief autobiographical sketch (50-100 words) by September 30, 2021.** Questions and submissions should be sent to [**laborandscience@sciencehistory.org**](mailto:laborandscience@sciencehistory.org).