

Nordic social and labour history conference

Title: Normative illegalities: State officials and the labour problem in 19th century Iceland

Abstract:

State officials in 19th century Iceland regularly complained of the difficulties of upholding the labour regulation of 1783 which forbade nearly all forms of casual labour (or daylabour) in favour of a system of bonded servitude. Similar regulation was in effect in all of the Nordic countries in the 18th and 19th centuries and public debates on the matter followed similar motifs, associating casual labour with vagrancy, criminality and immorality. At the same time social, political and economic developments in the Nordic countries in the 19th century pushed for a general reconsideration of the labour system and its regulation which put the issue in the forefront of public and political debates.

This paper will discuss 'the labour problem' in 19th century Iceland and the different forms of friction between the legal requirements of the state, their application by local officials, the needs of local communities and the will of individuals which that problem entailed. Drawing on county court records and the archives of county magistrates, as well as a methodological approach borrowed from practice theory, microhistory and *alltagsgeschichte*, I will argue that, despite its illegality and a public discourse virulently opposed to it, casual labour was in fact a cultural norm and a social necessity in 19th century Iceland and could not easily be uprooted. In fact, I will contend that the persistent existence of illegal casual labour throughout the period was an important factor leading to significant reforms of the labour legislation in Iceland in the 1860s.

short bio: Vilhelm Vilhelmsson (1980), Ph.D. in history, independent researcher, Iceland.

Longer bio: Vilhelm Vilhelmsson (b. 1980) is Ph.D. in history from the University of Iceland. His dissertation was on labour relations in rural Iceland in the 19th century, focusing particularly on subaltern agency and everyday resistance. His published work includes articles on the methodological problems of judicial sources, resistance as an analytical concept for historians, radical ideologies among Icelandic immigrants in Canada and property accumulation in 17th century Iceland. He is currently president of the Icelandic Association of Historians.