

## Debate

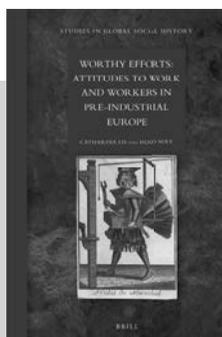
*Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly,*

Worthy efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe

(Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 664 p.

### Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe

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In *Worthy Efforts* Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly offer an innovative approach to the history of perceptions and representations of work in Europe throughout Classical Antiquity and the medieval and early modern periods.





## Editorial introduction

*to the review essays on Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 664 p.*

With *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-industrial Europe*, Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly analyse changing perceptions of work and workers in Europe from Classical Antiquity to the eighteenth century. The authors, now emeriti professors of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and guest professors at the University of Antwerp, have in the course of their careers written extensively on the history of poverty, social policy, entrepreneurship and guilds, focused mainly on the Early Modern Period and nineteenth century in Europe, and as such have deeply influenced the development of social and economic history in the Low Countries. With *Worthy Efforts* they have delivered a new *magnum opus*, in which they take their continuous endeavour to bridge disciplinary and chronological boundaries in the field of history another major step further, engaging in debates in social, economic as well as cultural history, and on continuities and discontinuities in European history over the very long term. Building on an impressive state of the art of the existing literature in these fields, they develop a number of innovative insights and challenging hypotheses that will no doubt influence research in these domains for years to come.

On the occasion of the publication of *Worthy Efforts* with Brill publishers late 2012, the editorial board of this journal took the initiative to solicit contributions from a diverse range of experts from the various fields related to the subjects of the book, each of whom was invited to reflect on the arguments developed in the book and to evaluate its possible contributions in relation to their own field of expertise. This has resulted in a rich collection of review essays and stimulating dialogue, which we are very pleased to present to our readers. By way of an introduction, the discussion is preceded by a short summary of the main arguments developed in *Worthy Efforts*. Next, ancient historian Koen Verboven evaluates how the arguments developed in the chapters on Greece and Rome relate to and in turn can feed into the state of the art in ancient economic and social history, and how they can provide a platform for the further development of comparative labour studies that transcend the boundaries between ancient, medieval

and early modern historians. Medieval cultural historian Jeroen Deploige subsequently takes the 'polyphony' of Christian ideologies of labour in the Middle Ages as identified by Lis and Soly as a point of departure in a search for yet more voices 'on the fringes' of the medieval Church, which together can provide new insights into the distrust among lay associations and authorities of clerics and religious communities who became actively involved in labour, crafts and commerce.

In the third essay, Jessica Dijkman discusses the contribution of *Worthy Efforts* in relation to on-going debates in social and economic medieval and early modern history, in particular on the role of guilds and apprenticeship and on processes of proletarianization. In addition, she engages in an exploratory comparison with attitudes to manual labour in the medieval Islamic world to call into question some of the authors' hypotheses on European singularity. Jan Lucassen in his essay turns to the merits of *Worthy Efforts* in relation to the field of labour history, in the context of which he questions the book's relative neglect of two groups of 'unworthy' workers in medieval and early modern Europe, namely soldiers and slaves. He too takes up the issue of broader comparisons, when he expresses doubt on the authors' assertions concerning the distinctiveness of European processes of proletarianization.

Comparisons between Europe and other parts of the world take centre stage in the fifth essay by global economic historian Peer Vries. Here, he discusses the possible contributions of *Worthy Efforts* to the 'Great Divergence' debate, in which he observes the role of labour to have – unjustly so – become fairly marginal. He uses the main arguments developed by Lis and Soly on the implications of increasing proletarianization in preindustrial Europe to argue that the very high involvement with wage labour, also by young people and women, in combination with a strong emphasis on the disciplining of labour and public poor relief, need to be included in explanations for European industrialization in general, and British industrialization in particular. Sinologist Christine Moll-Murata in her essay further pursues the comparison between Europe and China by analysing expressions on the valuation of work by different Chinese schools of thought. Here, she evokes polyphonies in which she observes subtle differences from their European equivalents by, among other things, the absence of distinctly depreciating terms for work and the early development of a relatively favourable attitude to enrichment during Chinese antiquity, and the existence of an influential anticlerical critique on 'useless' monasticism during the Chinese 'Middle Ages'.

In the concluding essay, Lis and Soly take on the points, questions and criticisms raised to reformulate their main positions regarding (dis)continuities between ancient and medieval history, the interplay between ecclesiastical and lay worlds during the Middle Ages, the in- or exclusion of certain groups of workers, the role of craft guilds and apprenticeship, and the distinctiveness of the European proletarianization process, to conclude with a plea for additional comparative research.

