

***Worthy Efforts* and the medieval economy**

Review article of Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-industrial Europe (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2012), 664 p.

Jessica Dijkman

Worthy Efforts is a book that transcends many boundaries. Its discussion of attitudes to work and workers combines social and economic history with the history of ideas, incorporates knowledge and insights from an enormous body of literature based on a wide variety of sources (from theological and philosophical treatises via ordinances and ego-documents to paintings and other visual representations), and crosses geographical borders between European regions with ease. Last but not least, the book covers an unusually long period – 2,500 years, to be precise – and thus bridges the traditional distinctions between Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern era. This book embodies the culmination of decades of historical research by the authors and offers its readers a tremendous wealth of historical detail and stimulating ideas.

When four years ago Catharina Lis, together with Josef Ehmer, published an edited volume on perceptions of work, the objective was primarily to open new vistas and stimulate discussion.¹ *Worthy Efforts* is more ambitious: Lis and Soly make a courageous attempt to identify, and explain, long-term patterns of continuity and change in attitudes to work and workers. This ties up with the idea, gaining ground over the last decade or so, that many of the structural and institutional transformations that shaped Europe's development after 1500 have older roots. While this will appeal to those scholars – and I am one of them – who feel the need to include the Middle Ages in studies of the long-term social and economic development of Europe, it also poses a new challenge, for Lis and Soly suggest that we may have to look back further than the year 1000 to find these roots. They forcefully reject the standard historical account holding that attitudes to work and workers changed fundamentally with the arrival of Christianity, emphasizing continuity for aspects such as the value attached to labour as conducive to virtue and happiness, the notion that work should serve

a higher purpose than just self-interest, and the co-existence of a wide variety of attitudes to work and workers.² Lis and Soly argue their case convincingly. Their emphasis on continuity raises a question that goes beyond the subject of their investigation: should we, after the revolt of the early modernists and that of the medievalists,³ perhaps conclude that the time has now come for ancient historians to take up their place in the social and economic history of Europe?⁴

In view of the extensive chronological and geographic scope of their study, Lis and Soly must be excused for not discussing every profession in detail. Identifying neglected occupations is therefore not what this contribution is about. One exception, however, seems justified. There is an entire category of workers that is conspicuously underrepresented in the book: retailers. Separate chapters are devoted to images and self-images of peasants and farmers, merchants, artisans, and wage labourers, but beyond the repeated statement that, in contrast to wholesale trade, retailing was usually considered as denigrating and retailers as inferior, Lis and Soly pay very little attention to this activity and the men and women practicing it. Retailers were nonetheless prominently present in late medieval towns (and, for that matter, in early modern ones as well). Street vendors and stallholders selling fruit, fish, dairy and haberdashery were everywhere; yet in this book we hear very little about them. One wonders why: could it be that a blind spot of marxism has found its way into the book? In defense of the authors it has to be added that James Davis' study of the moral and legal rules that underpinned retail trade in late medieval England was published only last year, too late to be included.⁵

Instead of proceeding to point out more omissions, this contribution will focus on two other issues. Firstly, as Marcel van der Linden notes in his foreword, Lis and Soly make an effort to systematically position attitudes to work and workers in a political and economic context. For the Middle Ages this approach is particularly valuable; it makes for a welcome change from the tendency to approach medieval thought on society and economy primarily from a theological and philosophical point of view.⁶ It does, however, give rise to an important question: how does Lis and Soly's analysis of attitudes and perceptions contribute to current academic debates on the social and economic history of the Middle Ages? Here, I intend to address this question for two debates that have a direct relation to labour: the discussion about the role of guilds, and the debate on wage labour and living standards. Both regard long-term social and economic developments in which the Middle Ages play a vital part. Secondly, in the concluding chapter Lis and Soly attempt a brief comparison between Europe

and other parts of the world, intended to spark off a new discussion; the authors readily admit that more research is needed. This challenge deserves to be taken up. I would like to make a beginning – it can be no more than that – by briefly comparing attitudes to work and workers in medieval Europe and the medieval Middle East.

Guilds and the image of artisans

In recent years the reasons for the emergence of guilds in medieval Europe and for their continued existence throughout the pre-industrial era have been the subject of much academic debate. This goes for merchant guilds as well as for craft guilds, but to the first of these two categories *Worthy Efforts* pays little attention. Understandably so, for the academic debate on merchant guilds does not directly touch upon labour and attitudes to labour; instead it focuses on the benefits of merchants' associations for contract enforcement, property rights and principal-agent relations versus the drawbacks of the monopoly privileges these organizations enjoyed.⁷ Perceptions of merchants were determined by other issues than guild membership, issues that Lis and Soly dwell on extensively: the growing awareness – under the influence of economic change – that merchants fulfilled a useful function, and the gradual acceptance of the pursuit of profit as a reward for their exertions and for the risks they took.⁸

The debate on craft guilds, on the other hand, is closely related to perceptions of work. For Lis and Soly, craft guilds are of course familiar ground: both separately and jointly they have published extensively on various aspects of these organizations,⁹ making important contributions to the debate on craft guilds that has taken place since the 1980s. To summarize this debate very briefly: we now know that craft guilds were not the rigid, conservative institutions they were earlier believed to be. They were not only more flexible than was previously thought, but actually contributed to the reduction of transaction costs in three stages of the industrial process. Through the regulation of apprenticeship they stimulated craftsmen to invest in the transfer of skills to the next generation, through subcontracting they allowed for the coordination of complex production processes in a world dominated by small workshops, and by providing mechanisms for quality control they helped to reduce information asymmetries between producers and consumers.¹⁰ The question to be answered here is if and how the discussion of images and self-images of artisans in *Worthy Efforts*

contributes to this debate. Does it offer new points of view, or lend additional weight to existing ones?

In *Worthy Efforts* Lis and Soly highlight the close link between occupational skills, self-employment, product quality, and the identity of craftsmen. Artisans took pride in their technical knowhow, the experience-based knowledge that allowed them to produce high-quality objects. In combination with the independence of the master as a self-employed producer, skill was what defined artisans as professionals. Here, guilds fulfilled an important role here. They constituted a community that helped to create a collective occupational identity, reinforced by rituals and symbols. Membership of that community, in turn, allowed master craftsmen to distinguish themselves from outsiders: guild members took pride in working according to the rules and maintaining high standards.¹¹

However, while it is clear that the transmission of skills took place through the apprenticeship system, the relation between that system on the one hand and professional identity on the other is not discussed in detail in the book. Only in the concluding chapter the role of the master piece is briefly pointed out: before artisans were allowed to set up their own workshop, they had, so to speak, pass an exam that certified their skills and guaranteed the quality of their work.¹² This element in particular deserves more attention than Lis and Soly give it. Craft production in the pre-industrial period made large demands on skills: production was skill-intensive rather than capital-intensive. The acquisition of these skills depended to a significant degree on 'tacit knowledge': experience-based knowledge that needed to be transferred from person to person. S.R. Epstein has argued that masters were only prepared to invest in the training of youngsters if they could be certain that apprentices stayed on long enough to make the investment worthwhile. Conversely, apprentices wanted to be sure their masters gave them a solid training completed by a proper qualification. Through regulation and formal and informal forms of disciplining, the guild apprenticeship system was able to provide these guarantees.¹³ Admittedly, the fact that in early modern London many apprentices never finished their training suggests that reality was more complex than this.¹⁴ However, formal qualification for the craft, when it existed, was almost always organized by guilds.

Notably, the formal requirement of a test of acquired skills through the master piece appears to have been a late medieval innovation: in the Low Countries it was introduced in many crafts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In other parts of the world formalised qualification seems to have made its appearance either much later or not at all.¹⁵ This suggests that the

guild-based, collective occupational identity that shaped the self-image of craftsmen also stimulated the development of a reliable qualification procedure for the profession. For the time being this must remain an hypothesis: *Worthy Efforts* does not consider the link between occupational identity and formal qualification in sufficient detail to substantiate it.

In conclusion, by incorporating images and self-images of craftsmen into the guild debate Lis and Soly add to the 'revisionist' position in that debate, but they pay very little attention to an element that could have given yet more substance to their arguments: the role of formal qualification through the apprenticeship system and the master piece.

Wage labour and living standards

In the chapter on wage labour Lis and Soly return to an argument they made more than thirty years ago: the claim that the rise of capitalist modes of production in the late Middle Ages and early modern era led to a gradual but persistent process of proletarianization. Systems of poor relief supported this process by regulating the labour supply, thus ensuring the availability of an abundance of cheap labour.¹⁶

In *Worthy Efforts* the same issue is approached from a new angle: that of a growing distrust of day labourers and itinerant workers, who were increasingly depicted as parasites and even criminals. Wage labour, Lis and Soly explain, had been unusual in the early Middle Ages, but became more common with the commercialization of agriculture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. From the late thirteenth century onward, but especially after the Black Death, labour legislation developed in various parts of Europe, designed to make wage labour available at conditions favourable for the employer. In contrast to Samuel Cohn, who argues that the variety of legislative responses cannot be linked to political and economic circumstances,¹⁷ Lis and Soly convincingly argue that there is a pattern to be discerned. National labour laws only emerged when central authority was strong and political and economic interests of powerful groups converged, England being the most prominent case in point. In regions where cities enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy uniformity was lacking, but urban elites imposed control on the urban labour force just as well. Labour legislation was based on the notion that such a thing as 'free labour' did not exist. Everybody had a duty to work at the official wage and was expected to be in the service of a lord or master, bound to him by contract. Those who were not, were branded as 'idle vagrants': lazy, unreliable, and even criminal.

In England, the authorities used the ideological construct of the idle vagrant to legitimate a constant stream of labour legislation that continued into the early modern era. In combination with poor laws and vagrancy laws, labour laws were aimed at restraining the mobility of workers and keeping wages low.¹⁸

Bringing attitudes to work and workers into the argument has fleshed it out: as the authors state, 'legislation not only revealed how the elites felt about wage labour and wage workers, but [...] consolidated and legitimized their perceptions as well'.¹⁹ Nevertheless, there is a serious problem here. The underlying assumption of Lis and Soly is that the mutual reinforcement of attitudes and rules subordinated wage workers to the control of employers and thus set a process of immiseration in motion. That proletarianization cannot be equated with impoverishment, however, was already pointed out in reaction to Lis and Soly's *Poverty and Capitalism*.²⁰ Moreover, since then a considerable amount of additional evidence in support of that comment has become available.

In *Worthy Efforts* Lis and Soly choose not to discuss the actual effects of late medieval labour legislation,²¹ but it is clear that wages could not be kept in check for long. All available evidence points to an increase in living standards in many parts of Europe after the Black Death. Not just artisan's wages, but also wages for unskilled labour and – at least in England – agricultural wages, rose significantly. The implications extend beyond the Middle Ages. In the last twenty years or so, research on the development of wages in pre-modern Europe has brought to light a wealth of data that has materially altered views on living standards before the Industrial Revolution. At least for northwestern Europe (England and the Low Countries) the picture of long-run stagnation of real wages has been replaced by a more optimistic view. While in southern Europe wage levels fell back to pre-plague levels at the end of the Middle Ages, embarking on a downward course that was not reversed until the nineteenth century, in England and the Low Countries real wages maintained their relatively high post-plague levels throughout the early modern era.²²

In short, while attention for the mutual reinforcement of attitudes to wage labour and legislation has allowed Lis and Soly to better explain the consistent increase of proletarianization (defined as dependency on wage labour), they do not engage with the results of recent research demonstrating that this dependency did not, or at least not by definition, imply immiseration. If anything, a reverse relationship is more likely: exactly in the most commercialized and industrialized regions with the highest proportions of wage labour – the Low Countries in the late Middle Ages,

England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – standards of living were comparatively high.

Polyphony: a comparison with the medieval Islamic world

Lis and Soly readily admit that labour and exertion were as highly valued in other parts of the world, including the Islamic lands, as in Europe. However, they also claim that the ‘polyphony’ so characteristic for the discourse on work and workers in pre-industrial Europe was not mirrored elsewhere. Only in Europe, they state, different views on what were to be regarded as worthy efforts were expressed simultaneously; only in Europe the valorization of labour was an issue to be discussed repeatedly.²³ At least for the Islamic world Lis and Soly offer no evidence whatsoever for this statement. Investigation is warranted; here, it will be restricted to the attitude towards manual labour.

The standard view on labour in the Islamic world holds that the Arabs, originally a nomad people, valued trade and merchants, but looked down upon manual work and manual workers and that these perceptions subsequently came to dominate the lands conquered by the muslim armies. This, however, is at best a partial truth. In the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries religious scholars and other intellectuals in the Middle East did indeed portray peasants, craftsmen and labourers and their activities as inferior. This was combined with an ethnic distinction that can be traced to the era of the Islamic conquests: manual work was left to the conquered, non-Arab peoples. But under the influence of a growing urbanization and the blurring of distinctions between Arab and non-Arab groups, and also in reaction to the emergence of a strand of Sufi mysticism that propagated forsaking all worldly matters including labour, in the late ninth and especially the tenth and eleventh centuries different views emerged.²⁴

The habit, common among craftsmen of even moderate abilities, to sign their work, suggests that they at least felt pride rather than shame in their professional activities.²⁵ They were not the only ones: there was discussion on the value of manual labour among intellectuals as well. A striking example is the section on labour in the *Rasa'il Ikhwān al-Safā'*, an encyclopedia composed in the late tenth or eleventh century by the ‘Brethren of Purity’, a group of political and religious activists. In this document, craftsmanship is described as a creative act and likened to the work of God. Crafts and trades are classified according to a number of criteria, among which are the level of skill required, but also their utility for society. According to



Illustration 1 Woman at work on a spinning wheel or a spool-winding wheel (Baghdad, thirteenth century)

Illustration from *al-Harīrī*, *al-Maqāmāt*. BnF, Collection Manuscrits Orientaux, ARABE 5847, folio 13v.

this last criterion weaving, agriculture and building rank highest, as they fulfill people's most basic needs.²⁶ However, conservative elites of scholars and also merchants clung to the established view that manual labour was humiliating and degrading. Contrasting opinions gave rise to continuous debates.²⁷

In the fourteenth century the debate on labour was revived on a somewhat different footing. It was now dominated by the *‘ulama*, muslim jurists who were increasingly called upon to fulfill administrative functions in the service of the newly developing states and saw their social status rise as a consequence. Unsurprisingly, they expressed great appreciation for their own field of work and placed manual labour lower down the scale. This, however, did not mean that discussion on the value of manual work had died down.²⁸ In his *Muqadimma* (1377 CE), a multifaceted work originally intended as an introduction to a world history, Ibn Khaldun repeated elements of the earlier classification of occupations based on skill level and utility expressed in the *Rasa’l Ikhwān al-Safā’*. He ranked weaving, building and several other forms of skilled craftsmanship – but not agriculture – higher than commerce because of their greater usefulness to society.²⁹

From this very brief perusal of attitudes to manual work and manual workers in the medieval Middle East no final conclusions can be drawn: that would require more detailed research. It is, however, enough to shed serious doubt on the assertion of Lis and Soly that polyphony regarding attitudes to work and workers was a European prerogative. Equally striking is the fact that the four criteria that according to Lis and Soly dominated discussions about the valorization of labour in pre-industrial Europe also seem to have played part in the medieval Islamic world: meaning, honour, knowledge and utility.³⁰ Europe’s polyphony, in short, may not be as exceptional as Lis and Soly suggest.

Many of the institutions that underpinned the social and economic history of Europe were, at least partly, shaped in the Middle Ages. But what shaped these institutions? The standard answer is: social and political relations. *Worthy Efforts* – and to me that is the great merit of this book – adds another dimension by its detailed investigation of the interaction of social and political structures with perceptions and values. This approach opens new perspectives on the social and economic history of the Middle Ages: it helps, for instance, to better understand the link between artisan skills and the identity of craftsmen (even if Lis and Soly did not fully explore that link) and the connection between labour legislation and the increase of wage labour in the late Middle Ages (even though I fail to see a connection with the development of living standards). The most intriguing question is perhaps one that Lis and Soly barely touch upon: whether attitudes to work were really so very different in other parts of the world. But then, that too is a great merit of this book: it raises more questions than it answers.

Notes

1. Joseph Ehmer and Catharina Lis, 'Introduction: historical studies in perceptions of work', in: Joseph Ehmer and Catharina Lis (eds.), *The idea of work in Europe from Antiquity to modern times* (Farnham 2009) 1-30.
2. *Worthy Efforts*, 550-555, 563-564.
3. Jan Luiten van Zanden, 'The 'revolt' of the early modernists' and the 'first modern economy': an assessment', *Economic History Review* 55 (2002) 619-641.
4. Two research projects contributing to this development are currently carried out in Oxford (the Oxford Roman Economy Project) and Leiden (An empire of 2000 cities: urban networks and economic integration in the Roman Empire).
5. James Davis, *Medieval Market Morality: Life, Law and Ethics in the English Marketplace, 1200-1500* (Cambridge 2012).
6. E.g. Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought* (Cambridge 2002).
7. Sheilagh Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade: Merchant Guilds 1000-1800* (Cambridge 2011).
8. *Worthy Efforts*, 233-235, 277-290.
9. E.g. Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (eds.), *Werken volgens de regels: ambachten in Brabant en Vlaanderen, 1500-1800* (Brussels 1994); Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (eds.), *Werelden van verschil: ambachtsgilden in de Lage Landen* (Brussels 1997); Maarten Prak, Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen and Hugo Soly (eds.), *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries: Work, Power, and Representation* (Aldershot 2006).
10. For a summary of the debate: S.R. Epstein and Maarten Prak, 'Introduction: guilds, innovation and the European economy, 1400-1800', in: S.R. Epstein and Maarten Prak (eds.), *Guilds, innovation and the European economy, 1400-1800* (Cambridge 2008).
11. *Worthy Efforts*, 345-346.
12. *Worthy Efforts*, 566.
13. S.R. Epstein, 'Craft guilds, apprenticeship, and technological change in pre-industrial Europe', *Journal of Economic History* 53 (1998) 684-713.
14. Patrick Wallis, 'Apprenticeship and training in premodern England', *Journal of Economic History* 68 (2008) 823-861.
15. Maarten Prak, 'An artisan 'revolution' in late medieval and early modern Europe?' Paper presented at the ESH-seminar in Utrecht, March 2013, 9-10. Available at <http://vkclibrary.uu.nl/vkcl/seh/research/Lists/Seminar%20Program/AllItems.aspx>
16. Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Poverty and capitalism in pre-industrial Europe* (Brighton 1979).
17. Samuel Cohn, 'After the Black Death: labour legislation and attitudes towards labour in late-medieval western Europe', *Economic History Review* 60 (2007) 457-485.
18. *Worthy Efforts*, 426-442.
19. *Worthy Efforts*, 438-439.
20. Jan de Vries, 'Poverty and capitalism: A discussion of Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, Poverty and Capitalism in Preindustrial Europe', *Theory and Society* 12 (1983) 245-255.
21. *Worthy Efforts*, 438.
22. Robert C. Allen, 'The Great Divergence in European wages and prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War', *Explorations in Economic History* 38 (2001), 411-447; Sevket Pamuk, 'The Black Death and the origins of the Great Divergence across Europe', 1300-1600, *European Review of Economic History* 11 (2007) 289-317. Agricultural wages for England are presented in Gregory Clark, 'The long march of history: farm wages, population, and economic growth, England 1209-1869', *Economic History Review* 60 (2007) 97-135; but Clark maintains that in England wages dropped again in the sixteenth century.

23. *Worthy Efforts*, 553.
24. Maya Shatzmiller, *Labour in the medieval Islamic world* (Leiden 1994), 371-382.
25. Barbara Finster, 'Craftsmen and groups of craftsmen in the first centuries of Islam', in: Michael G. Morony (ed.), *Manufacturing and labour. The formation of the classical Islamic world 12* (Aldershot 2003), 199-201, 201-205. Translation of: Barbara Finster, 'Handwerker und Handwerkergruppen in den ersten Jahrhunderten des Islam', in Adalbert J. Gail, ed., *Kunstler und Werkstatt in den Orientalischen Gesellschaften* (Graz 1982), 7-16. Interestingly, Lis and Soly demonstrate that the same custom existed in classical Athens in the 5th century BCE: *Worthy Efforts*, 49-50.
26. Bernard Lewis, 'An epistle on manual crafts', *Islamic Culture* 27 (1943) 142-152. For a recent discussion: Abbas Hamdani, *The Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa'* and the controversy about the origin of craft guilds in early medieval Islam, in: Nelly Hanna (ed.), *Money, land and trade. An economic history of the Muslim Mediterranean* (London 2002) 157-173.
27. Shatzmiller, *Labour*, 383-386.
28. Shatzmiller, *Labour*, 387-396.
29. 'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammed Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimma: an introduction to history*, tr. Franz Rosenthal (London 1967), chapter V.
30. *Worthy Efforts*, 556-557.

About the author

Jessica Dijkman (1960) is a postdoc researcher in economic history at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. In earlier research projects she investigated commodity market institutions in medieval Holland and compared the organization of labour, particularly craftsmanship, in the Middle Ages in Europe and the Islamic world. Currently she studies the way societies in late medieval and early modern Europe coped with food crises and famines.

j.dijkman@uu.nl

