

Worthy and unworthy efforts: Europe as a comparative unit

Reflections on Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, Worthy efforts: attitudes towards work and workers in pre-industrial Europe (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2012), 664 p.

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This book is a masterpiece. Only once in several years a book is published on labour history that is so original, so new and so rich that one wishes to recommend it to everybody interested in this field. *Worthy Efforts* is such a book for several reasons. First, because it seriously covers an unusually long period of more than two thousand years, from Classical Greece up until 1800, second because it is based on a plethora of relevant and recent literature (about 60 pages, 1,400 titles of books and articles in English, French, German, Italian and Dutch primarily, occasionally also in Spanish) which itself is an indispensable and rare bibliography,¹ and third because it comes up with a highly original and consistent new grand narrative.

The shortest possible summary may be the authors' assertion that craftsmanship, manual work, and work in general was not only generally acknowledged as essential in Classical Antiquity, but also as honourable – notwithstanding what influential authors like Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and later on Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas may have written. Consequently, Lis and Soly stress 'the very pronounced ethic of effort that characterized Europe throughout the pre-industrial period, from Hesiod to Adam Smith'.²

Proletarianization as the prime mover

However, "valuation" or "valorization" criteria in order to determine which type of work (praying, trading, farming, sculpting and drawing, or weaving) had to be esteemed higher and which lower, varied over time and were heavily debated. Their careful, complete (as far as I am able to judge) and convincing analysis of these numerous debates may be the major achieve-

ment of this book; especially, as the authors earnestly try to include all – rare – existent traces of self-representation of farmers and manual workers, including women.

The authors distinguish several periods of ‘great social mobility’ which caused and determined these debates³: Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the Roman Empire from ca. 100 until 200 CE, urban growth in the Central Middle Ages, the long sixteenth century, and the second half of the eighteenth century. In this final stage the authors seem to take into account that not so much socio-economic developments like social mobility determine value systems, but that causal relations become reversed: ‘Smith did not equate self-interest with selfishness, but his condemnation of the ideal of civic virtue and his eulogy of private virtue could be construed by economically active citizens as *carte blanche* to reduce their social responsibility to pursuit of profit within the law, and that is in effect what many capitalists did.’⁴

This basic problem of the direction of causal relations between socio-economic developments and the competition between different “valuation” or “valorization” criteria is not systematically researched in this book in a quantitative way, but with reference to authors like Charles Tilly, Bruce Campbell and Bas van Bavel proletarianization is clearly seen as the prime mover. In the introduction it is stated: ‘The spectacular increase in the number of wage dependents was the most fundamental change in late medieval and early modern Europe, both in quantitative and in qualitative respects. In Classical Antiquity, wage labour had been present, but from the thirteenth century onward it continuously gained ground, and by 1800 most households in Western Europe derived at least part of their income from wage labour.’⁵ And in the conclusion they express themselves even stronger: ‘The process of proletarianization in many parts of Europe between the eleventh-twelfth centuries and the mid-nineteenth century influenced attitudes toward work and workers more deeply than any other change, also more deeply than the rise of new religious doctrines, the introduction of new ideas about knowledge/science, or the emergence of new schools of thought.’⁶

Which workers? Which Europe?

I have no good reasons at the moment to disagree with this emphasis on the role of proletarianization in Western Europe, but to what extent this differs from other parts of Eurasia is still under debate, as I will elaborate

at the end of this essay. Further quantification and an elaboration of the precise links between the rise and demise of wage labour on the one hand and the varying appreciation of it by different social groups clearly is the next step to be taken in labour history research.

It would however be utterly ungrateful to reproach its authors not to have taken on board this task now. Having said this, I would nevertheless like to point to two remarkable blind spots in their rich treasure trove: the absence of two types of 'unworthy efforts'. What I have been missing in this book are the considerable numbers of soldiers (and also sailors) as 'workers', and – at least after Antiquity – of slaves in Europe. Slavery is certainly mentioned in the chapters on the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, but only as an abstract category that labourers were contrasting themselves with.⁷ In order to set the next step to global comparisons in labour history these points have to be clarified first.

Before doing so, we have to stand still briefly at the definition of 'Europe' in the title. In the book it clearly shifts in time. In the first two chapters it refers to classical antiquity in the broadest sense of the word: the Greek and Roman world from the Indus or Persian Gulf westward to the Atlantic Ocean and from the Nile to the Black Sea and the Rhine, witness e.g. cited authors like (in modern national terms) Turkey-based Dio Cocceianus (Chrysostom), Syria/Turkey-based John Chrysostom, and Tunisia-based Augustine. The rest of the book, however and rather suddenly, limits Europe to the countries west of the Elbe, including Central Europe, Italy, and Spain (Portugal is mentioned only once).⁸ The boundaries in the southeast are less clear, but the Balkans are virtually left out. Let me rephrase therefore my point: what are the consequences of leaving soldiers, sailors⁹ and slaves out of a study on attitudes to work in post-Antiquity Western Europe west of the Elbe and without the Balkans, both as such and for comparisons with other parts of the world?

Slavery in post-Antiquity Europe

The slaves in Europe after Antiquity to begin with. As Lis and Soly know very well, the history of slavery in Western-Europe does not stop after the Roman Empire. Their fellow-countryman Charles Verlinden (1907-1996, and not unlikely one of their teachers at Ghent University) has extensively published on slavery in mediaeval Europe (occasionally extending his narrative until 1800), including the Iberian peninsula and Italy.¹⁰ This is not a simple story of tit-for-tat between Christian and Muslim ships in the Mediterranean (the

infamous white slaves on the Barbary Coast), nor of bad habits dying out in due time. To the contrary, in the Early Modern Period in the southern parts of Italy, Spain and in particular Portugal the employment of especially black slaves from Africa continued and sometimes even increased. In sixteenth-century Portugal 2-3 per cent of the total population consisted of black slaves, and in Lisbon even 10 per cent.¹¹ Apart from employment in agriculture domestic slaves were not uncommon in the big cities of these southern countries, including Venice. Besides, the Atlantic slave trade, although in principle engaged in transporting slaves from Africa to and within the Americas, caused even a certain number to land up in cities in north-western Europe. At the introduction of the *Police des Noirs* (August 9, 1777), some five thousand blacks of African descent may have been living in France, mainly domestic slaves, and predominantly in Paris, Nantes and Bordeaux. At the same time Britain counted similarly 10,000 persons of African descent, many of whom slaves and half of them living in London.¹² The question would be to what extent the very presence of slaves in Western Europe for such a long period, and in sufficient numbers in some big cities in order to be clearly visible, has had an impact on the discussions as treated in *Worthy Efforts*. It is at least remarkable how frequently early-modern labourers emphatically declared not only to be different from servants, but also from slaves.¹³ Their fear for confusion in this respect may not only have been derived from what they knew about daily practice in the tropics, but also next door.¹⁴

Equally important is the inclusion of slavery in the labour history of Europe as a whole, not only because Europeans organised slave transportations and plantations in the Atlantic and later on in their African colonies and beyond, but also because Europe itself has known much slavery. This history of slavery *in* Europe is all too often neglected,¹⁵ and should include – apart from the cases mentioned already above – also Southern Russia and the (Byzantine and Ottoman) Balkans, as well as comparisons between the different religions, Roman-Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, different brands of Protestantism, Judaism and Islam.¹⁶ This awareness is indispensable in any comparison between ‘Europe and the Rest’.

Soldiers and sailors as proletarians

But before turning to global comparisons, let me briefly discuss the role of the professional soldier in labour history, in particular of (Western) Europe.¹⁷ Not a worthy profession according to many, but still involving efforts. If we

concentrate on professional, paid soldiers, often in short called ‘mercenaries’ (in Scotland very appropriately ‘waged men of war’¹⁸), their historical significance is twofold. First, they are the oldest documented group of wage receivers, and, second, social benefits (pensions, disability benefits and the like) have been developed in armies before they spilled over to other occupational groups. For these reasons, as well for their mobility and the impact of their numbers on certain regions of origin and destination, soldiers cannot be missed from labour history.

In ancient Greece in particular the navy and in Rome the army mainly relied on paid labour.¹⁹ With the reappearance of urban centres in the High Middle Ages, mercenaries and after 1650 equally professional ‘state commission armies’ came to replace feudal armies. They dominated the field before the large-scale introduction of conscription after the French Revolution. The size of all these professional armies in Europe together was considerable. They involved 3.4 million individuals during the first half of the sixteenth century, a figure to increase to over 13 million men in the second half of the eighteenth century. On top of the soldiers, there was the army train, consisting predominantly of women and children, which equalled half of these figures before 1650, but diminished quickly with the advent of the state commission armies.²⁰ The impact of these figures on the labour market must have been enormous, especially in countries which specialised in this trade, and in those with relatively big armies. Switzerland, Ireland and Scotland are examples of the first category. Switzerland with its 1.75 million inhabitants catered for 60,000 to 80,000 soldiers in foreign armies when Europe was at war (15 to 20 per cent of its adult male population). On the receiving side, the Dutch Republic during stadtholder William III had a professional army of 100,000 against an adult male population of half a million.

This – one may wish to call it nasty – side of the proletarianization process, must have influenced the appreciation of wage labour as such, one might suppose. This should not be simply equalled with the miseries of war so graphically represented by Jacques Callot, or with the bad press of the Hessians in the American War of Independence. After all, most of the soldiers’ life was spent in garrisons, living in with local households and only from the eighteenth century onwards in barracks. There they sometimes became the competitors of craftsmen organized in guilds. At the same time, Frank Tallet concludes: ‘The readiness of men to volunteer for military service can be chiefly explained by the overcrowded state of the labour market. For most volunteers, the army was an employer of last resort’.²¹ Thus, the hypothesis might be formulated that free wage labourers not only wished to distinguish themselves increasingly (as demonstrated by Lis and

Soly) from servants under the absolute dominance of their master, unfree slaves, and the despicable ‘Lumpenproletariat’, but also of the voluntary wage labourers in the armies.

European workers in a global perspective

As already said, this book cries for global comparisons, and the authors on a few occasions already have made a start, comparing Western and Eastern Europe²² and with East Asia. They even go so far as to interpret high proletarianization levels in Early Modern (Western) Europe as a ‘unique social course’, determining the ‘Great Divergence’.²³ This is a daring suggestion if compared with other recent attempts at global comparisons regarding the role of work, labour, its institutions and ideologies. In general, authors who have attempted to make such comparisons recently tend to come up not only with differences, but increasingly also with similarities.²⁴ The picture is becoming gradually more mixed, without reaching a new orthodoxy for the time being. A few examples of such studies may suffice here: guilds, migration rates and labour relations across Eurasia.

The occurrence and success of craftsmen guilds in different parts of the world shows great variations. But these no longer can be neatly linked to continents, hailing European uniqueness in this respect, as has long been believed. A first comparison suggests that urbanization levels, the nature of political economy, levels of human capital formation as mirrored by literacy and numeracy rates and female labour force participation, as well as differing kinship ties may offer good explanations for these variations. Differences within Europe and between subperiods are as important as those within other continents, and as between Europe and the rest.

A similar conclusion may be drawn for mobility patterns.²⁵ Migration rates in the western and eastern extremes of Eurasia were not substantially different before 1650, after which a divergence took place, which has been lifted only in the past decades. More important are the strong variations inside Europe as well as inside East Asia. These developments are directly linked to the theme of work. Migration rates depend heavily on urbanization, i.e. occupational specialization, both of small independent producers and of wage labourers (and all intermediate categories, so well documented by Lis and Soly in the past). Urbanization certainly is characteristic for mediaeval and early modern Europe, but it occurred also elsewhere, with all concomitant consequences for shifting labour relations. Whereas urbanization levels

were highest in Western Europe and the USA in 1890 (with respectively 30 and 32 per cent of its populations living in cities of 10,000 inhabitants or more), this ranking list was rather different one century before – the time where *Worthy Efforts* ends. Around 1800 Japan was the leader with 15, the Middle East followed with 12 and only then Western Europe came with 10 per cent. Consequently, shifts in labour relations in the countryside have to be taken into account as much or even more as in the cities. Reconstructions in the framework of the *Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations 1500-2000* suggest that proletarianization was an important feature of the early-modern peasant populations in Russia and East-Asia.²⁶ Also army recruitment, with all shades of waged soldiers had a high impact on labour relations. And in the nineteenth century seasonal migration of waged harvesters, navvies, masons, brick makers etcetera added to this, especially also in Russia.

This is of course not to say that Lis and Soly should have attempted to make such wide geographical comparisons, only that they are much needed in the future. Variations inside Europe, also regarding the occurrence of unfree labour, and the many variations within free labour, including soldiers and sailors will have to be part of it. In order to make substantial progress in this direction it is necessary that besides much more empirical comparative work on the organization and remuneration of work, similar grand narratives like *Worthy Efforts* will have to be initiated for other parts of the world, including Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Necessary, but bearing in mind that the standard set by Lis and Soly is very high indeed.²⁷

Notes

1. I cannot refrain from quoting the following sentence which is characteristic for their modesty: 'The bibliography at the end of this book appears vast, but connoisseurs of a specific period, region, or sub-theme will undoubtedly notice gaps': *Worthy Efforts*, 9.
2. *Worthy Efforts*, 550.
3. *Worthy Efforts*, 561-563; see also p. 6 ('changes in social positions and sets of relations brought on recurrent debates and polemics about work and workers').
4. *Worthy Efforts*, 264.
5. *Worthy Efforts*, 8.
6. *Worthy Efforts*, 567-569, and chapter 7 ('The many faces of wage labour'); for an alternative view on the role of technology and religion see Karel Davids, *Religion, Technology and the Great and Little Divergences. China and Europe Compared, c. 700-1800* (Leiden and Boston 2013).
7. This becomes immediately clear from the excellent index tot this book in which soldier, army, mercenary, sailor, seaman, maritime are missing completely and slavery is referred to in the specific way mentioned here.

8. Although this narrowing down remains not unmentioned: *Worthy Efforts*, 6, also 568.
9. There is no place to elaborate here on sailors, but see several contributions and the extensive bibliography in Richard W. Unger (Ed.), *Shipping and Economic Growth 1350-1850* (Leiden / Boston 2011).
10. Charles Verlinden, *L'Esclavage dans l'Europe Médiévale*, Vol. I *Péninsule ibérique – France* (Bruges 1955); Vol. II *Italie, Colonies italiennes du Levant, Levant latin, Empire Byzantin* (Gent 1977).
11. A.C. de C.M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441-1555* (Cambridge, 1982); S.McKee, "Domestic Slavery in Renaissance Italy", *Slavery and Abolition* 29:3 (2008), 305-326; more literature is quoted in William D. Phillips jr., "African Slaves on the Iberian Peninsula", in: Klaus J. Bade et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of European Migration and Minorities* (New York 2011), 213-214, and Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, "Sklavenmarkt" and "Slavenverschleppung", in: *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit*, Vol. 12 (Stuttgart 2010), 83-88, and in Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, *The mobility transition in Europe revisited, 1500-1900. Sources and methods, IISH Research Papers* 46 (2010), 15-17.
12. Sue Peabody, *'There Are No Slaves in France'. The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York 1997); William D. Phillips jr., "African Slaves in Great Britain", in: Klaus J. Bade et al. (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of European Migration and Minorities* (New York 2011), 211-213; for the Netherlands see Gert Oostindie and Emy Maduro, *In het land van de overheerser. Vol. II Antillianen en Surinamers in Nederland 1634/1667-1954* (Dordrecht / Cinnaminson 1986), 6-19; Leo Balai, *Geschiedenis van de Amsterdamse slavenhandel. Over de belangen van Amsterdamse regenten bij de trans-Atlantische slavenhandel* (Zutphen 2013), 39-49.
13. *Worthy Efforts*, 495, 505, 527-533, 541-542, 573.
14. The debate about the motives of the different players, including organizations of wage labourers, advocating the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery seems to be undecided so far. However, national differences are remarkable. For an overview: Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations. The Long-term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Leiden / Boston 2011).
15. For a recent example of slavery with Europe left out: Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard (eds.), *The Routledge History of Slavery* (London and New York 2011). Luckily, this absence in overviews is counterbalanced by many monographs covering parts of Europe or relevant for European history, e.g. Ehud R. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle and London 1998); William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (London 2006); Madeline C. Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge 2010); Mohammed Ennaji, *Slavery, the State, and Islam* (Cambridge 2013); cf. also Lucassen and Lucassen in n. 11. *
16. William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (London 2006) 219-230.
17. I refrain here from discussing different shades of freedom and compulsion in military work, see Erik-Jan Zürcher, "Introduction. Understanding changes in military recruitment and employment worldwide", in: Erik-Jan Zürcher (ed.), *Fighting for a Living. A Comparative History of Military Labour 1500-2000* (Amsterdam 2014), 9-39.
18. James Miller, "The Scottish mercenary as a migrant labourer in Europe, 1550-1650", in Zürcher, *Fighting for a Living*, 165-195, 167.
19. Vincent Gabrielsen, *Financing the Athenian Fleet. Public Taxation and Social Relations* (Baltimore 1994), pp. 105-125; W.V. Harris, *Rome's Imperial Economy. Twelve Essays* (Oxford 2011), 296-297; Peter Temin, *The Roman market Economy* (Princeton and Oxford 2013) 76-77, 120-121.
20. Figures in Lucassen and Lucassen, *The mobility transition*; for the army train see J.A. Lynn, *Women, Armies and Warfare in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2008).

21. Frank Tallett, "Soldiers in Western Europe, c. 1500-1790", in: Zürcher, *Fighting for a Living*, 133-162, 142.
22. *Worthy Efforts*, 6, 253-255, 500.
23. *Worthy Efforts*, 553-555, 561, 567-568 (quotations from 568).
24. Apart from the already quoted volumes by Davids and Zürcher, see also Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History. A State of the Art* (Bern 2006); Jan Lucassen, Tine de Moor, and Jan Luiten van Zanden (eds.), *The Return of the Guilds*, Supplement 16 to *The International Review of Social History* 53 (2008); Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata (Eds.), *The Joy and Pain of Work: Global Attitudes and Valuations, 1500-1650*, Supplement 19 to *The International Review of Social History* 56 (2011).
25. Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (eds.), *Globalizing Migration History. The Eurasian Experience (16th-21st centuries)* (Leiden/Boston 2014).
26. See methodological papers on Russia, China, Japan and Taiwan on <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourrelations/methodological-papers>.
27. One confession may be necessary: I know the authors already for a very long time and cherish dear memories of our close cooperation, see e.g. Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen, Hugo Soly (zds.), *Before the Unions: Wage earners and collective action in Europe, 1300-1850* (Cambridge 1994, Supplement 2 to *International Review of Social History* 39; reprinted separately in 1995 and in a Russian translation in 1997) and Maarten Prak, Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen, and Hugo Soly (Eds.), *Craft Guilds in the Early Low Countries: Work, Power and Representation* (Aldershot 2006). I trust, nevertheless, that this article shows that I am not too biased to push the debate forwards.

About the author

Jan Lucassen (1947) is emeritus-professor at the Free University in Amsterdam and since 1988 working at the International Institute of Social History, since 2012 as honorary fellow. He published on social and economic history of Western Europe and Northern India, in particular on the history of migration and the history of work and labour relations.

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