

Exploring ideas about work and workers in pre-industrial Europe and other parts of the world

A reply from the authors of Worthy Efforts

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Abstract

In the reviews of *Worthy Efforts*, the book is seen in relation to some of the major debates in historiography. How should ancient European society be characterized? Classical Antiquity and the medieval West: continuity or change? How important was the interaction between religious and secular worlds in medieval society? What was the role of labour in the Great Divergence? In what respects did pre-industrial Europe differ from other parts of the world? The reviewers note gaps in our present knowledge, warn against overly structured points of view, and question some of our statements and hypotheses. They also make clear that still other views were expressed about work in medieval and early modern Europe, and that global comparisons are absolutely necessary.

We feel deeply honoured that we have elicited such inspiring comments from so many experts, and we take to heart their invitations to elaborate on certain problems, the more so since all authors emphasize the need for additional research, especially comparative research, and the main objective of *Worthy Efforts* is 'to encourage placing research on historical perceptions and representations of work and workers higher on the agenda'.¹ The papers cover a great many topics, and although it is tempting to address every objection and suggestion in detail we prefer to focus on general themes.

We have always regretted that historical research has become so compartmentalized. The organization of academia increasingly compels historians to become entrenched in a single period, a carefully circumscribed region, and a specific problem area. Specialization leads to great depth, which often yields new insights but which hinders comparisons across time and space. We are convinced that it is refreshing to explore different horizons at the risk of appearing heretics in the congregation. In *Worthy Efforts* we have only partially fulfilled our ambition to bridge space and time. While we have kept the long term in mind, we have ultimately

curtailed the geographic scope in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period to the areas west of the river Elbe. The approach is therefore Euro-centric, with only sporadic coverage of Russia and none at all of the Balkans. In the 'concluding reflections', we present some elements for comparison with China and Japan,² but these are no more than suggestions intended to elicit reactions. The papers by several reviewers demonstrate that global comparisons are indeed necessary.

Closing the gap between ancient and medieval history

Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages have long been separate worlds in historical research. Classical historians themselves are partially responsible for this. Over the course of the previous century, most of them fell under the spell of the German Historical School, Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, and especially Moses Finley: they emphasized the 'specificity' of the Greco-Roman world and considered comparisons with other and later pre-industrial societies to be irrelevant. Medievalists and Early Modernists therefore were licensed to leave Antiquity out of the picture. After all, they risked wandering around a foreign country, where they were unfamiliar with the signposts and lacked the instruments to decipher them. We ventured into that foreign country shortly before 2000 CE, when the demolition of the dominant structure was accelerating: new sources were coming into use, new methods were being tested, and old paradigms were being questioned. The extensive and richly documented review by Koen Verboven fortunately reveals that the pieces we picked up could be fitted into the newly developing structure. The economic and social history of the ancient world, especially that of classical Rome, is rapidly being revised, but Verboven notes that many research questions remain unanswered, and that debates about important matters are ongoing.

The traditional vision of a bipolar society characterized by the elite-plebeian contrast and based on a slave economy has made way for a far more complex perspective: an empire in which members of the select few were engaged in trade and finance, where social middle groups were rising, where freedmen played an important economic role, and where wage workers were fairly numerous in both the cities and the countryside. Rather than legal status, economic position often lay behind social contrasts. There was a wide variety of labour relations: chattel slavery, serf tenancy, debt-bondage, forced labour, casual work, subcontracting...³ The ancient world of work was therefore far more variegated than has long been assumed.⁴ How did this

manifest itself in the images and self-perceptions of various categories of economically active groups?

Verboven rightly sees problems arising when he observes that ‘among the multiple slave identities those of skilled workers and ambitious managers were as “natural” as those of the faithful or treacherous servant. There was no single slave-identity that could have imposed itself on free workers’. He refers on the one hand to the older view that slaves and freedmen together embodied a ‘popular culture’ or a ‘worker culture’, on the other hand to Paul Veyne, who credits the *plebs media* – the ‘middling sort of people’⁵ – with their own culture distinct from that of a ‘class of freedmen’. He also brings to our attention the most recent view, which holds that both freeborn and freedmen participated in an urban ‘middle class culture’. All these interpretations assume – sometimes explicitly but often implicitly – that the groups concerned had tremendous respect for work, thereby distinguishing themselves from the elite. We are inclined to place our accents differently.

For centuries a strong work ethic permeated Greco-Roman society. Making worthy efforts was regarded as a duty and a necessity, not only because the gods demanded efforts from everybody, but also and especially because it entailed a generally recognized social value. The nature of the effort might vary greatly, but social groups at all levels in the hierarchy took it to heart.⁶ Large and small tombstones depicting economic pursuits reveal what people with very different occupations considered worthy of commemoration, as well as how closely work, virtue, and honour were intertwined. The impressive grave monuments erected by Trier merchants between the start of the second century and the first quarter of the third century reflect the pride of a new local elite aiming to demonstrate that the family’s commercial pursuits had served the common good, and consequently that they had earned their wealth through legitimate means. What wealthy merchants wished to commemorate was valued in equal measure by craftsmen, as the mentions of skilled labour on tombstones indicate. These also sought to recall to public memory that they had done their duty, i.e. had worked hard, and that they had served the common good by providing good-quality products. Visual images on such tombstones served to show professional skills and, if possible, technical knowledge.⁷ We believe that such tombstones were not variations on a style of ‘freedman art’,⁸ and that they cannot be regarded as a ‘worker-subculture’ either. Nor do we agree with the researchers who regard them as an expression of an urban ‘middle class culture’, i.e. ‘an attempt to take issue with agrarian-aristocratic values’, as Emanuel Mayer has recently argued.⁹ Funerary culture in our view derived from a largely shared value system, in which economically

active freedmen and freeborn stated: 'We have made worthy efforts in our own way'. When we examine grave monuments of the social elite, we notice similarities not only in the conceptual and stylistic features but also in the tenor of the message. In fact, the visual strategies of Eurysaces' tomb were not fundamentally different from those used by prominent Roman citizens: the wealthy baker presented himself as a 'public servant' who had served society just as well as a high-ranking soldier or civil servant. Precisely because there was a broad social consensus that everybody had to make worthy efforts, tombs and epitaphs from top to bottom conveyed messages resonant with a highly comparable message.

Consensus about the need for worthy efforts did not exclude debates and controversies, however. Time and again the question was asked: 'Who performs his duty and who does not'? This could just as easily lead to a discourse on parasitism as to the condemnation of certain activities regarded as valueless and/or as non-work. Established elites moreover gave specific answers to the question: 'Which groups have to perform which tasks'? Cicero's well-known statements about trade and manual labour are to be seen in this context. Rather than interpreting them as signs of contempt for merchants and craftsmen, we view them as warnings against transgressions: members of the established elite were reminded that their social status was closely linked to the nature of their efforts. Last but not least, the crucial question is: 'Which criteria did different groups apply in attributing value to their own efforts and in discrediting those of others'? There were always various voices sounding off at the same time. We have examined this polyphony by asking heuristically: who said what, where, when and how, in what circumstances, to whom and why? In Classical Antiquity work was valued on the basis of criteria that have resurfaced continually in later periods, and that have deeply influenced definitions and representations of craftsmanship and professional skills, classifications of knowledge, the theory-practice and mind-body problem, and interpretations of concepts such as autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency, even happiness. The spectacular expansion of archaeological studies and the use of new modes of analysis will undoubtedly reveal more about this polyphony in the near future.

We are delighted that Koen Verboven is receptive to efforts to bridge the gap between ancient and medieval history. Especially because the traditional argument invoked to justify this chronological schism, namely the rise of Christianity, does not in our view hold water. In the dominant grand narrative, it has been emphasized continually that only in the Christian world did a deep, omnipresent appreciation for work arise. No schism is

discernible between Classical Antiquity and the Western Middle Ages, however, as far as the obligation to work is concerned. In both periods efforts were expected of everybody. The Church of Rome continued to use ideological constructs and physical metaphors to make this clear.

Interplay between ecclesiastical and lay worlds in medieval society

The transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages did, however, involve major changes. In ancient Rome several types of work might be related explicitly and openly to identity, virtue, and prestige, and different valorization criteria co-existed. In medieval Western Europe, the Church of Rome, on the other hand, considered only a single criterion to be relevant: were the efforts dedicated to a higher spiritual cause? Work was to be performed in the light of eternity, of spiritual salvation, and should therefore ideally be an expression of devotion. The impact of this message should not be underestimated. The Church of Rome was not only a powerful institution in terms of its growing wealth and immense political influence but remained until the rise of Protestantism in the sixteenth century the primary source of ideological positions in Western Christianity as well. This meant that economically active lay people had to define and manifest themselves primarily in relation to religious discourse. They derived support from the fundamentally favourable view of the clergy toward work, but the principle that all work ultimately needed to serve a spiritual cause precluded highlighting other valorization criteria and certainly prohibited overt demonstrations of economic success, technical ingenuity, or individual occupational pride.

The Church, however, was unable to provide a straightforward answer as regards the best way to serve God. Should *all* members of the clergy perform work and more specifically manual labour? Various monastic orders adopted different positions, and within a single order, the answers might vary greatly over time.¹⁰ Ecclesiastical circles therefore abounded with polyphony as well. In a well-thought out and inspiring paper Jeroen Deploige reveals that others besides monks and theologians spoke out: ‘voices from the fringes’, religiously motivated voices from below. He mentions not only heretic movements – Cathars and Valdians – but also semi-religious communities and groups of lay people, especially the Humiliati and the Beguines. He infers from scattered twelfth and early thirteenth-century sources ‘that already quite early on there seem to have existed religiously

motivated voices from the lower strata arguing for a new apostolic spirituality in which lay professions and a Christian life could go together perfectly well'. This is an important hypothesis. The text quoted by Deploige about a group of weavers in the bishopric of Liège around 1135 who were forced to undergo a humiliation ritual shows that economically active lay people could indeed defend themselves by emphasizing that they earned their keep through hard work and did so without committing any sins: 'Living from the work of their own hands in accordance with the righteous life of the ancient Christians and apostolic men'. These arguments, conveyed by a monk-chronicler, attest to an explicit self-awareness. But can they also be regarded as expressions of a *new* apostolic spirituality? Were the weavers doing anything other than taking up their duty as *laboratores* and situating their activities within the sins rhetoric of the Church?¹¹ It is in any case clear that they used socio-ideological and religious arguments offered by the ecclesiastical authorities to position themselves as a group.

Some movements labelled as heretics by the Church gave a different dimension to the religious discourses about the spiritual meaning of work. Deploige notes that both their preachers and their disciples engaged in very early forms of 'innerworldly asceticism'. Prominent contemporaries associated weavers with propagating heresy, which in the twentieth century gave rise to debates about whether weavers became heretics, or heretics became weavers. We are inclined to regard this as a non-issue. Considering the rapid growth of the urban cloth trade, the changes in the organization of work, and, last but not least, the ideals of radically apostolic people – including proclaiming the true Christian message¹² – no professional activity other than weaving offered so many opportunities to reach so many urban producers and to set an example. At any rate, the ideal of 'labour by one's own hand' proclaimed in the margins of the religious system certainly influenced late-medieval reform movements such as the *Devotio Moderna*. As regards Christian ideologies of work in the Latin West, *Worthy Efforts* focuses mainly on the different monastic rules and the views of the theologians. Deploige is correct in writing that such an approach 'may inspire the assumption of a permanent and sharp differentiation between the medieval worlds of clergy and laity'. He notes that 'religious status in the Middle Ages was often more contingent and fluid', as is made clear by the reality of the 'mechanical clerics' and 'trading clerics.' Unfortunately, little is known about this group, but what is known justifies the assumption that in some thirteenth-century French towns up to one third of the male population consisted of lower clergymen, who were economically active and were able to marry. Did they deliberately take the tonsure to be exempt

from taxes?¹³ Because they had special tax privileges until the end of the thirteenth century, they are in our view unlikely to have helped raise the status of the occupations they practised. Lay people in the true sense of the word had every interest in universally applicable regulations, as the Ghent conflict in 1287-89 over the tax exemption for trading clerics demonstrates. If members of semi-religious groups, such as Beguines and Beghards operated as entrepreneurs and merchants, they became similarly entangled in conflicts with professional organizations and secular authorities. In this sense, they indirectly and unintentionally promoted the 'secularization of work'.

Worldwide comparisons are addressed below, but the following question from Christine Moll-Murata is relevant here: were monks and nuns ever labelled as parasites in medieval Europe, as they were in China? There were voices to that effect, but up to the Reformation they targeted members of specific orders. Mendicants were seriously taken to task by lay people as well as by other members of the clergy and were accused *inter alia* of transgressions, especially of performing tasks that were the exclusive purview of the secular clergy.¹⁴ In China, on the other hand, *all* Buddhist monks and nuns were repeatedly stigmatized as parasites in anti-clerical discourses, because they subsisted on alms and dodged their social obligations: they did not perform feudal labour, they did not work, and they did not pay taxes.¹⁵ In the medieval Islamic world, movements within Sufism that valued asceticism over work were also criticized.¹⁶

Missing groups of workers

Some reviewers wonder why certain occupational groups or social categories have not been addressed, noting that some of these were very numerous. Rather than dismissing this by answering that much work still lies ahead, we would like to point out that *Worthy Efforts* is first and foremost an attempt to trace recurring *debates and polemics* about work and workers in pre-industrial Europe. Agrarian, commercial, and artisanal pursuits and those practising them have since Classical Antiquity been regarded and valued in different ways by members of the elite and the social middle groups, and the same held true for wage labour and wage earners from the fourteenth century onward. We have therefore focused our research on these categories. Since we are not writing a socio-economic and cultural history of work but are considering perceptions and evaluations of work,

we have omitted many occupational groups that were not pivotal in the recurring debates and polemics.

Types of work that elicited repeated objections from ecclesiastical and/or secular authorities and were subject to negative sanctions should of course be considered. Jessica Dijkman therefore has a point when she draws attention to retail trade. In the chapter about Christian ideologies of work we have mentioned the late-medieval confession books and *artes praedicandi*, which covered all kinds of activities that might easily be a source of sinful temptation. Retail trade was a frequent scapegoat in the rhetoric of sin, as the individuals concerned here – unlike wealthy merchants¹⁷ – did nothing other than ‘buying low and selling high’ and according to the Christian work ethic were therefore not entitled to profit. We have also mentioned retail traders in reference to regulatory and disciplinary interventions by secular authorities. In the Early Modern Period itinerant traders were especially likely to arouse suspicion; many legal texts lumped them together with vagrants. Prejudice against fixed-shop traders was also deeply enconced. Based on the contexts, we infer that insinuations and accusations directed at ‘merchants’ in literary texts were largely directed at shopkeepers. In the eighteenth century Adam Smith attempted to refute prejudices against the retail sector by demonstrating that shopkeepers supported the distribution network and consequently benefited the national economy. Still, acknowledging the economic importance of the retail sector was quite different from expressing appreciation for its protagonists. The commercial success of print series such as *Cris de Paris* shows that male and (especially) female street peddlers fascinated the middle groups but remained subject to suspicion and contempt.¹⁸ Even the owners of shops selling luxury commodities in England were consistently targeted in satirical accounts, which depicted their main skills as cunning and deceit and mocked the differences between their interactions with their social superiors and those with equals.¹⁹

The extensive, long-term study of retail traders that Dijkman advocates would be welcome, especially if it were to include comparisons with other pre-industrial societies, as the striking thirteenth-century example of the Chinese street peddler (*huolong*) raises many questions. As far as late-medieval and early modern Europe is concerned, additional research might resolve an (apparent?) paradox: how could an overwhelmingly negative image coincide with the frequently very influential position of retailers’ organizations in several cities? In some centres many or even most members of the mercers’ guilds were wealthy merchants, but elsewhere such corporations comprised large numbers of shopkeepers of more modest means. This was the case in Antwerp, where all shopkeepers joined the *Meerse*, one

of the three most powerful corporations, which gave the members great standing and respect as a collective.²⁰ Similar reservations may be expressed regarding many other types of work that are not covered or surface only peripherally in our book. This is especially true for civil servants and for professionals, such as lawyers, whose rise and proliferation related closely to state formation. They also merit a lengthy discussion, because their activities and their increasing importance has been a cause of both positive and negative discourses, often with major political and ideological implications.

There is much discussion about the relationship between political (and social) transformations on the one hand and military changes on the other hand, but the increasing reliance among European rulers on professional, paid soldiers from the late fourteenth century is indisputable. Jan Lucassen is absolutely right in stating that this category ‘cannot be missed from labour history’, because it is ‘[one of] the oldest documented group[s] of wage-receivers’. With many occupational groups, members of the elites and the social middle groups distinguished the activity from the person performing it, sometimes assessing the work (or its result) favourably and the worker unfavourably. They did the same with respect to professional soldiers, often expressing admiration for their military prowess, their operational reliability, and their courage and valour – attributes held in great esteem by the aristocracy – although such appreciation nearly always referred to their collective efforts on the battlefield. Soldiers received little or no respect as individuals, unless they were sons of affluent citizens or noblemen who were military commanders or were at least in charge of a contingent. German *Landsknechte*, who in the sixteenth century were renowned as professional soldiers, were labelled as vagrants by most authors in peacetime and were moreover described as paragons of debauchery and blasphemy. The usual depictions of Roman soldiers as *Landsknechte* on German crucifixion scenes in the Renaissance is by no means coincidental.²¹

Did the massive presence of these ‘waged men of war’ in the Early Modern Period influence the negative vision of wage labour, as Lucassen suggests? We doubt this, because elites in any case regarded the performance of work in return for payment as a sign of inferiority and even unfreedom, which in their view justified subjecting this category to all kinds of coercion. We also question the hypothesis that ‘free’ wage workers set themselves apart from professional soldiers. Considering the massive numbers of soldiers, and that having a son in the army figured in the complex survival strategies of many rural families, we think it unlikely that cottagers and other semi-proletarians would have regarded service in the armed forces as an inferior occupation. We are more inclined to reverse the hypothesis to argue that

professional soldiers might feel superior. Indications are available that in some cases they distinguished themselves from the great masses of wage dependents. German *Landsknechte* described themselves in songs as ‘free’ men who were ‘chivalrous’ in battle. They had a strong sense of honour and presented themselves as ‘pious’ warriors, even though contemporaries emphasized that their lifestyle was far from Christian. While for the time being it cannot be determined how representative the sixteenth-century *Landsknechte* and their Swiss counterparts were for Europe, their examples suggest that early-modern professional soldiers did not necessarily rank at the bottom among wage earners – both as far as their standard of living is concerned,²² and with respect to appreciation for their activities by other members of the lower social groups. Significantly, those participating in the mutinies in the Spanish Army of Flanders tended to emphasize how hard they worked and strongly emphasized their rights; moreover, in many cases they manifested a strong measure of corporative identity, collective solidarity, and internal discipline.²³ It would be interesting to compare the code of honour and the often ritualistic actions of some groups of professional soldiers with those of journeymen associations.

Lucassen had also expected that we would include slaves in medieval and early modern Europe. If we had systematically covered the areas east of the Elbe, we should have done so, but our focus was on the western part of Europe, where the presence of slaves was marginal. The studies by Charles Verlinden reveal that slaves were very few in number in thirteenth-century Western Europe. Only after the Black Death did domestic slavery increase and only in Italy and on the Iberian peninsula. Moreover, ‘slave-owning did not move too far beyond the circles of wealthier households in international trading centres’.²⁴ The growth of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the Early Modern Period did not bring about any fundamental change in Southern or in Northwestern Europe – the figures Lucassen provides for England and France are very revealing. Of course his question remains relevant, as ‘to what extent the very presence of slaves in Western Europe for such a long period [...] has had an impact on the discussions as treated in *Worthy Efforts*? It is indeed remarkable that wage workers sometimes argued that they differed not only from servants but also from slaves. We do not think that this rhetoric derived from personal encounters with black Africans. In the Middle Ages and in the sixteenth century the ‘slave’ concept was not associated with the colour black in Western Europe: the English law of villeinage did not distinguish serfs from slaves, and in medieval interpretations of the story about Noah’s curse (based on Genesis 9:20-27), Ham is depicted as the father of the serf.²⁵ The initiators of the notorious Vagrancy Act of

1547 in England did not have black Africans in mind, when they stipulated that able-bodied men and women who refused to work were to be offered as slaves for two years to the employer that claimed them; runaways were to be sentenced to lifelong enslavement.²⁶ And as for images of slavery: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries broad groups of the population heard from the pulpit about the large numbers of Christians turned into slaves by Barbary pirates.²⁷ This subject also featured extensively in popular literature.²⁸ Is it not likely that these stories had a greater impact than the relatively scarce presence of black Africans?

One crucial point in a study about perceptions of work is that the concepts of freedom and unfreedom were interpreted in many different ways in early modern Europe (and later on). In this context, Peer Vries notes that we have omitted the many forms of coercion applied, even during the take-off in Great Britain. He mentions not only slaves but also indentured servants and convicts, who performed forced labour in the colonies, the young men impressed into serving at sea or with the armed forces, as well as inmates in workhouses and houses of correction. This is true. Forced labour was indeed used in many contexts, and participants in the debate about the Great Divergence often overlook this reality. But we would like to clear up a misunderstanding here: we have not argued that a truly free labour market came about in England, on the contrary. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the English authorities abolished only the institutions that had provided some groups of wage workers with a measure of protection: craft guilds, apprenticeship clauses, settlement laws and the Old Poor Law (1834).²⁹ This reveals what (certain categories of) employers regarded as 'free labour'.

The early modern discourses of lawyers, political theorists, and philosophers indicate that the many different manifestations of unfree work did not lead to carefully circumscribed definitions and demarcations. Admittedly, from the sixteenth century onward, slavery and serfdom were distinguished from ordinary service, but freedom and unfreedom continued to be represented as matters of degree. Even though servants were not slaves but were legally free, most commentators held that elements of unfreedom were present, which justified the use of coercive means. Labour laws were in effect 'master-and-servant' laws. In the view of the authorities and the employers, there was no unambiguously free labour, not as an abstract category and certainly not in practice. Even skilled workers could therefore be regarded as servants. Overwhelming evidence is available to demonstrate that they radically rejected such characterizations, and, moreover: that well-organized journeymen interpreted the concept of slavery in their

very own way. They saw it as the negation, the opposite extreme, of what characterized 'free workers': autonomy based on 'property of labour' or 'property of skill', independence guaranteed by a strong position on the shop floor, and self-sufficiency, i.e. the ability to rely on the 'boxes' of their own association in emergencies.

Institutions and actors

Debates about craft guilds relate closely to perceptions of work, writes Dijkman. She therefore wonders why the relationship between the apprenticeship system and the masterpiece on the one hand and the professional identity of artisans on the other hand is not discussed in detail in the book. Two considerations apply here. First, we believe that the virtually exclusive focus on craft guilds over the past twenty years has yielded too biased an impression of work in the cities. Larger numbers of men and women were *not* part of the world of the guilds, because their sector was not guild-based, or because they were unable or unwilling to join such an organization. At the periphery of the guild-based world, there were often 'unfree' workers and 'false' masters accused of moonlighting and undercutting, but who were nonetheless regarded as indispensable by large entrepreneurs.³⁰ Some of these producers at the periphery had completed formal training, but most had not, raising the question as to whether concerns about quality were truly important in all cases.³¹ At any rate, it may be assumed that there were skilled workers who developed a professional identity without being embedded in the apprentice system or producing a masterpiece. Second, the European craft guilds were complex and dynamic institutions that did not have the same features or serve the same purpose always and everywhere; formal similarities might conceal very different contents. Manufacturers in export-oriented guilds had little in common with masters and journeymen serving the local market. The progression 'from apprentice to independent master' was an unattainable ideal for the majority in the corporative world; most journeymen performed wage labour throughout their lives. Some guilds were highly autonomous, others were in effect extensions of the local authorities. And so on. Both considerations suggest that the apprentice system or masterpiece cannot be attributed a universal social or cultural significance. Moll-Murata very rightly argues in a recent article: '[A]n absolute and static view of the entire guild-landscape is difficult to defend, and should be supplanted by a relative and dynamic one'.³² This is exactly what we have aimed to do in *Worthy Efforts*.

Master artisans not only manufactured objects but were also producers of knowledge, as several historians of science and economic historians have recently stressed.³³ We have followed in their footsteps and have disclosed the role of master artisans in both the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Vries asks whether we believe that such craftsmen ‘were so innovative *thanks to* or *notwithstanding* the existence of organised crafts’. The answer in our view lies not in the intrinsic institution (of the guild) but in the actor and the global context in which he operated.³⁴ Craftsmen who realized and/or disseminated technical innovations operated at times from within and at times from outside the corporative world, and guilds could either embrace technical progress or resist it. Therefore, no straightforward link exists between guilds and innovations. Still, ‘the crucial factor in the industrial Enlightenment was the part played by artisans’.³⁵ Vries is right in refusing to accept that they achieved their results ‘without relying on scientific theory’. Our formulation is awkward. What we really mean is: innovative craftsmen did not rely on scientific research by a scholarly elite. They did, however, attribute immense importance to understanding the production processes in which they were involved.³⁶

Comparisons: wage labour

Several reviewers emphasize that *Worthy Efforts* ‘is crying out for comparisons’ with other parts of the world, with Eastern Europe and the Balkans, with the Islamic world, and especially with East Asia. We wholeheartedly agree with this. Three papers include comparisons with other pre-industrial societies, with the examination focused primarily on China. This is understandable, since China is pivotal in discussion on the Great Divergence, and this debate is ‘one of the most relevant debates in global *economic* history’, as Peer Vries has rightly noted.³⁷ He observes that work and labour relations do not figure in the overwhelming majority of recent studies and uses our book to investigate to what extent a consideration of such dimensions might promote a more adequate analysis and explanation. He thus opens prospects for further research, as does Christine Moll-Murata in an inspiring paper that relates to other important articles she has recently published about aspects of work in the Chinese Empire.³⁸

Both reviewers notice that we regard the increase of wage dependence as ‘the most fundamental social change in late medieval and early modern Europe’. Vries stresses that wage work was indeed far less important in imperial China, and that Chinese society strongly disapproved of women

and children working outside the home. Since Craig Muldrew and Jane Humphries insist that the British Industrial Revolution is impossible to conceive without considering the prevalence of cheap labour by women and children in the textile industry,³⁹ the contrast between China and England is very pronounced indeed. As to the extent of European proletarianization, Moll-Murata notes that the general trend is clear, but that 'the order of magnitude, if entire West Europe is taken into account, may require more quantitative exploration'. We certainly welcome her call for additional research, and we would like to add: with special consideration for variations in processes of proletarianization, since both the causes and the consequences could vary considerably. In the late sixteenth century, 60 to 70 percent of the population of Andalusia and New Castile consisted of *jornaleros*, day labourers,⁴⁰ i.e. an even higher percentage than in Holland,⁴¹ while the agrarian structures in the two areas had nothing at all in common.

In most of Western Europe, proletarianization long meant that more and more rural households had to obtain a (growing) *share* of their income from wage labour. At the end of the eighteenth century, complete wage dependence did not yet predominate in most rural areas, although the proportion of semi-proletarian and proletarian households had increased considerably. This increase was far greater than in China, where the overwhelming majority of the rural population continued to consist of small-scale, independent households that were proportionately far less involved in agrarian wage labour, proto-industrial activities, and other sources of supplementary income. It explains why the working population was much more mobile in Western Europe than in China.⁴² It also explains why from the late Middle Ages onward in various parts of Western Europe a social policy was devised that aimed at regulating the mobility and labour of wage dependents and strengthening the authority of employers over their workers, both legally and in practice.

Vries considers it logical that Chapter seven of *Worthy Efforts* is largely about the multitude of dimensions of labour discipline but wonders 'whether all this disciplining made any difference, *economically* speaking'. Our response is quite simply: no. The countless employment projects launched from the sixteenth century via private or public initiatives never yielded any benefit; most were considered – costly – failures by contemporaries. Still, secular and ecclesiastical authorities, lawyers, political economists, and employers in periods and areas that in their view had a 'labour problem', nearly always tried to address this through control and regulation. They were firmly convinced of the need for direct or indirect coercion. They defined unemployment among able-bodied men and women as refusal

to work and regarded labour discipline as the antidote to idleness and immorality. After 1650, English political economists argued that high wages not only affected the national affluence but also threatened to cultivate a sense of independence among the labouring poor and, consequently, to undermine the existing order. They therefore stressed the ‘utility of poverty’. Radical advocates of an ‘active society’ believed that the jobless had to be kept disciplined to toil, even if this meant building ‘a useless Pyramid upon *Salisbury Plain*’, in the words of Sir William Petty.⁴³ Until well into the eighteenth century, most commentators regarded the long hours of work and low wages as a panacea, and it would be very long indeed before the statement that the French physicist Charles Augustin de Coulomb formulated in his *Théorie des machines simples* (1779), namely that three quarters of the energy invested in hard work was actually wasted, gained acceptance.⁴⁴

In our book we have not addressed questions concerning the evolution of the standard of living in general and real wages in particular. Our objective was to examine, conceptualize, and explain the *rhetoric* concerning wage work, wage workers, and wages. We are therefore surprised that Dijkman reproaches us for equating proletarianization with impoverishment, which is a serious problem in her view. Without seeking to engage in a debate that is completely unrelated to the content of *Worthy Efforts*, we can formulate three considerations. In early modern Europe wage dependence did not necessarily signify poverty. Some journeymen remained wage workers throughout their lives, in material circumstances that were noticeably better than those of many small masters, not only because they were well paid, but also because they had their own forms of social security. To broad groups of the population, however, growing wage dependence rendered them increasingly vulnerable and rendered their subsistence insecure. To quote Jan Luiten van Zanden: ‘Perhaps the labouring classes around the North Sea owned more tin spoons, books and crockery at the end of the eighteenth century than they had in the sixteenth [...] but they were almost certainly poorer in terms of the means of production necessary to partially feed themselves and gain a little independence from the demands and uncertainties of the labour market’.⁴⁵ Finally, the high real wages in eighteenth-century England⁴⁶ need to be considered in context: complex forms of income-pooling, changes in family composition, and work participation by *all* family members should be taken into account. ‘The account of the high wage economy is misleading’, writes Jane Humphries, ‘because it focuses on men and male wages, underestimates the relative caloric

needs of women and children, and bases its view of living standards on an ahistorical and false household economy'.⁴⁷

Comparisons: polyphony?

Back to the China-Europe comparison. The texts quoted and commented on by Moll-Murata reinforce our hypothesis that the basic attitude to work was the same in both societies: everybody was expected to contribute to the greater whole. Specifically, worthy efforts were expected from everybody. Like the concept of *ponos* in ancient Greece, the term *lao* in China had the connotation of 'toil', 'pain', or 'industrious work'. In both areas an equal revulsion towards social parasitism was manifested. Also shared is the view that efforts needed to take place in a context of task allocation and interdependence. In the fourth century BCE, this led the philosopher Mencius, one of the leading interpreters of Confucianism, to draw a sharp distinction between those who laboured with their hands and those who laboured with their minds. He added the consideration: 'Those who labour with their minds govern others; those who labour with their strength are governed by others. This is a principle universally recognized'. He was mistaken. In Athens a philosopher like Plato could adopt a similar position, but the basis for comparison ends there, as dissenting voices resounded. A world of difference existed between Plato's elitist view of allocation of tasks, which held that government should be left to specialists, and that of Protagoras, a moderate democrat, who argued that moral and political virtue was a universal quality that was common to both manual workers and affluent citizens.⁴⁸ In other words, in ancient Greece polemics revolved around the question of who should or could perform which tasks. Was this also the case in China?

Of course the similarities should not be ignored. In both societies ongoing processes of urbanization and commercialization enabled certain groups to improve their socio-economic status. In both societies many cities had a highly diverse and growing population of workers involved in the most diverse commercial and industrial activities and consisting of both independent craftsmen and wage workers. Similarities are also discernible in some texts describing socio-economic developments. The early sixteenth-century collection of songs by Chen Duo mentions a great many urban occupations with no consideration for hierarchy but with an ironic-critical undertone.⁴⁹ The resemblance to Tomaso Garzoni's *La Piazza Universale* (1585) is remarkable.⁵⁰ Parallels are also available with

respect to rural contexts. The ‘Mr Shen Book on Agriculture’ (1644), which is about the ‘practical planning and accounting of landlords who employed hired labourers’,⁵¹ reads like a Chinese version of Olivier de Serres’ *Théâtre d’Agriculture* (1600).⁵²

Still, the question remains: did the rise of social middle groups in China lead to recurring polemics, as was the case in Europe? Moll-Murata notes that from very early on the attitude in China toward all kinds of enrichment was far more favourable than in Europe. She mentions the great historian Sima Qian (145-86 BCE), who acclaimed the extremely wealthy merchants and monopolists of the Han empire and described them as ‘nobles without fiefs’, a qualification that would have been inconceivable in ancient Rome.⁵³ Sima Qian made statements that resemble an ode to the ‘invisible hand’ and even recall Hayek’s ideas about the free market economy. He was convinced that he was describing the ‘real world’, when he argued that pursuit of profit was part of human nature, and that state intervention was undesirable: ‘[H]uman acquisitiveness will provide everything that is needed’. And he was highly critical of unbridled pursuit of profit only because greed led to taking irresponsible risks. Nobody in pre-industrial Europe held such extremist views; Adam Smith certainly did not reduce personal motivations to pursuit of profit or self-interest.⁵⁴ Sima Qian appears to have been alone, however, in advocating a free market economy and eulogizing – industrious – merchants. In the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, an official historical text from the first century CE, he was severely criticized ‘for praising wealth and power while shaming the poor and lowly’, and many troubles in history and contemporary society were attributed to the activities of merchants.⁵⁵ According to Florence Chain, this tone continued to resound in all subsequent official texts. Accordingly, there were no polemics. All authors regarded businessmen with suspicion and placed them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Highly successful money-makers were often labelled as ‘immoral’ individuals or as ‘thieves’, unless they worked for a government enterprise or paid part of the profits to the Emperor.⁵⁶

The writings by Sima Qian are so interesting, because they reveal that different opinions regarding commercial activities *could* be formulated. The available information suggests, however, that he remained an exception, so that his radical view carried no weight. Thus, in China, economic changes do not appear to have given rise to debates and polemics similar to those in pre-industrial Europe. Definitions and evaluations of work became the subject of ideological struggle there whenever new economic opportunities arose, and the established elites were confronted with growing numbers

of *nouveaux riches*; the polemics were especially fierce when the latter managed to turn their economic power into political influence, which was not possible in China.⁵⁷

A systematic study of perceptions and evaluations of work and workers in the medieval Islamic world might be an eye opener in several respects: for the possible links between socio-economic ideas of Islamic scholars and Greek and Latin-European scholarship,⁵⁸ because the Koran was very favourably disposed toward trade, and, last but not least, because of changes in valorization criteria in parts of the Near East. Jessica Dijkman mentions that during the economic growth that occurred between ca. 750 and ca. 1100 and coincided with strong urbanization, work acquired new dimensions: the traditional attitude that manual labour was demeaning did not disappear, but a school of thought arose that valued craftsmanship. Moreover: '[C]ontrasting opinions gave rise to continuous debates', which were revived in the fourteenth century. She writes that while reaching definitive conclusions would be premature, 'serious doubt' may be expressed about our hypothesis that 'polyphony regarding attitudes to work and workers was a European prerogative'. Doubt is certainly justified. The question remains, however, what impact did the contrasting opinions have on the lay world? The positive attitudes toward some forms of manual labour appear to have been limited to the tenth-eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, and the debates in the first period seem to indicate primarily ideological variations within the Sufi movement.⁵⁹ At any rate, we eagerly await the results of additional comparative research.

Notes

1. *Worthy Efforts*, 9.
2. *Worthy Efforts*, 553-555, 561, 567-568.
3. Arjan Zuiderhoek, 'Workers of the Ancient World: Analyzing Labour in Classical Antiquity', *Workers of the World* 1/3 (2013) 32-48, and 'Sorting out Labour in the Roman Provinces: Some Thoughts on Labour and Institutions in Asia Minor', Paper presented at the conference on *Work, Labour and Professions in the Roman World*, Ghent, 30 May-1 June, 2013.
4. In this connection, see the taxonomy devised by the 'Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations': Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata (eds.), *The Joy and Pain of Work: Global Attitudes and Valuations, 1500-1650* (Cambridge 2011; *International Review of Social History*, Special Issue 19) 6, 21-23.
5. We derive the concept from British Early Modernists who use it to denote the social middle groups. See Jonathan Barry and Christopher W. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society, and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke 1994) esp. 'Introduction' and 28-51 (Keith Wrightson, 'Sorts of People in Tudor and Stuart England'). In our opinion, the term 'middle class' cannot be justified for both theoretical and empirical reasons.

6. *Worthy Efforts*, chs. 1-2.
7. For more detail, see our paper 'Work, Identity and Self-Representation in the Roman Empire and the West-European Middle Ages: Different Interplays between the Social and the Cultural', presented at the conference on *Work, Labour and Professions in the Roman World*, Ghent, 30 May-1 June, 2013.
8. See the critical remarks of Lauren Hackworth Petersen, *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History* (Cambridge 2006).
9. Emanuel Mayer, *The Ancient Middle Classes: Urban Life and Aesthetics in the Roman Empire, 100 BCE-250 CE* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).
10. *Worthy Efforts*, 99-131.
11. In this connection, see Birgitta van den Hoven, *Work in Ancient and Medieval Thought: Ancient Philosophers, Medieval Monks and Theologians and Their Concept of Work, Occupations and Technology* (Leiden 1996) 224-227.
12. Entailing a high degree of mobility. R. I. Moore, *The War on Heresy* (Cambridge, MA, 2012) 182, has noted that weaving was 'a trade well suited to fugitives'. See also Herbert Grundmann, 'Religious Movements in the Middle Ages', in James L. Halverson (ed.), *Contesting Christendom. Readings in Medieval Religion and Culture* (Lanham 2008) 143.
13. Since Emperor Constantine's time, the bishops and the clergy of all ranks were exempted from personal taxes: Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover 2002) 29-31. On clerics engaged in manufacture and trade in Late Antiquity, see Werner Eck, 'Handelstätigkeit christlicher Kleriker in der Spätantike', *Memorias de Historia Antiqua* 4 (1980) 129-137.
14. *Worthy Efforts*, 123-125.
15. See Moll-Murata's paper in this issue, as well as Sylvie Hureau, 'L'apparition de thèmes anticléricaux dans la polémique anti-buddhique médiévale', *Extrême Orient, Extrême Occident*, 24 (2002) 17-29.
16. Maya Shatzmiller, *Labour in the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden 1994) 376-381.
17. Substantial merchants have always set themselves apart from retailers. See Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XVe-XVIIIe siècle*, Vol. II: *Les jeux de l'échange* (Paris 1979) 331-339.
18. *Worthy Efforts*, 137-8, 187, 237, 242, 244, 355, 467. See also Nancy Cox, 'Beggary of the Nation: Moral, Economic and Political Attitudes to the Retail Sector in the Early Modern Period', in: John Benson and Laura Ugolini (eds.), *A Nation of Shopkeepers. Five Centuries of British Retailing* (London and New York 2003) 26-51, and Nancy Cox and Karin Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot 2007) 21-22, 49-55.
19. R.H. Sweet, 'Topographies of Politeness', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 12 (2002) 355-74, esp. 363-6; Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions*, 187; Jon Stobart and Leonard Schwartz, 'Leisure, Luxury and Urban Specialization in the Eighteenth Century', *Urban History* 35 (2008) 233.
20. Ilja Van Damme, *Verleiden en verkopen. Antwerpse kleinhandelaars en hun klanten in tijden van crisis, ca. 1648-ca. 1748* (Amsterdam 2007) 92-5, 165-6; Laura Van Aert, 'Tot leven of overleven? Winkelhouden in crisistijd: de Antwerpse meerseniers, ca. 1648-ca. 1748', Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Antwerp, 2007.
21. Reinhard Baumann, *Landsknechte: Ihre Geschichte und Kultur vom späten Mittelalter bis zum Dreissigjährigen Krieg* (Munich 1994); Peter Burschel, *Söldner in Nordwestdeutschland des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts. Sozialgeschichtliche Studien* (Göttingen 1994); Ernst Schubert, *Fahrendes Volk im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt 1995) 413-427; Matthias Rogg, *Landsknechte und Reisläufer: Bilder von Soldaten. Ein Stand in der Kunst des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Paderborn 2002);

- Jan Willem Huntebrinker, *'Fromme Knechte' und 'Garteteufel': Söldner als soziale Gruppe im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Konstanz 2010).
22. An annual income of fifty guilders in the mid-sixteenth century places the Swiss pikemen and the German *Landsknechte* high amongst ranks of skilled labourers. See David Parrott, *The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2012) 60 and 340 n. 154 (with references to the literature).
 23. Geoffrey Parker, 'Mutiny and Discontent in the Spanish Army of Flanders, 1572-1607', *Past and Present*, no. 58 (1973) 38-52. See also David J.B. Trim, 'Ideology, Greed and Social Discontent in Early Modern Europe: Mercenaries and Mutinies in the Rebellious Netherlands, 1568-1609', in: Jane Hathaway (ed.), *Rebellion, Repression, Reinvention: Mutiny in Comparative Perspective* (Westport 2001) 47-61.
 24. Jeffrey Fynn-Paul, 'Empire, Monotheism and Slavery in the Greater Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era', *Past and Present*, 205 (2009) 31-34 (on p. 34).
 25. See esp. Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford 1999) 86-104, and David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (Aldershot 2009) 19-42.
 26. C.S.L. Davies, 'Slavery and Protector Somerset; the Vagrancy Act of 1547', *Economic History Review*, 19 (1966) 533-549.
 27. Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke 2003).
 28. See *inter alia* François Moureau (ed.), *Captifs en Méditerranée (XVI-XVIIIe siècles): histoires, récits et légendes* (Paris 2008).
 29. *Worthy Efforts*, 500.
 30. See Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehntz (eds.), *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe, 16th to Early 20th Centuries* (Vienna 2011).
 31. On the complex problem of product quality in a corporative context, see Bert de Munck, 'Gilding Golden Ages: Perspectives from Early Modern Antwerp on the Guild Debate, c. 1450-c. 1650', *European Review of Economic History*, 15 (2011) 221-253, and 'Guilds, Product Quality and Intrinsic Value: Towards a History of Conventions?', *Historical Social Research*, 36 (2011) 103-124.
 32. Christine Moll-Murata, 'Guilds and Apprenticeship in China and Europe: The Jingdezhen and European Ceramics Industries', in: Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten Van Zanden (eds.), *Technology, Skills and the Pre-Modern Economy in the East and the West. Essays Dedicated to the Memory of S.R. Epstein* (Leiden 2013) 256.
 33. See esp. Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago 2004); Liliane Hilaire-Pérez, 'Technology as a Public Culture in the Eighteenth Century: The Artisans' Legacy', *Technology and Culture*, 45 (2007) 135-153; Lissa Roberts, Simon Schaffer and Peter Dear (eds.), *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialisation* (Amsterdam 2007). Also Pamela O. Long, *Artisan/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400-1600* (Corvallis 2011), and S.R. Epstein, 'Transferring Technical Knowledge and Innovating in Europe, c. 1200-c. 1800' in Prak and Van Zanden (eds.), *Technology*, 25-67.
 34. In our own research we have not focused on 'the' guilds, on formal institutions, but on balances of power between the different actors in export-oriented industries: merchant-entrepreneurs versus master artisans, large versus small producers, and masters versus journeymen.
 35. Hilaire-Pérez, 'Technology', 137.
 36. See the interesting comments of Ursula Klein and E.C. Spary (eds.), *Materials and Expertise in Early Modern Europe: Between Market and Laboratory* (Chicago and London 2010) 1-6.

37. For a systematic analysis and an excellent discussion, see Peer Vries, *Escaping Poverty: The Origins of Modern Economic Growth* (Vienna and Göttingen 2013).
38. See esp. Christine Moll-Murata, 'Work Ethics and Work Valuations in a Period of Commercialization: Ming China, 1500-1644', in: Hofmeester and Moll-Murata (eds.), *The Joy and Pain of Work*, 165-195, and 'Guilds and Apprenticeship'.
39. Craig Muldrew, "'Th' Ancient Distaff" and "Whirling Spindle": Measuring the Contribution of Spinning to Household Earnings and the National Economy in England, 1550-1770', *Economic History Review* 65 (2012) 498-526; Jane Humphries, 'The Lure of Aggregates and the Pitfalls of the Patriarchal Perspective: A Critique of the High Wage Economy Interpretation of the British Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review* 66 (2013) 693-714.
40. Noël Salomon, *La campagne de Nouvelle Castille à la fin du XVIe siècle d'après les 'relaciones topográficas'* (Paris 1964) 257-266.
41. Bas van Bavel, 'Rural Wage Labour in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries: An Assessment of the Importance and Nature of Market-Oriented Non-Agricultural Activities in the Countryside in Flanders and Holland', *Continuity and Change* 21 (2006) 37-72.
42. See the comments of Anne Winter, 'Population and Migration: European and Chinese Experiences Compared', in: Peter Clark (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford 2013) 405-406, 410.
43. Quoted in Paul A. Fideler, *Social Welfare in Pre-Industrial England* (Basingstoke 2006) 131.
44. H. Freudenberger, 'Work Efficiency and Endogenous Growth', *Economic History Review* 51 (1998) 348-349.
45. Jan Luiten van Zanden, 'Wages and the Standard of Living in Europe, 1500-1800', *Economic History Review* 52 (1999) 191-192.
46. Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cambridge 2009) ch. 2.
47. Humphries, 'The Lure of Aggregates', 695.
48. *Worthy Efforts*, 31.
49. Moll-Murata, 'Work ethics', 179-182.
50. *Worthy Efforts*, 352-354.
51. Moll-Murata, 'Work ethics', 188.
52. *Worthy Efforts*, 198-200.
53. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton and Oxford 2012) 5 (who uses the expression 'untitled nobility').
54. *Worthy Efforts*, 302-303, 564.
55. Michael Gibbs Hill, *Liu Shu, Inc.: Translation and the Making of Modern Chinese Culture* (Oxford 2013) 41-42.
56. Florence Chan, 'The Money Making in Ancient China: A Literature Review Journey Through Ancient Texts', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 91 (2010) 17-35.
57. See the pertinent remarks of Wim Blockmans and Marjolein 't Hart, 'Power', in: Peter Clark (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford 2013) 430-433.
58. For some controversial but stimulating explorations, see Shaikh M. Ghazanfar (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Economic Thought: Filling the Great Gap in European Economics* (London 2003).
59. As noted by Shatzmiller, *Labour*, 376-382.

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