

Outlines of a History of Labour

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Outlines of a History of Labour^{*}

Jan Lucassen (IISH)

Abstract: The scope of contemporary labour history research has broadened considerably, with regard to time frames and geographic space. This overview article provides insights about what we can learn from the new global labour history, using important new research findings to illustrate the ideas. A definition of work is provided and, after a survey of the origins of six main types of labour relations, the question is discussed of why and how major shifts in labour relations occurred in world history. Recent research indicates that the classical schemas used to understand the course of world history (such as those of Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Max Weber) as well some of their critics (like Karl Polanyi and Alexander Chayanov) contradict the historical facts. Those basically teleological schemas ought therefore to be revised. The article concludes with a discussion of three important global turning points in contemporary labour relations, which confirm our *ignorantia* about the movements of history. To provide better knowledge about long-run historical trends in working life, and to write the global history of labour, it is argued, much more empirical and comparative research about the world's working population is possible and necessary.

The future of labour history research has been talked about a lot in the last decades. From the time of the *Wende* in 1989, it was claimed by some that labour history is “dead” or, at the very least, that it was suffering a serious crisis. Others argued that, instead, labour history has slowly but steadily been making a comeback, and, recently, has entered a new era of florescence. Any final judgment about the *Werdegang* of the discipline is perhaps best left for a while yet; but we are on safe ground if we note that academic output in the field has increased gigantically in the meantime.

Compared to the previous high point reached in the years 1960-1970, what is immediately noticeable in the new work is that there are now serious attempts at truly *global* overviews and comparisons. Especially Marcel van der Linden has called attention to this aspect.¹ The globalization of research has gone together with another expansion, namely an expansion of time frames. While for a whole century the great majority of labour historians occupied themselves with the epoch since the industrial revolution, a small but substantial

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¹ See *inter alia* Heerma van Voss & Van der Linden 2002 and Van der Linden 2008. See also Lucassen 2006. The developments of the discipline can be followed very well by consulting the volumes of the *International Review of Social History*, published by the IISH (Amsterdam) since 1956. In addition, see the journal *International Labor and Working Class History*, published since 1972 by various institutes, and lately by Rutgers University.

group has recently begun to focus on earlier periods, in particular the history of work and labour relations in Europe since about 1500 AD. And very recently, some historians, notably Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, have dared to trace out long-run trends from classical antiquity until the present day, picking up a tradition which seemed to have disappeared after Max Weber, a century ago.² A combination of both developments – the expansion of labour history in time as well as in space – is the logical next step. In this endeavour, it is obvious that industrial workers (or indeed only waged workers) cannot be the only and exclusive concern for labour historians.

My objective in what follows is to sketch the outlines of the new global project of labour history, basing myself on the existing literature, which mainly relates to Eurasia. That the literature mainly deals with Eurasia is a practical matter of fact, and not – I hasten to add – an insidious bias of mine which intends to exclude the history of labour and labour relations in pre-colonial Africa or pre-Columbian America. As I will clarify, the history of labour and labour relations must be an integral part of social history everywhere, regardless of place and time.

The meaning of “work” and “labour”

To begin with, what is work – whether paid or unpaid? Unpaid work usually occurs in a domestic context: cooking, washing, ironing and looking after children.³ Beyond that, however, there is also other unpaid voluntary work. If work is paid work, i.e. if it is exchanged for a salary or wage, it is usually called “labour”. The concept of work also includes independent entrepreneurship, from the simplest self-employed operator right up to the international banker, to the extent that the banker doesn’t get rich without doing any work.

As with many conceptual definitions, it is easier to say what work isn’t, than what it is. When you, the reader, awoke this morning, you already had a period of not working behind you when you were asleep. Showering, breakfasting and other rituals of personal care are not considered to be work either, but for those among you who had to dress their children, butter their sandwiches and bring them to school, the working day started early already.

In a free translation of the well-known definition by Charles Tilly and his son Chris Tilly, “Work includes any human effort adding use value to goods and services”.⁴ Strictly speaking, the personal use of one’s own free time would also be included (and Tilly & Tilly do indeed stretch their definition so far)⁵. In that case, the alternate for working would only be personal care, sleep included. However, both free time and personal care should definitely be distinguished from work.

To be sure, the transitions between work and free time can be very fluid. People living in cultures where less emphasis is placed on the individual, and where opportunities to do work are strongly determined by natural forces, do not seem to make a clear distinction between work and free time. Thus, for example, when village

² Ehmer and Lis 2009; recently followed by Lis and Soly 2012 (I was not able to read the last-mentioned book before I completed this article).

³ Also known as “reproductive labour” in contrast to “productive labour”.

⁴ Tilly & Tilly 1998, 22; cf. Van der Linden 2008 and 2011.

⁵ Ibid.: “However much their performers may enjoy or loathe the effort, conversation, song, decoration, pornography, table-setting, gardening, housecleaning, and repair of broken toys, all involve work to the extent that they increase satisfactions their consumers gain from them”. No wonder that concepts like “holiday”, “leisure”, “pension”, “vacation” or “weekend” do not appear in their extensive register.

dwellers in Mexico and Ecuador were questioned about it in the 1950s, they turned out not to have any concept of free time. In the words of Nels Anderson, they worked steadily as needed, but not in a Western tempo. They used every minute of their time either for work or for what he calls other “structured activities”. When they did not work, they went drinking together and had fun. According to Beate Salz, the Ecuadorian Indians worked and saved as if marriages, baptism festivities and fiestas were the most important reasons for their existence. Anderson prefers to speak in this context of “social obligations”, and warns against treating these “non-work obligations” simply as free time. After all, in this way one earned one’s reputation as good spouse, parent, citizen and friend, and the efforts required could be just as satisfying as pure enjoyment of free time.⁶ In modern Western culture, the boundaries between household labour, the care for household members and free time can also be quite fluid. In industrial employment, by contrast, matters are more straightforward. A 15th century poem titled *Holidays*, attributed to an English spinster,⁷ contains the following lines:

I’ve waited longing for today:
 Spindle, bobbin, and spool, away!
 In joy and bliss I’m off to play
 Upon this high holiday.
 Spindle, bobbin and spool, away,
 For joy that it’s a holiday!

And so the poem goes on, for another few couplets, until on this blessed free day the girl gets pregnant – something which in due course must lead to quite a lot more work than spinning. The point here is that, even before the factory clock or whistle became institutionalized, wage workers were very aware of the difference between work and free time.

No one works alone. Even Robinson Crusoe eventually found his Friday. Where people cooperate in the broad sense intended here, *labour relations* emerge, varying from egalitarian relations to the worst kinds of domination and subordination.⁸ In the history of labour until now, almost all attention has gone to labour relations between employer and employee (and, sometimes, to labour relations between slaveholder and slave). But as the inclusion of household labour already implies, other labour relations exist among, for example, spouses who divide up the housework, or run a business with brothers, sisters and parents – think of the classical working family of the shop owner, or of the small farmer. I call the employer-employee relationship *external*, and that of cooperation within the household, within one’s own business or among wage workers and slaves themselves *internal*.⁹ The origin and historical development of all these labour relations, together with the background of their development up to the present day, will be the main focus of my story.

⁶ Anderson 1961, 39 with reference to Oscar Lewis (on Mexico) and Beate R. Salz (on Ecuador).

⁷ Thomas 1999, 256-257 (translated from Middle English by Brian Stone).

⁸ This definition of labour relations is therefore deliberately more inclusive than what is normally understood by “labour relations”: the conventional definition usually refers only to industrial work from the end of the 19th century.

⁹ We can find internal labour relations everywhere, while external ones exist only between employers and employees or unfree workers. I did not find the internal/external distinction in the literature yet, although the problematic behind it is well-known – see e.g. Tilly & Tilly 1998, chapter 4, elaborated in chapters 5 and 6. Inspiring for internal labour relations in our time is: De Botton 2009.

The emergence of labour relations

How has human labour, as I just described it, developed in the course of time? It is much too large a question for one article, but nevertheless I want to try to set out some of the main long-run trends. In doing so, I am inspired by a research project at the International Institute of Social History (in collaboration with dozens of colleagues at home and abroad) about the history of labour and labour relations worldwide.¹⁰

I will take a long-run perspective. Until circa 12,000 years ago, humans satisfied their basic needs by hunting and gathering. Although globally there was a fascinating amount of variety in how this work was actually carried out (think, for example, of the differences between Eskimo's and pygmies), one common characteristic stands out here. Hunters and gatherers lived in small communities of at most some dozens of people, who had to cooperate closely to survive. Not only was close cooperation essential, but also a division of tasks between women and men, between diggers of roots, fruit gatherers, herb collectors and other food gatherers, and between hunters, drivers and killers. The first human labour relations were in this sense direct, and thereby – in the terminology of Karl Polanyi – *reciprocal*.¹¹

These kinds of reciprocal labour relations persisted after the emergence of agriculture, although farming, perhaps the most important innovation in human history, contained within itself the germinal forms of other kinds of new labour relations. After all, the farmer produced surpluses in excess of what was consumed, making possible the formation of substantial reserves, and therefore a steadily progressing labour specialization.

Apart from young children and the elderly, other members of the community from that time onward also did not need to preoccupy themselves anymore with the daily production of their own food. And so professional potters, spinners, weavers, carpenters, brick makers, masons, transporters, smiths and priests began to make their appearance.¹²

The exchange of goods and services between specialists within simple farming communities could develop analogously to what we witnessed among groups of food gatherers and hunters, and what we still see within most households: it was exchange without writing out bills. Nevertheless a certain formalization of arrangements was necessary, the best known model of which is, perhaps, the Indian *jajmani* system: craftsmen supplied their services to the farmers in their village, in exchange for a share in the collective harvest.¹³

The development of labour specialization within farming communities took thousands of years and led, at the earliest circa 7,000 before the present (BP), to the first cities in the Middle East; 2,000 years later to the first city states; and even later to the first states, i.e. political units which encompassed several cities and the surrounding

¹⁰ I mean the IISH Collaboratory Global labour History 1500-2000 (hereafter abbreviated as IISH-CGLR; see <http://socialhistory.org/en/projects/history-labour-relations-1500-2000>) or <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourrelations>. Some of the mentioned labour relations can occur independently (reciprocal, tributary and self-employed), while other logically cannot exist without other ones (wage workers and slaves necessarily assume the existence of employers or owners).

¹¹ Polanyi 1944, chapters 4-6; Polanyi, Arensberg & Pearson 1957; Dalton 1971; see also footnote 18 below.

¹² For this so-called Neolithic evolution, see e.g. Whittle & Cummings 2007 and Mithen 2003. Due to the combining influence of crop-growing with high yields, nomadic cattle farming could emerge (Khazanov 1994; cf. Matthews 2003, 182-188).

¹³ For a classical approach, see the chapters in Neale 1957; for a critical discussion, see Tanabe 2005.

countryside.¹⁴ The first cities with some thousands of inhabitants include Eridu (from 7,000 BP) and Uruk (from 6,000 BP) in Southern Iraq. Another millennium later, Hemudu in China followed, and still later, the cities of the Nile and Indus valley. We have then arrived at 2,600 before the Common Era (BCE).¹⁵

In these first cities and city states, a new kind of labour relationship emerged next to the reciprocal one, because political and spiritual elites could claim tribute from commoners in the form of labour-services. In turn, that implied a redistribution of goods. Such a central redistribution of goods and services demanded a lot of organization and administration, including public accountability. It is no wonder, therefore, that in these kinds of city states administrative inventions such as the (roll-) seal, the first pictographic script and arithmetic were made.¹⁶ We speak in this context of *tributary* labour relations.¹⁷ Tributary societies are documented not just for Eurasia, but also for pre-Columbian societies in South and Central America.

With the emergence of states, the preconditions emerge for at least two new kinds of labour relations: *slavery* and *wage labour*. Perhaps they even originated simultaneously, since the oldest category of wage workers which we encounter in large numbers in ancient records are soldiers. And slaves are hostages who are not killed, as is later described explicitly in the statute of Justinian (written in 528-534).¹⁸ So considered, war occupies a central place in the history of labour. I am talking here specifically about war, and not about violence or aggression in general, of which the traces can be found already in the earliest history of humanity.¹⁹ For real war campaigns, defined as systematic and sustained violence aiming to defeat other peoples, an army was needed that was so large that it could only be successfully maintained by a state. In turn, this state depends for its income on farmers who can produce more than they need for themselves. At the same time, sufficient demand for labour exists in such complex societies, so that war hostages can be profitably put to work, instead of being killed off.

Around 2,350 BC, Sargon the Great, the ruler of “all four corners of the world, of all lands under heaven from sunrise to sunset”, established the first large state in world history, with a territory reaching from the Persian Gulf far into Anatolia.²⁰ In the preserved records of this kingdom, we encounter both slaves and professional soldiers. A little later, hirelings are also documented for Egypt, originating both from Egypt itself and from Nubia.²¹

¹⁴ The Neolithic revolution also led to a clear division of tasks between men and women, not only between farm work and housework, but occasionally also between farm work for women and hunting for men (Adivassio, Soffer & Page 2007, 247-249, 268-269).

¹⁵ Leick 2001, Matthews 2003, Mithen 2003, Chang 1999; Wright 2010.

¹⁶ Leick 2001, 43-48, 77-78; Matthews 2003, 98-99; Wright 2010, 160-166, 183-187, 222-225 (seals); also the description by Fischer of labour relations in Mycena and Knossos (Fischer 2007) which appears similar, although Garlan 1995, 3-35 emphasizes the slave character of this society.

¹⁷ Polanyi (see note 12) talks of “redistribution” with “centricity”, Weber mentions “*Leiturgie*” and both cite pharaonic Egypt as an example (Weber 1909, 80-91, 181; Idem 1976, 153, 211, 818).

¹⁸ Rotman 2009, 19, 26, 211 (“*Servi autem ex eo appellati sunt, quod imperatores captivos vendere iubent ac per hoc servare nec occidere solent*”).

¹⁹ Parker, Pearson & Thorpe 2005. In the same publication, Taylor 2005, 232 turns matters on their head by assuming that in prehistory forced labour existed “in the same way as access to drinking and water is assumed”.

²⁰ Leick 2001, chapter 4; Matthews 2003 offers arguments why Uruk 1,000 years earlier might be a candidate for this honour; Van der Spek 2008, 33-39.

²¹ Van der Linden 1997.

Even if states began with employing soldiers and provisioning them with food, shelter and wherewithal, that does not imply the existence of a labour market, however. For a real labour market to emerge, multiple employers are needed, who seek to attract wage workers and enter into employment contracts with them. To put it another way, in a labour market, wage workers can choose between different employers, and can bargain over their wages. These kinds of labour markets gradually emerged in subsequent centuries when, next to the state, cities, temples and – especially – the sub-contractors hired by temples began to act as employers of labour in their own right. At the same time, commodity markets were needed on a regular basis.²² In such markets we can find two kinds of buyers: firstly, independent producers who sell to each other and buy from each other, like the fisherman who buys grain from the farmer, the farmer who buys fabrics from the weaver, and the weaver who buys fish from the fisherman, etc.; and secondly, professional soldiers or other hirelings who did not, or only partly, produce their own food, and used their wage money to buy fish, grain or fabrics. Beyond the four labour relations which I already mentioned (reciprocal labour, tributary labour, slave labour and wage labour) there is therefore a fifth type: *independent labour* for the market, including the family business arrangement in which women already early on played a role.²³ As already indicated, from the sub-contractors of temples and other central organs also emerged the first *employers* of labour. I limit myself in this historical sketch to these six main types of labour relationships, although I am quite aware that a far more elaborate taxonomy is possible.²⁴

The expansion of different kinds of labour relationships in the first centralized states that we know of can be illustrated using various separate examples. The earliest community for which sufficient original and secondary sources are available is probably Mesopotamia in the first millennium BC, especially the new Babylonian empire and the Persian empire which assimilated it. Going beyond old and persistent myths about an invariant “Eastern Despotism” or the “Asiatic mode of production” which were supposedly the gloomy inheritance of this part of the world, a much more nuanced and revealing picture has emerged in recent decades. Muhammad Dandamaev, Michael Jursa and Bert van der Spek have demonstrated that, in Babylon, self-employed labour and wage labour were much more prevalent than slave labour; that reciprocal labour was relatively unimportant outside the home; and that tributary labour was strongly declining.²⁵ What is also striking is that payment for wage labour was reckoned in silver, and that the wages were by no means meagre. Even slaves sometimes received wages, so that, even although they were juridically speaking unfree workers bound to their owners, they could nevertheless acquire property of their own. For all these reasons, this era of world history deserves a special place in the history of labour.

In some cases, the archaeological record is so detailed that we can become acquainted with individual workers. In the so-called Mardonios archive, for example, cuneiform tablets are preserved which inform us that in the years 484-477 BCE three brick

²² Cf. Matthews 2003, 182-188 for a good model. This development obviously does not represent the origin of trade. Trade is much older in origin, and archaeological findings suggest that it occurred already in the earliest stages of human prehistory when groups of hunters and food gatherers exchanged rare goods without much interaction and sometimes without physical contact (for the so-called “silent barter”, see Wicks 1995, 12). Trade also existed already in tributary societies.

²³ Barber 1994, chapter 7.

²⁴ For a more extensive taxonomy consistent with the one presented here, developed at the IISH, see IISH-CGLR (see fn. 11).

²⁵ Dandamaev 2009; Jursa 2010; Van der Spek 1998 and 2008.

makers named Nabu-usursu, Bel-ana-merehti and Bel-ittannu hired themselves out as a team. Every month, they would mould and fire 11,000 to 12,000 large bricks, for which they received the sum of 21 shekels in silver.²⁶ Many of such work-teams were required. The construction of the city walls and the palaces of Babylon alone employed thousands of such teams at the same time. As we shall see, this form of organization strikingly resembles that of the brick makers in early modern and modern Europe, Russia and North India.²⁷

Long-term shifts in labour relations

So far I have identified and located six main labour relationships in the history of human civilization. How did these relationships evolve and change? In the next part of my story, I will try to map out their occurrence in different parts of the world during the last four or five millennia. More importantly, I will consider not only their prevalence, but also the great shifts between different types of labour relations. Think, for example, of the rise and decline of independent entrepreneurship, of wage labour and of slavery in the course of history. A few cases of such shifts have already been referred to, such as the shift from tributary, redistributive state forms in Mesopotamia, to societies dominated by markets. I hasten to add that I obviously cannot do complete justice to this vast topic here. More than that – the preparatory research needed for such a task has really only just begun. I therefore restrict myself to a minimally necessary selection of facts, which can be treated as an appetizer for the fascinating task confronting historians of the global history of labour and labour relations. I will start my examples with ancient Babylonia, jump to classical antiquity, then make an even larger leap to the last 500 years, and conclude with some reflections on our own time.

When Dandamaev compared the New Babylonian and Achaemenid empires with the states preceding them, he discovered a clear decline of unfree labour and the ascendancy of self-employed labour and wage labour. In the long sixth century BC, slavery was concentrated especially in the households of the wealthy and in temples (which, incidentally, also employed plenty of free labour). *Latifundia* and other large production units employing slaves did not exist.²⁸

A dominant theme in the socio-economic history of classical Greece and the Roman empire is the question of the extent to which antique civilizations were really “slave societies”. Again and again, the opinions of authors like Plato and Cicero have been repeated, which express contempt for manual labour and for people who must work to earn their keep.²⁹ One comment by Cicero is especially famous: “Unbecoming to a gentleman [...] and vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labour, not for artistic skill; for in their case the very wage they receive is a pledge of their slavery.”³⁰

²⁶ Jursa 2010, 261-263, 680. The ancient silver shekel weighed between 11 and 17 grams. That both moulding and firing bricks was done is not mentioned in this source, but I infer as much from production figures for the shaping of bricks by hand in later times. See Kessler & Lucassen 2013, cf. also Campbell 2003, 30-37.

²⁷ Lourens & Lucassen 1999; Kessler & Lucassen 2013.

²⁸ Dandamaev 2003, 652-653; Jursa 2010, 235.

²⁹ Van den Hove 1996, especially 6-10; Ehmer & Soly 2009, 8-10; Lis 2009, 57-58; Migeotte 2009, 28-46; Lis and Soly 2012A.

³⁰ *Cicero de Officiis*, I: 150 (in the Loeb-edition translated by Walter Miller, cited by Lis 2009, 55). Striking here is the word “slavery” as translation of “servitutis” which is absent in most of the French,

Cicero and most other classical authors contrasted manual workers with the landowners. Only the latter were regarded as the “true” citizens, who could and should devote themselves to the administration of the state. In that sense, important historians of antiquity like Moses Finley have created an image of Greek and Roman civilization as a type of society in which slave labour *dominated*. This interpretation remains influential, even although powerful counter-arguments have been presented more recently. It appears that the great majority of the population in reality consisted of independent small farmers; a vital stratum of craftsmen existed; and although wage workers were a minority, they were a very significant minority. Historians’ estimates for the proportion of the different labour relations still diverge considerably, but the modern consensus is that slaves were only a minority of the total population, and not the majority.³¹ At the start of the Roman Empire, slaves comprised about 17% of its total population.³² Kyle Harper’s estimate is somewhat lower, at 10% to 15%, and no more than 10% in the 4th century AD.³³ In Harper’s judgment, the slave population stayed at roughly the same proportion because of natural increase, and not through military conquests, as has often been argued.³⁴ One-third of the slaves were employed in specialized farming for the market, and two-thirds in the households of the wealthy (and especially the households of the super-rich).³⁵ However, Harper’s most important conclusion is that the Romans were forced to maintain slavery despite its high costs, because of the scarcity and expense of wage labour. Where plenty wage workers were available, such as in densely populated Egypt, their wages were low (see appendix), and slavery was much less prevalent.³⁶

The Roman empire featured a strong state which protected its peasants, enabled wage labour, and legally regulated competition from slave labour. The states which succeeded the empire were weak, and could no longer offer the same kind of protection to their peasant subjects. Consequently, markets also collapsed. They were replaced with a decentralized feudalism based on serf labour. Concurrently, production by slaves on the *latifundia* also disappeared. Within households, slavery persisted for much longer. Western Europe then became a supplier of slaves for the Levant and the Byzantine empire. With their sizeable slave populations, Byzantium, but more especially the caliphate of Baghdad, in a sense supplanted the Roman empire.³⁷

I will now jump ahead a thousand years in time – not because world development stagnated meantime, but because our knowledge about labour history in the most recent five centuries has improved greatly.³⁸ We owe this new insight to the

German and Dutch translations (thanks to Jaap Kloosterman for this insight); cf. also Van den Hove 1996, 48 (footnote 81), 59: the source of Cicero’s work was Panaetius of Rhodos who lived a hundred years earlier (185/180-110 BCE).

³¹ For the Greek World, see Lucassen 2007, 24-28; cf. also Gabrielsen 1994, chapter 5.

³² According to Jean Andreau and Raymond Descat, cited in Lis 2009, 35, footnote 5. See also Harper 2011, 60.

³³ Harper 2011, 38-60; see also Harris 2011, 61; for Athens circa 400 and 350-310 BCE Garland arrives at twice these percentages, which for these much shorter periods could be explained by massive supplies due to wars (Garland 1995, 61-66 and 72-73); for free labor in Athens, see: Migeotte 2009, 93.

³⁴ Harper 2011, 67-91; this in contrast to Harris 2011, 62-75, 88-103.

³⁵ Harper 2011, 59-60: “The top 1.365 percent of Roman society thus owned the bottom 5 percent of Roman society”. I disregard here the important sexual function of slaves (see Harper 2011, chapter 6).

³⁶ Harper 2011, 150-151, 157-158, 162-179; cf. Rotman 2009, 114-116; see also appendix 1.

³⁷ Harper 2011, 497-509; Rotman 2009.

³⁸ Harry Pleket opines that the Roman economy did not differ in essential respects from that of Western Europe between 1400 and 1700 or perhaps even 1800 (Lis 2009, 58). In making this claim, he does not

Collaboratory on Global Labour Relations at the International Institute of Social History, which is mapping out labour relations worldwide in a standardized way, both quantitatively and qualitatively. I will take the research of Christine Moll-Murata about shifts in labour relations in East Asia as my point of departure.³⁹

After an initially strong expansion of the market economy during the heydays of the Ming dynasty in the 16th century, a return to forms of unfree labour occurred. More and more, small farmers became so indebted that they ended up selling themselves or their own kin as debt slaves. The fact that Ming statute books explicitly prohibited the sale of one's own wife and children – especially to other men looking for a wife, or for work in “low status” occupations in the entertainment industry or prostitution – is very telling.⁴⁰ Another type of labour relationship emerged with the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The Manchu invaders from the North were strictly organized under eight so-called “banners”, with military obligations. Although in a sense this involved privileges – just as with the Janissaries of the Ottoman empire, the Japanese Samurai, or parts of the military apparatus of the Mongols – it certainly implied *tributary* labour. In turn, the military workers themselves could employ slaves. Labour for the market increased again in the Qing dynasty period, although there are big disagreements among specialists how it occurred. Labour for the market definitely increased in China from the end of the 19th century, even for women. After a radical reversal of this trend under chairman Mao, most of the Chinese population is now once again at work as wage-earners or small independent operators. China still has the legacy of 3 to 6 million Chinese (or, according to some, 10 to 20 million) engaged in forced labour in penitentiary re-education camps.⁴¹

Of course, in a huge country like China there are large regional differences. China should not be equated with East Asia either. For centuries, Japan for example was a country of small independent farmers who produced for the market. Compared with China, the transition to a society in which free wage labour dominates occurred much more gradually in Japan. Even so, an analytical problem remains. During the Edo period (1603-1867), the compulsory levies on the harvest to the few dozen *daimyo* families who owned the land were very high. We then have to ask ourselves whether the farm work was in reality a kind of serfdom or tributary labour.⁴² In the heavily industrialized Japan of today, what is striking is the large proportion of married and unmarried women who perform unpaid labour in the household. The very detailed Japanese data available for Taiwan in 1905 reinforce this picture, which in turn gives cause for examining household labour in mainland China more closely.

I turn now to another part of the world: sub-Saharan Africa, marked with the rise and gradual decline of slavery across the last five centuries. Although slavery in Africa has

mean to imply that nothing happened in the meantime. With Pleket (and in contrast to Weber 1909, 56-73) I assume that the market in Roman times was therefore just as developed as during the Renaissance. See also Temin 2004.

³⁹ See her contributions to IISH-CGLR, and to the IISG-project *Fighting for a Living* (<http://socialhistory.org/en/projects/fighting-living>); Moll-Murata 2008, 2011, and 2012.

⁴⁰ Moll-Murata refers to article 298 and 399 of *The Great Ming Code*. How much practical activities could deviate from it, is shown by Zurndorfer 2011.

⁴¹ Moll-Murata maintains the low estimates in her cross-section *China 2000* for IISH-CGLR with reference to publications of the *Laogai Research Foundation* of Harry Wu, and James D. Seymour, Richard Anderson & Fan Sidong, *New Ghosts, Old Ghosts: Prisons and Labor Reform Camps in China* (M.E. Sharpe, 1998).

⁴² Moll-Murata 2012, where she refers to part 4 of the *Cambridge History of Japan*.

even older origins, it increased strongly after the export of slaves to other continents began. The rise of the Ottoman empire closed off the supply of slaves from Russia and Slavic territories for the sugar plantations in the Christian part of the Mediterranean.⁴³ For this reason, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese traders began to take more and more slaves from black Africa, especially for labour in the Americas, where the sugar-growing industry had established itself. In the Caribbean region, in Surinam for example,⁴⁴ the majority of the population consisted of slaves. Consider also the effect on Africa itself: detailed reports for French West Africa show that a hundred years ago, i.e. a century after the British abolition of the slave trade, some 30% of the local population still consisted of slaves. While the high point of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was reached in the 18th century, and although the export of slaves from the East coast continued, slavery within Africa reached its zenith in the second half of the 19th century – or even later. Until 1935, between one-fifth and one-third of all inhabitants in Ethiopia remained enslaved.⁴⁵

Taking a helicopter view of labour relations during the last 500 years, as documented by the Collaboratory on Global Labour Relations 1500-2000, we can conclude that, in the long term, the proportion of the world population engaged in wage labour increased, just like the proportion of non-working people (children and students) and those who were no longer working (the sick and the retired).⁴⁶ Those increases occurred at the expense of especially self-employed labour, reciprocal labour (especially in the household) and unfree labour – I am, of course, well aware that slavery and forced labour exist even today.⁴⁷ The differences between the various continents and countries certainly have been large, but, in the last one or two centuries, the main trends do seem to converge worldwide.

How do shifts in labour relations occur?

Seen from the perspective of the workers involved, the great shifts in labour relations observable up to the present day emerged in two ways: forced from without, or on the initiative of the working people themselves. For the sake of brevity, I call these shifts respectively *vertical* and *horizontal* in nature.

Vertical, forced shifts in labour relations in the first instance refer to the enslavement of people who previously performed reciprocal labour, self-employed labour or wage labour. When they became prisoners of war, they could be suddenly sold off on a slave market. From the time of classical antiquity, tens of millions of people suffered this fate, including many European “Slaves” as well as inhabitants of tropical

⁴³ Phillips 1991; Blumenthal 2009, 18-20; cf. also Rotman 2009, 57-81, 187-188 and Zilfi 2010, 104-106, 130-133, 136-142.

⁴⁴ Van Stipriaan 1991, chapter 10.

⁴⁵ This is the result of not yet published research by Patrick Manning (Pittsburgh), whom I thank here for his information; see meantime, Manning 1975, Klein 1968, Eckert 2011; cf. also Kloosterboer 1954, and for Ethiopia: Fernyhough 2010, 161 (and for earlier periods, Eaton 2006).

⁴⁶ Under the influence of the demographic revolution and the increasing average level of education.

⁴⁷ With *inter alia* Eltis 2011, 139 I resist the impression which is sometimes created that unfree labour since the abolition of slavery continued in the same way, or even increased, until the present although this is obscured with misleading terminologies. Tom Brass is a good example of this type of argument (Brass 1997, cf. also Hagan & Wells 2000) but Zeuske 2012, 107-108 also contains misleading suggestions. More nuanced are Stanziani 2008 and 2009. For overviews of contemporary unfree labour, see Bales 1999 and 2005 (like the Anti-Slavery Society, he includes debt slavery (“debt bondage”), cf. Zimmermann 2011, 441).

Africa forcibly put to work in the Middle East, the Americas or within Africa itself.⁴⁸ The abolition of slavery was likewise regularly a matter of force. Serfs and slaves were freed at the stroke of a pen, for example, after the revolution in Haiti, in Russia with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, in the US after the civil war, and in Brazil in 1888. In other countries, wage labour for private employers was abolished in favour of state enterprises and cooperative experiments, such as in Russia and its satellites, in China, North Korea, and perhaps most extremely in Cambodia. That aside, labour relations can be dictated by penal law, such as in England (culminating in its penal colonies in Australia and elsewhere), Russia (with its prisoners in Siberia under the Tsars and the Soviets), Germany under the Nazis and China during the Cultural Revolution. These examples clarify that right up to the most recent epoch, systems of labour relations have regularly been changed by force, for better or for worse.

Such *vertical* transformations of labour relations have, of course, been studied the most. The *horizontal* changes – in other words, the changes which were not forced by the state and usually occurred more incrementally as the aggregate result of numerous individual decisions – have claimed much less attention from historians. The classical case involved people who decided to give up their small farm or craft enterprise, and go to work in a factory, in their local town or overseas (in the latter case choosing for emigration, combining geographical with professional mobility).

One of the most remarkable findings of the international Collaboratory on Global Labour Relations is that this kind of transition occurred gradually rather than suddenly. In the history of migration, we call this phenomenon “stepwise migration”. A man’s son goes to work somewhere else, for example, and when he succeeds he brings over his sister, and so on. Or, a worker emigrates first from the countryside to a small town, and afterwards to a large city. The Collaboratory discovered numerous cases where different income sources and the corresponding labour relations were combined, and where the dominant form of labour relationship gradually shifted during the life of the worker and his descendants. A good example is provided by the history of the Russian serfs⁴⁹

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the freedom of movement of Russian peasants was more and more restricted. Beyond working for their own subsistence, the peasants had to perform compulsory services for the landowning nobility. In the course of the 18th century, some had the opportunity to work part of the year in urban industries. When serfdom was abolished in 1861, many serfs already obtained an important part of their income from wage labour. Subsequently, and with the redistribution of land, they again became more independent, but additional income from work in urban industry and migrant labour was essential in many regions, and its share tended to grow. So the pattern here shifts from initially independent labour, via a combination of independent labour and serfdom to a combination of serfdom and wage labour, ending in wage labour only.

Migrant labour is of special interest with respect to combined income sources and labour relations. Such combinations have been documented already in ancient societies. Around 500 BCE, a cuneiform script from Uruk offers a striking example of combined labour relations in a free labour market.⁵⁰ For work on the land of a temple, a sub-contractor or executive complained at the time, it was impossible to obtain

⁴⁸ The historiography of slavery is immense. I will only refer here to Engerman 1999 and Van der Linden 2011A and for the Ottoman empire, Zilfi 2010, chapter 4.

⁴⁹ See the contributions of Gijs Kessler and Dmitri Khitrov to IISG-CGLR and Kessler 2012; see also Stanziani 2008 and 2009, and Dennison 2011; cf. for Brazil, Espada Lima 2009.

⁵⁰ Jursa 2010, 662-663.

manpower, because everyone was busy harvesting their own crops of dates – in short, self-employed labour was being combined with seasonal wage labour. The temple, incidentally, also had slaves in its service, though not very many, because they reportedly lacked motivation and escaped when they could.

For a better understanding of historical realities, these combinations should be analysed not only for the individual worker, but for his household as a whole. All the work activities of the members of a household during the year can be schematically described according to seasonal rhythms, using the so-called “labour cycle” concept.⁵¹ To illustrate this point, I will turn to the households of temporary migrants from the German principality of Lippe from the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century.

In the 16th century, the number of small and very small tenant farmers had grown strongly in Lippe, just as elsewhere in Westphalia.⁵² Partly due to the havoc caused by successive wars, they looked around elsewhere for additional paid work, and they found it in two ways, which were often combined: in domestic industry and in seasonal migrant labour in the Netherlands. The domestic industry, which in Lippe involved especially weaving and spinning, is known among historians as “proto-industry”⁵³ and the seasonal migration as the migration to the coasts of the North Sea.⁵⁴ There, the largest part of the Westphalian migrant workers was active in the harvest (such as the legendary *hannekemaaiers*), but some specialized also in other seasonal activities, such as peat digging and dredging, linen bleaching, brick making, plastering and peddling. Some of the peddlers stood at the cradle of the great Dutch warehouses established later, such as C&A, Vroom & Dreesmann, Peek & Cloppenburg and Voss. From circa 1650, men from the principality of Lippe discovered – probably in East Frisia, where they worked as harvesters – that there was a niche in the market for brick making.⁵⁵ Around 1900, at its highest point, a quarter of the male population in Lippe was at work in brick factories. It follows therefore that this specialism continued for at least 10 generations. Certainly, this combination of income sources, and therefore also of labour relations, can be viewed as a “transition” from self-employed labour to wage labour in the long run. But that transition took a very long time indeed. It was not experienced as a “transition” by most of the participants. For the Lippe brick makers, a combination of labour relations, and not a single labour contract, was simply the norm for centuries.

The success of this combination is partly explained – as Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm and later Van Nederveen Meerkerk have demonstrated for domestic industry – if we take into account not just the labour of the husband, but also the labour of his wife and children, i.e. the whole household as a unit. While her husband and possibly the oldest sons were away during the spring and autumn, the wife and the other children ran a small family business, together with the “Zieglerkuh” (a grandiose expression in Lippe for a goat – literally “brick maker’s cow”). In addition, the wife spun and wove, especially in the winter when there was little to do outside. Her husband was then again at home, and could help her with the work, as well as with the housework and care for the children. In the

⁵¹ Lucassen 1987.

⁵² Still worth reading is Tack 1902, 43-64. See further Lourens & Lucassen 1999, 32-42.

⁵³ Kriedte, Medick & Schlumbohm 1978; Ogilvie & Cerman 1996; Ebeling & Mager 1997; Duplessis 1997; Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2008 and 2012. Building on this research, the concept of the “industrious revolution” was created (De Vries 1994 and 2008; Van den Heuvel & Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2010).

⁵⁴ Lucassen 1987.

⁵⁵ Lourens & Lucassen 1987, 1999, 2007 and 2012.

romantic vision of the “*Ziegeldichter*” (the poet of the brick makers) Fritz Wienke (1863-1830), who himself worked as brick maker and tailor, life looked like this:⁵⁶

Im Sommer bin ich Ziegler.
 Im Winter sitz in Ruh'
 Ich vor der Nähmaschine
 Und schneidre lustig zu.

Die leichten handarbeiten begleitet ich mit Gesang,
 Dann wird in meiner Hütte
 Die Zeit mir niemals lang.

Oft stimmen Frau und Kinder
 Ins heitre Lied mit ein,
 Das mein ich, müsste auf Erden
 Ein kleiner Himmel sein.⁵⁷

Let us however leave Wienke to his idyllic union of *Hütte* and *Himmel*, and examine the *internal* labour relations of the German migrant workers among themselves. Something rather extraordinary was happening here. After all, most of the migrant workers did not hire themselves out as individuals, but as a group, and they did not receive time-wages as a group, but piece wages. Given that the rates were fixed at the beginning of the season, there was a direct connection between the efforts of the group and its remuneration. But the group effort was not simply equal to the sum of the efforts of all; it depended much more on the weakest link in the work chain, since the team members had to cooperate with each other. The brick makers from Lippe were therefore always keen to improve the composition of their team. When, in winter time, the new work was divided up in the Lippe church squares and in the inns around, there was accordingly a great deal of mobility between the brick makers' teams.⁵⁸

This form of labour organization, i.e. group-wise or cooperative sub-contracting with piece-wages, was not only typical of migrant brick makers in Europe, but still exists in India. A century ago, however, it affected a much greater proportion of wage workers. In particular branches of industry (including the most modern ones, such as

⁵⁶ Lourens & Lucassen 1999, 59 (the first printing of his poetry collection appeared in 1899; on him, see Bartelt & Schinkel 1986, 51-58).

⁵⁷ Freely translated:

In summer I am a brick maker,
 In winter, I sit myself down in peace,
 And work behind the sewing machine,
 Tailoring with verve and ease.
 My not too heavy handiwork
 I accompany with a song,
 So that sitting in my hut,
 The time never lasts too long.
 Often my wife and children
 Will burst into song with me,
 On earth there must be some heaven,
 That's what I believe, you see.

⁵⁸ Lourens & Lucassen 2012; cf. also Kessler & Lucassen 2013.

metallurgy) in Germany, England and France, such arrangements even predominated, according to David Schloss and Ludwig Bernhard.⁵⁹

By contrast, the great expansion of cooperative sub-contracting with piecework seems to have only small significance in the historiography of labour. Historians have probably unintentionally followed in the tracks of the great modern employers around 1900, and of the rising modern labour movement. Both of them, left and right, or, if you will, capitalists and socialists, rejected group sub-contracting with piece wages. The American Frederick W. Taylor (famous for inventing so-called “Taylorism”) wrote in 1911:

A careful analysis had demonstrated the fact that when workmen are herded together in gangs, each man in the gang becomes far less efficient than when his personal ambition is stimulated; that when men work in gangs, their individual efficiency falls almost invariably down to or below the level of the worst man in the gang; and that they are all pulled down instead of being elevated by being herded together.⁶⁰

Taylor concentrated, as it were, on the weakest link in the chain, and apparently had little faith in the ability of workers to minimize the risk to which he refers. That judgment was without foundation, as is shown by comparative research about West European, Russian and Indian brick makers who used this co-operative labour system.⁶¹ The socialists had much more confidence in the ability of workers to defend their own interests, but at the same time staged fierce opposition to group sub-contracting with piece wages. In view of the evidence, this hostility is not very logical, and therefore it deserves to be examined more closely.

In 1880, Paul Lafargue (1842-1911), the Creole son-in-law of Karl Marx, mocked the migrant workers of Auvergne and their colleagues worldwide by contrasting them with the biblical lilies in the field, which neither toil nor spin (Matthew 6: 28):

On the other hand, what are the races for which work is an organic necessity? The Auvergnians; the Scottish, those Auvergnians of the British Isles; the Galicians, those Auvergnians of Spain; the Pomeranians, those Auvergnians of Germany; the Chinese, those Auvergnians of Asia.⁶²

The Auvergnians were at that time the most famous migrant workers in France, just as the Galicians were in Spain. In Lafargue’s eyes – he does not elaborate further on this comment – they represented the stupid toilers “that love work for work’s sake”, among whom the revolutionary message fell on deaf ears.

The young social-democratic labour movement in Germany proclaimed simply that “*Akkord ist Mord*” or “*Akkordarbeit ist Mordarbeit*” [“collective subcontracting is murderous work”] and they called collective subcontracting an invention of the devil.

⁵⁹ Schloss 1898 and 1902 (he coined the term “cooperative subcontracting”); Bernhard 1903; see also Lourens & Lucassen 1999, 22-29.

⁶⁰ Quotation from F.W. Taylor, *Scientific Management, Comprising Shop Management, the Principles of Scientific Management, and Testimony before the Special House Committee* (New York, 1947), 72-73, in Kuromiya, 1991. I thank Gijs Kessler for this useful suggestion.

⁶¹ Kessler & Lucassen 2013.

⁶² Lafargue 1969, 123. He was probably inspired by Marx who fiercely opposed “*Akkordarbeit*” (Lourens & Lucassen 1999, 23). For the Auvergnians and the Gallegos (inhabitants of Galicia in Northwest Spain) see Lucassen 1987, and Chatelain 1976.

This attitude can be traced back to Karl Marx who, just like Louis Blanc in France, spoke out against the collective subcontracting system and piece wages in general.⁶³ In 1896, the Leipzig Union federation formulated the matter with crystal clarity. “*Akkordlohn*” should be rejected because, in the summary of Ludwig Bernhard, “*die Arbeiterschaft prinzipiell nicht mit dem Kapitalismus paktieren dürfe*” (“the labour movement should not make a pact with capitalism, on principle”).⁶⁴ Still, however much socialists and capitalists have fulminated against this type of labour relation, and however much labour historians have neglected it, millions of workers nevertheless found it to be the best way to improve and secure their earnings.

In summary, many if not most shifts in labour relations did not occur simply because of measures taken “from above” (*vertically*). They occurred just as much due to the combined and long-term effect of what might be dubbed “voters with their feet” (*horizontally*).⁶⁵ Vertical shifts have been more sudden and shorter than horizontal ones.

The question then arises about the extent to which vertical and horizontal mechanisms influenced each other, or whether they might even have logically entailed each other. Their mutual influence is certainly provable, and rather obvious. After the abolition of slavery, most ex-slaves opted for production as small independent operators, and not for wage labour. The former plantation owners then hired “indentured labourers” overseas, especially in India, i.e. people who were prepared to exchange a free passage for a commitment to a labour contract tying them for years to work at one and the same plantation, for a fixed wage.⁶⁶ Admittedly, labour systems do determine the behaviour of people, but as this example shows, the inverse can be just as true. Another example is the internal decomposition of the Russian system of serfdom into *obrok*-labour. Favoured both by landowners and by serfs (the latter whom were also in part migrants) this shift most probably contributed to the abolition of serf labour.⁶⁷

Why do labour relations change?

Apart from the mutual influences of vertical and horizontal mechanisms, we should also reckon with the possibility that there is a third factor at work which drives along both of them. Is there an overall “driving force” behind the historical evolution of labour relations?

This question was answered in the affirmative by the great social theorists inspiring our profession. The well-known conceptions of Adam Smith (1723-1790), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Max Weber (1864-1920) do indeed assume a sort of “motor” which drives along the social and economic developments, however much they might have disagreed about the fuel, the cylinder volume and especially the fuel efficiency. What they all had in common was the determining power they attributed to the market, from the moment it could develop freely in Western Europe, and particularly in the Dutch Republic⁶⁸ during the early modern period – except that Smith believed in the ultimately creative effect of markets, and Marx in their ultimately

⁶³ Bernhard 1902, 50-53 (about Louis Blanc), 53-67 (about Marx, see *Das Kapital*, part 1 section 6, chapter 19 and Idem, chapter 23 paragraph 5 e), 59-137 (the standpoints of supporters and opponents within the labour movement).

⁶⁴ Bernhard 1902, 65.

⁶⁵ Here is a good link to migration history, see Lucassen & Lucassen 2009 and 2011.

⁶⁶ See *inter alia* Turner 1995; Knight 2011.

⁶⁷ I think I can conclude as much from Stanziani 2008 and 2009 and from Dennison 2011.

⁶⁸ Lourens & Lucassen 1992.

destructive effect. Weber considered a “capitalist spirit”, i.e. a specific mental attitude oriented to the pursuit of profit, as a necessary precondition for the success of the market economy. Allegedly, this spirit was lacking among the landowning elites of classical antiquity. For this reason, Weber (and in his wake, Moses Finley) regarded antique society as being fundamentally different in nature from the capitalist society which slowly emerged in Europe from 1500 AD.⁶⁹

For the aforementioned thinkers and their followers, the development of the market for goods, capital and labour were preceded by more primitive societies, called feudalism, slavery or Asiatic despotism (think of the Marxist Karl Wittfogel, who was influenced by Weber).⁷⁰ About Asiatic despotism, they shared a prejudice which originated in classical antiquity. According to classical authors like Herodotus, the Greeks had an inborn urge for liberty, while their Persian enemy was doomed to an hierarchical society characterized by unfree labour. This narrative was incredibly influential, and – via the rediscovery of the classics in the Renaissance – it deeply influenced the early social and economic scientists of the late 18th and 19th centuries. The great voyages of discovery, particularly those by the Dutch, the French and the English to the Pacific Ocean, added to this the concept of the “noble savage”. We could summarize such schemes of interpretation – which remain influential even today – as systems of labour relations trapped in space and time, which were either almost immutable, or, in the European case at least, subject to an internal dynamic which, seemingly spontaneously, evolved from paradisiacal primitivism via feudalism to capitalism, and from there to socialism. The rest of the world, it was widely believed, would in due course traverse the same modernization path, in an accelerated tempo.⁷¹

This conception of the long-term dynamic of world history remained dominant for a long time. In a sense it remains so, because it is still shared by both liberal and Marxist thinkers. In the first half of the 20th century, Alexander Chayanov (1888-1937) and Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) made theoretically interesting attempts to create alternatives to it.⁷² Chayanov did so at the hand of comprehensive statistics about the small Russian peasants between circa 1880 and 1920, while Polanyi and his school explored many more examples – from Mesopotamia to Dahomey – though in a much less rigorous way than Chayanov did. Empirically speaking, however, the case made by these researchers is ultimately unconvincing. Above all, they fail to convince because they strongly exaggerated the importance of subsistence labour and anti-market behaviour in the world population since the Neolithic revolution. Karl Polanyi summarized his opinion very clearly:

Let us make our meaning more precise. No society could, naturally, live for any length of time unless it possessed an economy of some sort; but previously to our time [i.e. before the 19th century] no economy has ever existed that, even in principle, was controlled by markets [...] Though the institution of the market was fairly common since the later Stone Age, its role was no more than incidental to economic life. [...] Division of labor, a phenomenon as old as

⁶⁹ Weber 1909, 55-73. For a powerful summary of the discussion, see Ehmer and Lis 2009, 9-10, 57; cf. also Van der Spek 2004, Migeotte 2009, 2-3, 173-178, Von Reden 2010, 8-11, Harris 2011, especially chapter 12.

⁷⁰ Van der Linden 1989, chapter 8.

⁷¹ For a good intellectual genealogy of these developmental stages since Marx, see Van der Linden 1989, 235-260.

⁷² Chayanov 1966 (see also the discussion of his theory in Dennison 2011, 12-17); Polanyi 1944, especially 43-44. His most important authorities are Richard Thurnwald and Bronislaw Malinowski (cf. Wagner-Hasel 2003, 148-149), and also Raymond Firth and Max Weber.

society, springs from differences inherent in the facts of sex, geography and individual endowment; and the alleged propensity of man to barter, truck, and exchange is almost entirely apocryphal.⁷³

In the last decades, a lot of new research of high quality has been done, with reasonably good coverage across time and space – I have already referred to it previously – which questions the Smith-Marx-Weber master narrative and enables new hypotheses. I suppose that in a sense this revisionism is a rather facile criticism of intellectual giants who were, after all, men of their time who could only study the available literature as best as they could. Nevertheless, whoever wants to stand on their shoulders ought to rethink the earlier schema's of development, in the light of all the new empirical material that has become available.

As far as I can see, the new research provides three important findings for our perspective on the development of labour relations.

Firstly, market economies did not emerge only once, but several times in history in different parts of the world, and in many cases also disappeared again. The corresponding profound transformations of labour relations (so that a majority of the productive population who did not work strictly for subsistence ended up working for the market⁷⁴) can therefore be encountered in diverse locations, and the same applies to the corresponding commercial-entrepreneurial mentality of which Weber made so much.⁷⁵

Secondly, in that framework, wage labour on a large scale, slave labour and self-employed labour emerged several times in history, and also often declined again; the level of remuneration for wage labour did not necessarily gravitate toward a minimum subsistence level, but showed strong fluctuations between a physical minimum requirement and a level that was twice or three times higher;

Thirdly, these fluctuations in remuneration were not, or not only, the result of blind market forces, but also of individual and collective actions of the wage workers themselves.

I already referred to several different examples of the emergence of market economies: Babylonia in the long sixth century BCE, the classical Greek world, the Roman empire, Ming/Qing China, and Western Europe from the time of the great voyages of discovery. But as I will show, there are other possible candidates. Their alternates were in their majority self-subsisting societies featuring reciprocal labour or tributary (or redistributive) economies.

In the framework of the history of labour, we can now make a division in market economies between, on the one side, that part of the working population which provides for its livelihood by selling their products or hiring out their labour power, and on the other side that part of the workforce which is forced to work without remuneration, the unfree workers. From the point of view of research, the latter happily enjoy more and more attention, as is shown by an impressive number of recent monographs, journals and databases.⁷⁶ Nevertheless we are still much in the dark about the quantitative development of self-employed producers and wage workers, especially outside of

⁷³ Polanyi 1944, 43-44. The last part of this quote is a criticism of Adam Smith.

⁷⁴ To be precise: in terms of IISH-CGLR, in a market economy the majority of the productive population (i.e. everybody except those who are unable to work, affluent enough not to work, or only engaged in reproductive work) is primarily working for the market.

⁷⁵ See *inter alia* Weber 1909, 181-182.

⁷⁶ See, for example, the database www.slavevoyages.org by David Eltis, and the overview article by Zeuske 2012.

Western Europe before the most recent centuries. An important handicap for research is the lack of written records about something as pedestrian as day-to-day work activities.

Fortunately, sources of knowledge other than written ones are becoming available to begin solving this puzzle. A promising new approach, in my view, is the reconstruction of the degree of monetization of economies with the aid of numismatics and archaeology.⁷⁷ The basic idea of this type of analysis is simple. Wage workers – the expression itself already gives it away – receive wages for their efforts. Likewise, because most small independent producers cannot wait for the sale of their products in the market, they are dependent on regular cash advances from their customers. The remuneration of both wage-workers and self-employed operatives could be *in natura*, but since more than 2,500 years ago, *coins* have been used as means of exchange in large parts of Eurasia. The production and circulation of petty cash (“deep monetization”) point to a demand for daily use, and therefore they indicate the existence of a quantity of wage workers and small independent producers working for the market.

Given that I have proposed the existence of these two labour relations (next to unfree labour) as a yardstick to measure the increasing or decreasing commercial character of a civilization, the prevalence of small coins can serve as a fossil guide. The same method is not possible for the New Babylonian Empire, because the recently “invented” coins in Asia Minor were not yet widely in use there.⁷⁸ Still, the three other examples of market economies which I mentioned were indeed “deeply” monetized. The analytically important step is that we can also turn this hypothesis around. Those societies which were deeply monetized, according to numismatics and archaeological findings, but for which written records about labour relations are mainly lacking, very likely had large populations of wage workers and producers for the market. The hypothesis would then be, that *deeply monetized societies must have had market economies*, in which small independent producers and wage labourers dominated.

There are at least two historical cases which allow us to test out this idea: China and India. For China under the Song dynasty in the 11th and 12th centuries CE, we can prove straightforwardly that the annual production of copper coins per capita was higher than later periods, and perhaps also higher than in any preceding period.⁷⁹ So there are good reasons for believing that a “deeply monetized” society emerged here (comparable to the Roman empire, and later, to the Republic of the Seven United Provinces in the Netherlands⁸⁰). No wonder that at circa 1050, compulsory labour for the Chinese state was converted into a tax which had to be paid in cash.⁸¹ My hypothesis would be that self-employed peasants and craftsmen as well as wage earners became the new tax payers. Equally impressive was the increase of circulating copper money in 18th century China, although its effect on the

⁷⁷ Lucassen 2007; for “deep monetization” see also Verboven 2009. For the monetization of the Greek and Roman societies in general, see Von Reden 2010, Migeotte 2009, 55-60, 120-127 and Harris 2011, chapter 10.

⁷⁸ Van der Spek 2004. The Babylonian market economy was nevertheless monetized, in the sense that prices and wages were expressed in silver; and even “clay money” existed (a fiduciary kind of money).

⁷⁹ Von Glahn 1996; Lucassen 2005; Lucassen 2007, 29-32; Wang 2007; Scheidel 2009. In the fourth or the third century BCE, the more tributary society of the fighting states (403-221; see Rosenstein 2009) were replaced by the more market-oriented society of the Han, in which the first small copper “cash” – i.e. coins such as the *banliang* and the improved version of it, the *wuzhu* – circulated fully, and wage workers were actually paid in copper coins (Wang 2007). The annual “cash” production of the Western Han was 230 million coins; in the early Tang period 327 million coins were produced per year; and in the early Song period 800-1,300 million coins were produced per year – see Scheidel 2009, 194, 199.

⁸⁰ Scheidel 2009, 200-202, 205.

⁸¹ Von Glahn 2010 discusses the far reaching monetary changes in the subsequent centuries, but says nothing about the consequences of the strongly reducing use of copper money for the prevailing labour relations.

prevailing labour relations was not as large, since the population had meantime grown strongly and the circulation per capita therefore was smaller than during the Song dynasty. Christine Moll-Murata found a clear shift to work for the market in 18th century China. Whether this also implied an increase of agricultural labourers or rather of peasants is still a matter of academic controversy.⁸²

Just as in China, large, long-term fluctuations in “deep monetization” can be identified in the history of India.⁸³ On-going research suggests a strong intensification in the use of copper money in the 16th century, during the Suri dynasty (1538-1554) and the first Moghul emperors, in particular under Akbar (1556-1605). Compared to the preceding period, the production of copper coins probably trebled and, although we can assume that the population grew as well, a strong increase in monetary circulation per capita must have occurred. The evident great increase of minting houses would have stimulated the velocity and volume of circulation even more. What this meant in terms of labour relations is made clear by Najaf Haider’s estimates of the demographic structure at the end of Akbar’s reign. At that time, 85% of the population was active in agriculture, of which at least a quarter worked as wage workers. The same proportion will most probably have existed in industry and services. Besides, there was a large professional army. These proportions are similar to those at the end of the 19th century. In between, a steep demonetization occurred, roughly in the century from 1650 to 1750, after which a gradual recovery took place across the next century.⁸⁴ Here my hypothesis would be a simultaneous deproletarianization.

To conclude, China under the Song dynasty, India under the Suris and the early Moghul emperors, could all be called “market economies” just as much as Babylonia, classical Greece, the Roman empire and Western Europe with its maritime empire from 1500 CE. Remarkably, slave labour was much less prevalent in East Asia and South Asia than in the other cases mentioned.⁸⁵

One could of course object with Weber, Chayanov and Polanyi that it is possible to have markets and a large number of people working for them – free or unfree – without this necessarily implying that it gives rise to a “capitalist spirit” (or, put differently, a pervasive profit-oriented mentality).⁸⁶ But even at this point the reality may well have differed from what we traditionally thought. Although much more research is still necessary, there are meantime plenty indications that the pursuit of profit and all that implies was a pervasive phenomenon also outside of Renaissance Europe. The Greek poet Hesiod already opined in his classic *Works and Days* (700 BCE) that:

⁸² Christine Moll-Murata 2012. In this paper for IISH-CGLR, she refers to Wu Liangkai who thinks that such an increase in wage labour is probable, in contrast to Kang Chao who thinks that an increasing number of self-employed producers working for the market is more plausible. For the simultaneous increase of wage labour in diverse industrial sectors, see Moll-Murata 2008.

⁸³ Lucassen 2013 (see also my paper for IISH-CGLR 2012 “Labour relations in India 1500-2000”, in part based on Haider 2007, 293-294, 315); Lucassen 2014.

⁸⁴ In the textile regions of South India (cf. Parthasarathi 2010) the renewed monetization occurred the fastest.

⁸⁵ For slavery in India, see especially Chatterjee and Eaton 2006, and further Fukuzawa 1991 and Vink 2003; for China, see Moll-Murata 2011, 174-177 and her methodological paper for IISH-CGLR 2012.

⁸⁶ Howell 2010 shows how complex this “Geist” (spirit) was in Europe between 1300-1600.

for a man grows eager to work when he considers his neighbour,
 a rich man who hastens to plough and plant and put his house in good order;
 and neighbour vies with his neighbour as he hurries after wealth.
 This strife is wholesome for men.
 And potter is angry with potter, and craftsman with craftsman,
 and beggar is jealous of beggar, and minstrel of minstrel.⁸⁷

A few centuries later, we encounter a free translation of the same insight in the Chinese *Guanzi*, which again resurfaces – not coincidentally – in the Song period with a slightly different wording. The relevant passage of the *Guanzi* states:

It is human nature not to refrain from going after profit
 or warding off danger when either is in sight.

Where profit is anticipated,
 traders will hurry around day and night,
 and make light of travelling over a thousand li to get it [...]

So where there is profit,
 no mountain can remain unclimbed,
 and no water is immune from penetration even if it is unfathomable.⁸⁸

I will not try to prove here that the pursuit of profit and the market economy were in no sense a rare combination across millennia of world history. Several historians have claimed that social protests against the expansion of the market economy can be found everywhere when a cash economy emerged.⁸⁹ If this hypothesis is true, then we would have to encounter such protests around the middle of the first millennium BCE at the Eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean, in Northern India and in China. Roughly at the same time that money as means of exchange began to determine the life of commoners, we do indeed encounter philosophers and prophets who preach compassion. Think of Buddha, but also of Pythagoras and other Greek philosophers, the Old Testament prophets and quite likely Zarathustra as well.

I think that it is more than probable that a pervasive mentality of profit-seeking as well as market economies emerged in several epochs in history, and in several different places in the world. With that insight in mind, I want now to examine an important type of labour relationship which developed in such economic set-ups, i.e. wage labour, and in particular the remuneration of the wage workers.

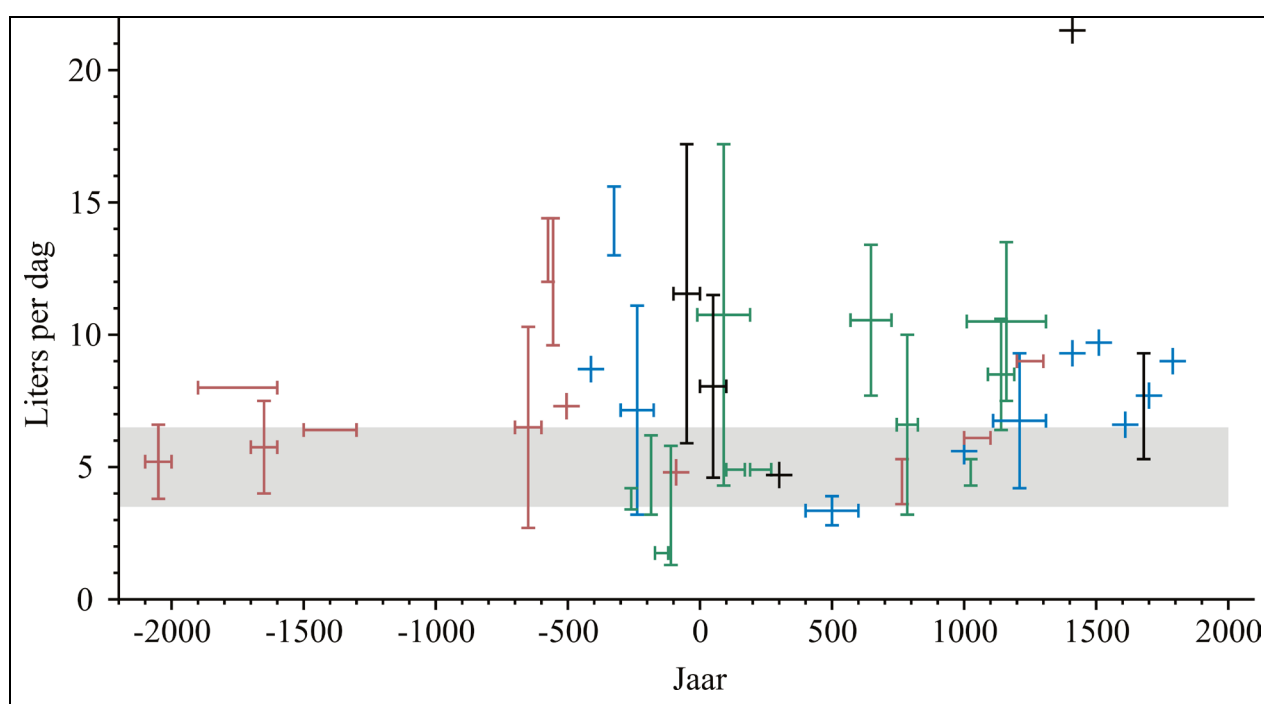
⁸⁷ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, II, 11-24 in the translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White [1914], see <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/works.htm>; see Lis 2009, 35 for a slightly different translation. Hesiod experienced the rise of the Greek polis, see Migeotte 2009, 5, 8, 28; for the opinion of Aristotle: *ibid.*, 170-171.

⁸⁸ Cited after Wicks 1992, 11 who refers to Hu Jichuang, *Chinese Economic Thought Before the Seventeenth Century* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984, 39-40). Wick's referral to a comparable passage from 1088 is taken from Shiba Yoshinobu, *Commerce and Society in Sung China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1970), 48.

⁸⁹ The combination of different passages in Bhattacharya 1996, 18, 28-34, 51 first gave me this idea – which, if it is worthwhile, obviously deserves a much more solid foundation than provided here. Marcel van der Linden referred me to Thomson 1972, 251-252 (who in his turn refers to the classical scholar C.T. Seltman). Cf. further Thapar 2002, 160-173 (162: she points out that Buddha not only had compassion, but also approved the quest for profit).

As is known, theoreticians like Karl Marx predicted the inevitable immiseration of the position of the workers in our part of the world, their *Verelendung*.⁹⁰ Happily, this prediction did not come true – ironically not in the least due to the efforts of the First International founded by Marx himself, and the labour movement which in the end emerged out of it. How the remuneration levels of unskilled workers developed in other market economies, we can see in the great region between Italy and Mesopotamia across nearly three millennia (see graph). In contrast to Walter Scheidel, to whom I am indebted for this data⁹¹, I think that what is especially remarkable in the time series is the fluctuations between a wage level reflecting a minimal subsistence, and a maximum which is two to three times higher than the Babylonian norm of 6 litres of grain per person per day.⁹²

Graph 1. Day wages for unskilled labour, expressed in litres of wheat per day in Mesopotamia and the Eastern Mediterranean, circa 2100 BCE to 1800 CE.



Source: Appendix 1. Legend: red = Mesopotamia; blue = Greece and the Levant; black = Italy; green = Egypt (including Palestine); the shaded horizontal bar indicates Scheidel’s “core range”.

⁹⁰ Marx, *Kapital*, Part 7, chapter 23, paragraph 5: “Es folgt daraus, dass im Masse wie Kapital akkumuliert, die Lage des Arbeiters, welches immer seine Bezahlung, sich verschlechtert [...] Es bedingt eine Akkumulation von Kapital entsprechende Akkumulation von Elend.“

⁹¹ Scheidel 2010, 452-458; just as pessimistic as Scheidel is Harris 2011, chapter 2.

⁹² The “ideal” monthly wage in Babylonia was equal to one shekel or 180 litres of grain (Bert van der Spek, personal communication). This amount is similar to weavers’ wages in Britain and India in the 18th century, and compared favourably with the earnings of the corresponding farm workers on the land (see Parthasarathi 2011, 37-46; Based on Van der Spek 1998, 250) I assume 0,587-0,788 kilogrammes of wheat per litre, or 1,13-1,74 British pounds per litre. Given 6 litres per day during minimally 6 days, this means that the Babylonian norm was 41-63 pounds of wheat per week; the subsistence minimum was 250 kilogrammes per person per year (Van der Spek 2008, 41) which would imply 1,3 litres per day. Thanks to Mathies Lucassen (University of Utrecht), who drew the graph for me.

The causes of these fluctuations are not at all clear for the time being.⁹³ What their occurrence does show, is that the most developed market economies covered by the data⁹⁴ did not necessarily cause a durable *Verelendung* of the unskilled workers. The contrary is more true: especially the well-organized market economies seem to have offered the wage worker the most – think here of the new Babylonian empire, Athens, the Roman empire, the Middle East under the Abbasids, the Mamluks and the Ottomans, and renaissance Italy.⁹⁵ Here the effects of “market order” are observable, although we should not forget that the same states were just as able to order and institutionalize unfree labour.⁹⁶

In this way, we arrive at the last important result provided by recent research. Fluctuations in remuneration are not, or not only, the result of blind market forces, but also of individual and collective actions by wage workers themselves. That this is true for Western society requires little argument. Institutional economists and economic historians starting with Douglas North have pointed to the rule of law and the ability to bargain as essential preconditions for economic growth. These principles can even be extended to the relationship between man and wife within marriage.⁹⁷ But they apply no less to the development of labour relations in a society. In Western society, we should note the abolition of slavery, the protective legislation for wage workers and for women and children in particular, legislation for schooling, the right to organize and form associations (including unions), the right to strike, and so forth. The countries which arranged these matters the best around 1900 also became the wealthiest.⁹⁸ Next to trade unions, other organizational forms flourished, such as mutual insurance funds and cooperatives.⁹⁹ The latter were also popular among small independent producers (think, for example, of farmers’ unions). Further back in time, it has been proved that occupational guilds were important for the success of small self-employed producers, and in some cases also for their servants.¹⁰⁰

The opportunity to migrate and establish oneself successfully elsewhere as a migrant is another aspect of the arrangements to which I refer. Spatial mobility in Europe increased enormously as the market economy expanded, at least from 1500. Industrialization and the transport revolution with steamships and trains from 1850 represent only the acceleration of a much older process. Overseas migration obviously played a role, but migration to the cities was even more important.¹⁰¹

⁹³ Interesting are some sub-regions, such as densely populated Egypt where the lowest wages occurred, representing perhaps also the aftermath of a society which only at relatively late stage – from the Seleucids – became monetized (Von Reden 2010, 41-47) and for millennia remained a tributary civilization.

⁹⁴ Jursa 2010, 815-816 refers to economic growth in the modern sense of the word, both in Babylonia in the long sixth century BCE and in classical Athens.

⁹⁵ I owe this suggestion to Bert van der Spek.

⁹⁶ The existence of institutions which order the practice of slavery socially in itself says nothing about the increase or decrease of the phenomenon. Dandamaev indicates a decrease of slavery during the old and new Babylonian periods and Jursa reaches the same conclusion. During the Roman expansion, the opposite could have been the case.

⁹⁷ De Moor and Van Zanden 2006; Howell 2010, chapter 2 offers a captivating story with regard to the work of men and women in Western Europe between 1300 and 1600; see also Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2008.

⁹⁸ Hu & Manning 2010.

⁹⁹ Van der Linden 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Prak, Lis, Lucassen & Soly 2006.

¹⁰¹ Lucassen & Lucassen 2009 and 2011.

To what extent did this factor – i.e., favourable institutional arrangements especially for self-employed producers and wage workers – play a significant role in the early market economies which I claim to have identified? Although this aspect of “global labour history” too is still in its infancy, many demonstrable examples are available which suggest that welfare improvements were not due to Santa Claus. A good analytical framework for social reforms is admittedly still lacking.¹⁰² We ought to consider the role of the guilds, not only in Western Europe but also elsewhere and in classical antiquity, in which the concern for human welfare is an old – though by no means exhausted – theme.¹⁰³ For the rest, I will make do with a brief discussion of early and non-European legislation with regard to labour and the collective actions which legislation enabled. I will focus here on the Middle East and India.

In the oldest legal texts which have been preserved, such as the code of Hammurabi, regulations can already be found for labour relations in the Middle East.¹⁰⁴ Less well-known perhaps is what Islamic sages say about it.¹⁰⁵ Both in the Malikite and Hanafite law schools, all kinds of labour relations are recognized and discussed at length. Next to the group-wise sub-contracting of work which I mentioned earlier, there are regulations with regard to what Udovitch calls “labour partnerships”. Islamic law pays a lot of attention to the economic phenomenon of “partnerships”, in which individuals pool money, goods or skills to start a business. When skills were pooled, the capital according to this reasoning consisted primarily of labour and the skills of the partners, and the venture was literally described as a “company of bodies”. While the Hanafite school speaks only of schooled and sedentary craftsmen like smiths and weavers, the Malakite school includes much larger occupational groups.

When Muslim rulers conquered most of India, they encountered not only a highly developed and already monetized society, but also a more than a thousand year-old legal system. Next to the income sources of the priesthood and warrior caste, this legal system recognized and protected trade and self-employed labour in agriculture for the Vaisayas, and wage labour for the Sudras.¹⁰⁶ What this meant in practice, and how it combined with the Islamic and the colonial legal systems introduced later, is something we know little about yet. In late-colonial India, the labour movement was weak, but that was not necessarily the case in earlier periods. I provide one case study as an example. My own research shows that in the 1790s, the gunpowder factory at Ichapur (to the North of Calcutta) with 2,500 employees was one of the largest factories in the world at the time. But not only that – its seasonal workers were paid reasonably, and fought hard for a decent wage. An impressive number of strikes and other collective actions were necessary for that purpose, which among other things culminated in a benefit compensation for work accidents from 1 May 1783, equal to 100% of the last received wage rate.¹⁰⁷

Using the long-run research findings I referred to for Europe and parts of Eurasia, we can conclude that civilizations with strongly developed markets already existed for a long time. They emerged in one era, and declined again in another. It

¹⁰² See however for the more recent period Van der Velden et al. 2007 and <http://socialhistory.org/en/stakingen> and <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourconflicts/datafiles>.

¹⁰³ Lucassen, de Moor & Van Zanden 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Leick 2002, 186-187.

¹⁰⁵ Udovitch 1961; for a critical view of the relationship between Islamic law and economic development, see Kuran 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Derrett 1957.

¹⁰⁷ Lucassen 2012; see also Lucassen 2007, and Van der Linden 2008, 48, 175-178.

follows that the traditional claim of European uniqueness, according to which markets (including labour markets) originated only in one place and at one historical time, and subsequently conquered the world (as e.g. Immanuel Wallerstein would have it), is dubious to say the least.¹⁰⁸ For the history of labour, this conclusion means not only that, in reality, the socio-economic developments occurred in a more complicated way than the traditional causal schema's of Smith, Marx, Weber and Polanyi assumed. The comparative writing of labour history has also gained a great many of additional "laboratory situations".¹⁰⁹ And these become even more interesting when we not only consider the *external*, but also the *internal* labour relations.

The implication is, in my judgment, that even although wage labour has become the globally dominant labour relationship outside the household, we lack enough evidence at present to be able to claim that we are in the end-phase of a clearly defined evolutionary path of labour relations.

Recent developments

So much for the distant past. What can we say about labour in our own time, i.e. the historical developments that have occurred since the oil shocks of the 1970s? With the finding of a worldwide forward march of wage labour, the story is not yet at an end. After all, at the same time that the total amount of wage labour has increased, we can also witness major changes in the very character of wage labour since the 1850s. Globally, I think three turning points in the form of wage labour were reached in the 1970s: the more flexible terms of labour contracts and the mutual obligations of employer and employee; the intensification of labour efforts per household, especially through the increased participation in wage labour by women; and, lastly, the shifting balance of power in the institutions of the labour market. These tendencies have admittedly existed only since the last few decades. They are perhaps most visible in contemporary Western Europe with its elaborate framework of social legislation. I believe that they represent real historical turning points which ought to be assessed within a global framework.

Changing labour contracts and labour mediation

The West European labour contract had two sources: servant law and commercial law.¹¹⁰ The juridical position toward servants, and relatedly apprentices and pupils, was originally paternalistic in nature. Wage earners were legally treated as "children" working under the paternal (or maternal) authority of the employer, with whom they often lived. This kind of labour relationship therefore contained all kinds of unfree

¹⁰⁸ Wallerstein 1974-1989.

¹⁰⁹ The reader will have noticed that I have avoided the terms *class*, *class struggle*, *capitalism* (Sombart's term, not Marx's) or *modern*. That is not because I am hostile to Marx, Weber or their more important followers, but because I believe that these terms have been so much abused in the discussions of the last century or one-and-a-half centuries, that they have lost most of their analytical power for "global labour history". This contrasts with terms like *market*, (internal and external) *labour relation*, *social inequality*, *collective action* and even morally loaded terms such as *pursuit of profit* and *exploitation*. See Harris 2011, chapters 1, 11 and 12.

¹¹⁰ Lucassen 1995, 381-383; Stanziani 2009, 381-384; Espada Lima 2009, 399-402; Caracausi 2011; Lis and Soly 2012A and B; see Lourens & Lucassen 1987, 38-41 for an interesting conflict between both systems in the case of the Lippe brick makers in Groningen province circa 1850.

aspects. In the Anglo-Saxon legal system, it even meant that breaches of contract were dealt with under penal law, and not under civil law.¹¹¹ The labour contract, in the sense of an agreement between a free employer and an equally free employee, by contrast followed the rules of any kind of commercial contract. Something similar applied in the medieval Islamic world. Thus, the 9th century *Mudawanna* stated: “Everything that is permitted in a business association on the basis of dirhams is also permitted in a business association based on the hands of its members.”¹¹²

In the 19th century, the commercial contract began to dominate in the Anglo-Saxon world, first in the United States, and half a century later also in England itself. Via the principles promulgated by the French revolution, it became a common practice in the rest of Europe. Expanded with binding collective labour contracts, the elaborate contemporary system of labour law came into being, notably in Western Europe.

This system has been attacked in recent decades. Any ceasefire in the battle still seems to be far off. The attack was aimed in the first instance not against the labour contract and its legal protection as such, but against employee benefits and the way in which these had been anchored into a welfare state. Just as soon as the welfare state had been perfected, the oil crisis of 1973 and a burgeoning number of claimants for state assistance called the viability of the system into question. The large number of claims did not just arise from individuals legally entitled to assistance. They also arose both from employers’ organizations, as well as from trade unions. Together they transformed redundancies into tickets for unemployment and retirement benefits. In the public debate, the use, abuse and misappropriation of social supports became an almost incomprehensible moral labyrinth, especially where the integration problems of immigrants and their offspring were concerned.¹¹³ All European countries experienced variants of this predicament.

After recurring small and large economic crises, the labour contract as such also became a target. In the first instance, the state monopoly over labour market mediation was slowly but steadily broken down. In the German-speaking world, this monopoly had been most developed, in fierce competition with private employment agencies. In 1922, the *Reichsarbeitsnachweisgesetz* (national labour mediation law) placed the authority over employment mediation wholly into the hands of the state, while its implementation was left to the organizations of employers and employees.¹¹⁴ Similar models were created everywhere, not in the least because the International Labour Organization became a strong supporter of them. Moreover, they fitted well in the framework of the post-war Keynesian economic policy. Meantime, however, the European Commission has spearheaded the introduction of flexible contracts. Such contracts would, it is argued, be economically much more advantageous, not only for the employer, but also for the employee. Everyone is now looked upon as if they are independent self-employed operators who are best able to look after their own interest. Small wonder, then, that the right to fire workers, or more precisely protection against redundancy, is cited as one of the reasons why Europe is unable to recover from the crisis. Meantime, the number of self-employed has indeed increased considerably. That did not simply happen because the self-employed volunteered for it. Much hidden

¹¹¹ Steinfeld 1991; Stanziani 2008 and 2009.

¹¹² Udovitch 1961, with reference to chapter XII in the *Mudawanna* of Sahnun ibn Sa'id ibn Habib at-Tanukhi (160 AH – 240 AH; 776/7 – 854/5), a jurist of the Maliki law school in Qayrawan.

¹¹³ Leo Lucassen & Jan Lucassen 2011.

¹¹⁴ Faust 1986; Van Bekkum 1996; Lucassen 2000.

unemployment is masked by self-employment as its only alternative. The number of permanent positions has strongly declined, and the number of temporary contracts has strongly increased.

In other parts of the world, the European model was for some time followed as the exemplar, initially in the framework of colonialism – among other things, because the ILO criticized the labour policy of the colonial authorities more and more. The attention shifted from the fight against unfree labour to the promotion of labour rights, collective contracts, labour protection and the insurance of work risks.¹¹⁵ In the colonies, the small public sector was the first to benefit, not in the least because a lot of public servants from the home country worked in that sector.¹¹⁶ The first trade unions founded outside the Atlantic world were those of public servants and the staff running trains, especially the machinists. They were followed by unions in large enterprises dominated by Europeans, such as the textile factories and mines in India. In the late-colonial and post-colonial period, these kinds of trade unions tried to extend their model to the rest of society. Those parts of the economy in which more elaborate labour legislation and the recognized influence of labour organization held sway were called the “formal sector”, while the rest – the great majority of the working population – worked in the “informal sector”.¹¹⁷

While previously this still small formal sector in post-colonial countries tended to expand, it has shrunk again in the last decades. In part, it is the effect of denationalization (privatization) of industries and services in many countries. The informal sector and “casualization” are on the winning side, worldwide. The changes occurring in the former Communist power bloc have no doubt contributed to this trend. Very striking, for example, is the *de facto* informalization of labour in China, where the liberal ideal of the worker as a “small employer” who improves himself by continuously changing jobs has become a reality. This trend is vividly pictured in Leslie T. Chang’s book *Factory girls*. Her main character, Wu Chunming – 17 years old at the time – writes in her diary:

Wu Chunming, you cannot go on living every day like this! Think about it: You have already been at this factory an entire half year, but what have you really gained? You know that to do migrant work in the plastic molds department for your whole life does not have any prospects, so you want to job-hop and find a satisfactory job.¹¹⁸

It does not take much argument to know that job-hopping can succeed only for a limited time. Such a routine of nervous souplasse and self-improvement is simply not an option for most of the working population during most of their working life.

From less to more working hours

The intensification of labour effort per household, especially due to the increased paid employment of women, is a second turning point in the last decades. This trend is particularly striking because it is the direct opposite of the main trend since the 19th century

¹¹⁵ Hu & Manning 2010.

¹¹⁶ See *inter alia* Van der Linden 2008, 222-224 and various contributions in Lucassen 2006.

¹¹⁷ Bhattacharya & Lucassen 2005; Candland & Sil 2001.

¹¹⁸ Chang 2009, 50.

toward a gradual but steadily diminishing number of hours worked,¹¹⁹ culminating in the introduction of the 35-hour workweek in France in 1998. That historical tendency seemed logical at the time, because with increasing mechanization (and therefore increasing labour productivity) it was possible to produce more in less time, and – assuming a fair distribution of wealth – the products could be consumed by the producers.

The infamous 12-hour workdays and even longer work periods of 19th century factory operatives – men, women and children without distinction – were limited and reduced step by step. The first important stage was completed with the establishment of the eight-hour working day. In the Netherlands that happened in 1919, in the aftermath of the turbulent ending of World War I.¹²⁰ And the labour movement was proud of it. The socialist premier Léon Blum, who in 1936 introduced the 40-hour workweek in France, remarked with emotion that, on a rare occasion when he left the ministry for a long walk through the *banlieus*, the idea occurred to him that he had contributed to uplifting the harsh and dark lives of the workers. On his walk, he saw roads full of bicycles, tandems and motorcycles with colourfully dressed working-class couples seated on them, who seemed to radiate a natural and simple coquetry about their free time. It was not just that they no longer sat in the pub, or had more time for their family, but – said Blum – “they had gained a perspective on the future, they had gained hope.”¹²¹ The second stage in most European countries was the introduction of a free day on Saturdays, inaugurating the 40-hour workweek. In the Netherlands, it was approved by the Lower House on 23 December 1960. In subsequent years, holiday time was also significantly extended.

This tendency toward less and less work, and more and more free time, has come to an end – at least for the meantime. Just as the five-day workweek was introduced in the United States ten years earlier than in Europe, the turnaround has first become visible stateside as well. American couples are now at work for many more hours per year than European ones, and have only half the number of holidays that European couples have. However, the total number of hours worked per worker is also increasing in Europe. In the Netherlands, this tendency is especially visible in the increased labour participation of women, although the average number of paid hours worked by Dutch women is significantly lower than in other European countries.¹²²

I will not go into detail here about the paradox of greater labour productivity, more working hours and shrinking buying power, which is already evident in the Atlantic world for many years. I do however want to point out that this development stands in shrill contrast to the preceding century. A similar situation occurred still earlier, about 150 years ago, when people failed to understand how increased mechanization and output could combine increasing working hours and increasing misery for working-class families. At the start of 1880, Paul Lafargue (whom I already quoted earlier) wrote his passionate and satirical pamphlet titled *The right to be lazy*, in which he did not so much defend laziness, as the right to free time.¹²³ As if intoning a prayer, he concluded his tirade against the exhaustion of the workers with the appeal:

¹¹⁹ Cross 1988 and 1989; for an earlier increase in work time, see de Vries 1994 and 2008.

¹²⁰ Heerma van Voss 1991 (just as in most of the surrounding countries, in the end not a 45 hour week but a 48 hour workweek prevailed in the most important branches of industry).

¹²¹ Lafargue 1969, 78 (in the original, “on leur avait ouvert une perspective d’avenir, on avait créé chez eux un espoir”).

¹²² Portegijs 2008.

¹²³ Lafargue 1969.

O Laziness, have pity on our long misery! O Laziness, mother of the arts and noble virtues, be thou the balm of human anguish!

A futuristic echo of this appeal can be found in a later statement by the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich, in 1921:

everything that was done in the past was only the work of man; in the present, man is no longer alone, but with machinery. In the future only the machine, or something which is similar to it, will remain.¹²⁴

That was the optimism of the years following the Russian revolution of 1917. For Lafargue, the bourgeois were clearly the great evildoers. They consumed what the workers produced, and they would perish because of their gluttony, their drinking and their greedy, decadent behaviour.¹²⁵

At practically the same time, and independently of Lafargue,¹²⁶ the Scottish entrepreneur Alexander Wylie wondered about the same paradox. In his *Labour, Leisure and Luxury* he too points an accusing finger at his fellow captains of industry, and at economists who, according to him, tried to justify the lengthy work-times and unfair social inequality with spurious arguments. However, Wylie argues, ultimately the workers are themselves just as much the victims of the desire for luxury as their bosses are.¹²⁷ That is, they spent a disproportionate part of their wages on alcohol, tobacco and the excessive consumption of sweets, instead of spending their money on educating their children, or saving it up for less fortunate times. Workers could spend their money best, Wylie thought, on healthy foods, consumer cooperatives, mutual insurance and building societies. Before we – no doubt with the blessing of Paul Lafargue – laugh scornfully about such moralism, we ought to realize that part of the workers did exactly what Wylie proposed.¹²⁸ These concerns for healthy living were moreover important programmatic points of the same modern labour movement that eventually won the reduction of work-time.

The rise and demise of the labour movement

A third historical turning point in the contemporary labour relations is the weakening and hollowing out of the labour movement – or, to put it differently, the privatization of working conditions and social security benefits by a shift in power from corporate and state institutions to the market. From the end of the 18th century in England, and from the middle of the 19th century in Europe, trade unions emerged, and parallel to them – as I indicated already – mutual insurance societies and consumer cooperatives.¹²⁹ In many countries, trade

¹²⁴ Malevitsj 2006, 27 (original text 1921).

¹²⁵ Lafargue 1969, 136.

¹²⁶ In any case I cannot find a reference to this effect. Both writers do refer to works in their own language. Wylie's great authorities were Robert Dudley Baxter, Robert Giffen and M. G. Mulhall. He described himself as co-owner of a textile weaving and textile printing plant in Renton near Dumbarton. He was therefore probably the member of parliament of the same name (1838-1921) who, from 1895 to 1906, represented Dumbartonshire in the House of Commons.

¹²⁷ Wylie 1884, 53-54.

¹²⁸ Van der Linden 2008, chapters 5-7; Hu & Manning 2010; for an earlier period, Prak et al., chapter 7.

¹²⁹ Van der Linden 2008, chapters 7 and 8. Production cooperatives of wage workers have, as far as I know, never been a success – unless one included cooperative sub-contracting.

unions were able to conquer a lot of power at the national level – think of the German DGB or the English TUC, but also of the role played by the Dutch unions in the Social-Economic Council and other consultative organs of the “*poldermodel*”. Union membership as a proportion of the labour force grew steadily in the Netherlands for a long time, with ups and downs, but from 1950 it remained at circa 40%. From 1980, the ratio fell back rapidly to only 24% in 1989, meaning that all the membership gains since 1920 were annulled in a very short time.¹³⁰ At the moment, the proportion stands at about 20% according to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics. The remaining mutual insurance societies and cooperatives are no longer significant as active associations of workers.

This decline no doubt has many different causes. For the organizations themselves, the absence of new members and the consequent greying of the existing membership is the most worrying trend. Although a declaration of war against the trade union movement by some governments certainly did play a role – think of Thatcher’s ruthless confrontation in 1984-1985 with the English mineworkers led by Arthur Scargill – the political apathy of the largest part of the working class has ultimately been decisive. This is certainly true for most of the European countries, where membership is generally voluntary, the membership fees are low, and ordinary employees do not need to fear for their jobs when they join a union.

Globally a similar tendency is noticeable, although union membership was generally already much lower. In many countries where the *de facto* right of association and the right to organize exist, only a few per cent of the working population belongs to a union. Worldwide, only between 5 and 10 per cent of all wage workers nowadays belong to a traditional trade union.¹³¹ Of course, non-union associations of workers also exist, but they do not alter these percentages significantly.

I think that the understanding by labour historians of this trend toward disorganization has been clouded, because too little attention is paid to *internal* labour relations. Labour relations do not consist only of shared union membership or incidental participation in collective actions. Not only is the internal dynamic strong in group-wise contracted work, as I noted, but the mutual work relations among wage workers under individual wage contracts are just as much an integral part of the history of labour. The history of collective action is important, but there is much more that can be said about the history of social relations at the shop-floor level.¹³²

Conclusion

The three historic turning points in the evolution of labour since the mid-19th century which I have sketched here, and which I have dated roughly in the 1970s, are obviously connected. That does not yet *explain* them, however. Of course, the neoliberal faith of academics and politicians in the superiority of one abstract institution, “the market”, has risen enormously, at the expense of other institutions such as trade unions, employers’

¹³⁰ Jan Peet provides relevant statistics for the period 1894-1991 (Peet, Altena & Wiedijk 1998, 779-793).

¹³¹ Van der Linden 2008, 280; cf. Candland & Sil 2001. Due to the strong increase of the global working population which performs wage labour, the mutual variations have of course become much greater. This might help to explain the reduced mutual solidarity and therefore the willingness to organize collectively.

¹³² Inspiring examples are offered by Davids 1980 and Ramaswami 2007. This links to the theme of labour productivity which has been neglected in social history (cf. Kessler & Lucassen 2013; Lucassen & Unger 2011).

organizations and the socio-economic policy of national states.¹³³ And, of course, the successive global crises since 1973, the accelerating globalization since that time, the unification of Europe and the shift of economic power from the Atlantic world to Asia and other parts of the world are also implicated. But that is not yet to say that – now that the previously acclaimed social contract seems to offer less promise than had been thought – the effects for the further development of labour relations are clear.

For long, social scientists – including labour historians – believed that they knew fairly well where society stood, how it got there, and, therefore, how it would most probably develop in the future. If we are honest, however, we ought to admit that in reality we are largely in the dark about it. We have certainly cast our nets further and further, hoping finally to make progress with our knowledge. Yet in truth the complex history of human labour, now recast as the history of the workers of the whole world in the very long term, still remains to be written.¹³⁴ For the layman, the very thought of it might be torture. For historians, it portends a big new challenge. There is much work that needs to be done.

¹³³ Hu & Manning 2010; the absorption of wage workers and their institution by the market is ironic when we consider the investor behaviour both of workers (in particular in the United States) and their pension funds (especially in Europe). Thanks to Jaap Kloosterman for this interesting observation.

¹³⁴ Cf. already Weber 1909, 182: “Das Kontinuum der mittelländisch-europäischen Kulturentwicklung kannte bisher weder abgeschlossene ‚Kreisläufe‘ noch eine eindeutig orientierte ‚gradlinige‘ Entwicklung.“

Appendix: Grain wages (litres per day) for unskilled workers in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean seaboard in the very long term¹³⁵

Location	Litres of wheat per day	Period	Sources and notes
Sumer	4.8 (4-6.4)	2100-2000	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Babylonia	8	1900-1600	Jursa 2010, 814-815
	4-7.5	1700-1600	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Nuzi	6.4	1500-1300	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Assyria	(2.67- 10.31 ; m 5.33)	700-600	Jursa 2010, 814-815
South Babylonia	12-14.4 in natura	580-570	Jursa 2010, 814-815
	13.3-12 in geld		Jursa 2010, 814-815
(North) Babylonia	9.6-14.4 (m 12)	550-540	Jursa 2010, 814-815
North Babylonia	7.3 (of minder)	505	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Athens	8.7	425-400	Jursa 2010, 814-815; Scheidel 2010, 453
Athens	13-15.6	330-320	Jursa 2010, 814-815; Scheidel 2010, 453
Delos	3.2-11.1 (4.6- 8.6 ?)	300-175	Jursa 2010, 814-815; Scheidel 2010, 453
Egypt	3.4-4.2	270-250	Scheidel 2010, 453
Egypt	3.2-6.2	210-180	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Egypt	<i>1.6-1.9</i>	170-120	Scheidel 2010, 453
Egypt	<i>1.3-5.8</i> (2.6-3.1?)	130-90	Scheidel 2010, 453
Babylon	4.8 (?)	90	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Rome	(>5.9?? < 11.8-17.2 ??)	100-0	Scheidel 2010, 453
Pompeii	(4.6- 11.5 ??)	0-100	Scheidel 2010, 453
Palestina	(8.6 ?? 4.3- 17.2 ?)	0-200	Scheidel 2010, 453
Egypt	4.9	100-170	Scheidel 2010, 453
Egypt	4.9	190-270	Scheidel 2010, 453
Roman empire	4.7	301	Jursa 2010, 814-815; Scheidel 2010, 453
Levant	2.8-3.9	400-600	Scheidel 2010, 453
Egypt	> 7.7-13.4	570-725	Scheidel 2010, 453
Mesopotamia	3.6-5.3	760-770	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Egypt	(3.2- 10 ?)	745-825	Scheidel 2010, 453
Constantinople	(5.6?)	1000	Scheidel 2010, 453
Egypt	(>?)4.3-5.3	1000-1050	Scheidel 2010, 453
Mesopotamia	6.1	1000-1100	Scheidel 2010, 453
Caïro	7.5-13.5	1000-1300	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Egypt	6.4- 10.6	1100-1200	Scheidel 2010, 453
Constantinople	(4.2- 9.3 ?)	1100-1300	Scheidel 2010, 453
Mesopotamia	9	1200-1300	Scheidel 2010, 453
Constantinople	9.3	1400-1420	Scheidel 2010, 452
Florence/Milan	21.5	1410	Jursa 2010, 814-815
Constantinople	9.7	1500-1520	Scheidel 2010, 452
Constantinople	6.6	1600-1620	Scheidel 2010, 452
Constantinople	7.7	1680-1720	Scheidel 2010, 452
Florence/Milan	5.3- 9.3	1690	Jursa 2010, 814-815; Scheidel 2010, 437
Constantinople	9	1780-1800	Scheidel 2010, 452

M = median; ? = uncertain; ?? = very uncertain; vet means higher than and italics lower than Scheidel's "core range" of 3,5-6,5 litres.

¹³⁵ For the early Mesopotamian data, I prefer Jursa's figures, for the rest I have followed Scheidel, without however adopting his "single source" data.

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