

## Introduction

We have called this collection of essays *Before the Unions*. What exactly do we mean by (trade) unions and what preceded them? Exactly a hundred years ago Beatrice and Sydney Webb defined a trade union as “a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment”.<sup>1</sup> These permanent organizations of wage earners of the same occupation, according to most labour historians, started at a local level and tended to develop into national and sometimes even international unions and they formulated political as well as economic demands.

The almost general acceptance of the adjective “continuous” in the Webbs’ definition, suggests that most labour historians have been looking for the origins of trade unions that were still in existence in their own time. Although the Webbs cannot be blamed for the “naive, if widely held, belief that trade unionism and industrial conflict originated in the concentration of industry in the early nineteenth century”, this belief still prevails, among other reasons because of the emphasis on continuity.<sup>2</sup> C. R. Dobson and John Rule have also elaborated upon some of the early attempts to offer an alternative vision. Dobson concludes that in Britain “in some cases continuities can be traced to Stuart or even Tudor times”, in contrast to France, where similar continuities were interrupted by the Revolution. Rule calls the period 1750–1850 “the formative years” of British trade unionism, without explaining why 1750 should be accepted as the starting-point.<sup>3</sup>

Similar approaches, although sometimes with different periodization, have been developed by labour historians for other countries. In Germany, for example, this means that the *Vormärz* between 1830 and 1848 is seen as the formative period, and the ensuing decades, during which the Industrial Revolution took place, are seen as giving birth to true unionism. Industrial capitalism is considered the “essential precondition” for the emergence of modern labour organizations, to be distinguished from “earlier craftsmen’s endeavours”. This view fully recognizes the journeymen associations’ ability to fight, as well as recognizing the organization of the miners and mutual benefit societies in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, and apparently because of the discontinuity of such organizations, the history of trade unionism and strikes in Germany is restricted to the last one and a half centuries.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London, 1894), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> C. R. Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen. A Prehistory of Industrial Relations 1717–1800* (London and Totowa [New Jersey], 1980), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen*, pp. 151–152 and J. Rule, *British Trade Unionism 1750–1850* (London and New York, 1988), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> K. Tenfelde *et al.*, *Geschichte der deutschen Gewerkschaften von den Anfängen bis 1945* (Cologne, 1987), pp. 17ff.; K. Tenfelde and H. Volkmann (eds), *Streik. Zur Geschichte*

The Industrial Revolution is thus still widely held responsible for the emergence of trade unionism, although labour historians recognize that in the preceding decades craftsmen were already well able to articulate their grievances. Friedrich Lenger calls this the “artisanal phase of the labour movement”, which “began as early as the late eighteenth century in England, and around the 1820s and 1830s in France, Germany and the US, although in the case of France and the United States the revolutions of the late eighteenth century also had a formative impact”.<sup>5</sup> There are many examples of wage labourers organizing themselves in the Middle Ages, well in advance of this artisanal phase, but these are deemed too episodic and spontaneous to form a distinct and integral part of labour history.

The reason for this seems to be legitimate. Before the watershed of the Industrial Revolution and the preceding artisanal phase, the great majority of the population of Europe, and *a fortiori* outside Europe, were supposed to be engaged mainly in subsistence farming. Those who were not lived mainly in the cities, earning their livings as artisans in small workshops.

### INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROLETARIANIZATION

Over the last few decades the concept of the Industrial Revolution as the main motor of proletarianization has been forcefully challenged and, as a result, a number of scholars have questioned the insignificance of labour organizations in the period, roughly speaking, before the nineteenth century. The growing interest in pre-industrial artisans and craftsmen thus corresponds to a general reorientation of research traditions which have dominated social historians’ agendas over the last few decades. This revisionism, which is without doubt related to recent rapid economic, social and political change, manifests itself simultaneously in many fields and in many different and often paradoxical ways.

As far as the world of work during the *ancien régime* is concerned, it is important to note that the dominant post-war view – that the Industrial Revolution formed a fundamental dividing line characterized by technological modernization and radical economical and social transformations, with England as the prominent model of growth – is increasingly being questioned. A new generation of British historians, arguing that “less happened, less dramatically”, present the Industrial Revolution as a gradual, localized and sectional process whose roots must be sought

*des Arbeitskämpfes in Deutschland während der Industrialisierung* (Munich, 1981), pp. 18–19; also see H.-G. Husung, *Protest und Repression im Vormärz. Norddeutschland zwischen Restauration und Revolution* (Göttingen, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> F. Lenger, “Beyond Exceptionalism: Notes on the Artisanal Phase of the Labour Movement in France, England, Germany and the United States”, *International Review of Social History*, 36 (1991), pp. 1–23, quotation on p. 2.

in the seventeenth century and earlier, the consequences of which were far less spectacular and far-reaching than is suggested by classic reference books. They stress the fact that industrial production continued to be heavily dependent upon the manual skills and customary know-how of the artisan or skilled worker well into the nineteenth century. The fact that France achieved comparable economic results under very different social conditions, and the persistence of small workshops and firms throughout the nineteenth century, both in England and on the Continent, reinforce the view that there was a craft alternative to mass production.<sup>6</sup>

The debate about proto-industrialization has also led to a review of traditional interpretations.<sup>7</sup> It has become clear that a profound transformation of the relations of production occurred prior to the extensive mechanization of industry, since in many parts of western Europe the growth of rural industries during the early modern period went hand in hand with proletarianization. This led to short-distance and temporary migration which had a major effect on the rural population. The search for supplementary sources of income beyond agriculture led to the tapping of a wide variety of employment opportunities such as mining, road-building, canal-digging, work in the transport sector – mainly at sea – and even soldiering. In many cases a direct transition took place from self-employment in agriculture to employment in urban industries.

On the other hand there is a tendency to contrast instances of rural industrialization with guild-based industries in the cities. Many historians still assume that a large part of urban production during the *ancien régime* took place within a corporate straitjacket and that this led to technological retardation and social conservatism. Nevertheless, some authors point out that pre-industrial cities were not purely junctions for money and goods transactions and that they cannot be regarded as parasitic centres of consumption. On the contrary, during the early modern period the logic of capitalist production increasingly undermined

<sup>6</sup> For excellent surveys of the literature, see D. Cannadine, "The Past and the Present in the English Industrial Revolution, 1880–1980", *Past and Present*, 103 (1984), pp. 131–172, and P. Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992), pp. 9–36. See also the thought-provoking article of C. Sabel and J. Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization", *Past and Present*, 108 (1985), pp. 133–176, and the comparative study of N. F. R. Crafts, "British Industrialization in an International Context", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 19 (1989), pp. 415–428.

<sup>7</sup> See especially L. A. Clarkson, *Proto-Industrialization: The First Phase of Industrialization?* (London, 1985); P. Kriedte, H. Medick and J. Schlumbohm, "Proto-Industrialization Revisited", *Continuity and Change*, 8 (1993), pp. 217–252; S. L. Engerman, "Expanding Proto-Industrialization", *Journal of Family History*, 17 (1992), pp. 241–251; G. Lewis, "Proto-Industrialization in France", *The Economic History Review*, 47 (1994), pp. 150–164.

the corporate fabric. Towards the middle of the eighteenth century (or even earlier), most export-oriented artisans had already been undermined from within to such an extent that corporate restrictions concerning the size of the business hardly had any impact.<sup>8</sup>

Conclusions about urbanization and especially migration, phenomena which have traditionally been linked to the Industrial Revolution, have also been thoroughly revised. The migration of labour can no longer be explained solely by the emergence of urban factory industry. Its history in Europe is far older, going at least as far back as the seventeenth century, as Leslie Page Moch has shown. This revisionist view has offered an alternative to the old image of poor peasants who were uprooted and defenceless in the face of modern urban life.<sup>9</sup>

A reappraisal of the history of the guilds has also taken place. A growing number of authors stress the fact that the guilds cannot be defined simply as organizations of employers with indolent journeymen only rising in protest in times of hardship. They call our attention to other aspects such as the frequent antagonism between masters and wage labourers.<sup>10</sup> Particularly interesting, especially in Germany, is research dealing with the presence of guilds in the countryside<sup>11</sup> and the “travelling brothers”.<sup>12</sup>

### THE MAKING OF THE WORKING CLASS?

Reconceptualizing the temporal and spatial arrival of capitalist production relationships, and the new emphasis on the multiple dimensions of

<sup>8</sup> M. Berg, P. Hudson and M. Sonenscher (eds), *Manufacture in Town and Country Before the Factory* (Cambridge, 1983), esp. pp. 25–28; J. de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 238–246; P. Hohenberg and L. H. Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1550* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1985), esp. pp. 106–168; M. Berg (ed.), *Markets and Manufacture in Early Industrial Europe* (London and New York, 1991); T. M. Safley and L. N. Rosenband (eds), *The Workplace before the Factory: Artisans and Proletarians, 1500–1800* (Ithaca and London, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> L. P. Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992); compare J. Lucassen, “The Netherlands, the Dutch, and Long-Distance Migration, in the Late Sixteenth to Early Nineteenth Centuries”, in N. Canny (ed.), *Europeans on the Move. Studies on European Migration, 1500–1800* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 153–191.

<sup>10</sup> For references, see the contribution by Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly in this collection.

<sup>11</sup> R. Boch, “Zunfttradition und frühe Gewerkschaftsbewegung. Ein Beitrag zu einer beginnenden Diskussion mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Handwerks im Verlagssystem”, in U. Wengenroth (ed.), *Prekäre Selbständigkeit. Zur Standortbestimmung von Handwerk, Hausindustrie und Kleingewerbe im Industrialisierungsprozess* (Stuttgart, 1989), pp. 37–69; R. Reith, “Arbeitsmigration und Gruppenkultur deutscher Handwerksgesellen im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert”, *Scripta Mercaturae*, 1–2 (1989), pp. 1–35.

<sup>12</sup> W. Reininghaus, “Die Migration der Handwerksgesellen in der Zeit der Entstehung der Gilden (14./15. Jahrhundert)”, *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 68 (1981), pp. 1–22; K. J. Bade, “Altes Handwerk, Wanderzwang und Gute Policey: Gesellenwanderung zwischen Zunftökonomie und Gewerbereform”, *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 69 (1982), pp. 1–37; A. Griebinger, *Das symbolische*

proletarianization together with survival strategies challenges the customary story of the role of the Industrial Revolution in the formation of an antagonistic class consciousness. E. P. Thompson has already shown that it was the craftsmen and not the factory workers who provided the social basis for an embryonic working-class and socialist consciousness. Thompson, moreover, places less emphasis on the objective determinants of class position than on class as a lived or perceived experience.<sup>13</sup> This view has undoubtedly sharpened interest in the history of urban labour, in particular during the period between 1750 and 1850 when the skilled workshop trades were besieged from all sides by technological innovation and the influx of unskilled or juvenile labour. According to many historians, these transformations provided the basis for the workers' radicalism of the early nineteenth century.

Even this view, however, has recently been questioned. The most radical attack comes from those who regard the whole notion of a working class as a fictional construct, the product of a series of discourses about workers produced by the bourgeoisie and various intellectuals. The fear of being accused of economic reductionism has prompted increasing numbers of historians to consider the post-structuralist search for the limits set by linguistic structures and the knowledge systems associated with them.<sup>14</sup>

Other authors have their doubts about explanatory models that overlook the fact that the proletariat can be flag-saluting, peer-respecting and foreigner-hating, and which bestow little attention on questions of gender, religion or the role of the state. They stress the differences that exist among proletarians regarding employment, skills, standards of living, experience beyond the workplace and so forth.<sup>15</sup>

*Kapital der Ehre. Streikbewegungen und kollektives Bewußtsein deutscher Handwerksgelesen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/M., 1981).

<sup>13</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (rev. ed., Harmondsworth, 1968), and *idem*, "The Politics of Theory", in R. Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), pp. 405–406. See also the comments by W. H. Sewell, Jr., "How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation", in H. J. Kaye and K. McClelland (eds), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 50–76, and N. Kirk, *Labour and Society in Britain and the USA. Vol. 1, Capital, Custom and Protest, 1780–1850* (Aldershot, 1994), pp. 7–12.

<sup>14</sup> For a critique, see B. D. Palmer, "Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism: The Poverty of Theory Revisited", *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), pp. 133–162. Also see D. Mayfield and S. Thorne, "Social History and Its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language", *Social History*, 17 (1992), pp. 165–188, the responses by J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, "The Poverty of Protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language", and P. Joyce, "The Imaginary Discontents of Social History", *Social History*, 18 (1993), pp. 1–15 and 81–85, and the reply by D. Mayfield and S. Thorne, *Social History*, 18 (1993), pp. 219–233.

<sup>15</sup> See especially D. Cannadine, "The Way We Lived Then", *Times Literary Supplement*, 7–13 September 1990, pp. 935–936; A. Gorz, "The New Agenda", *New Left Review*, 184 (1990), pp. 37–46; R. Price, "The Future of British Labour History", *International Review of Social History*, 36 (1991), pp. 249–260; S. O. Rose, "Gender and Labor History: the

In short, the idea of “the making of the working-class” is increasingly being reconsidered. Gérard Noiriel warns in this regard against approaches which analyse the history of the labour movement as a continuing progression in which each generation steadily builds upon the solid achievements of its predecessor: the working class is never made but is instead endlessly in flux.<sup>16</sup> This seems to be a good starting-point from which to re-examine labour in the *ancien régime*.

Pat Hudson has recently observed that so complete a shift in perspective is under way that class development and class consciousness during the Industrial Revolution is ceasing to be recognized. This shift, she argues, is partly a reflection of a new gradualist view which severely plays down the extent of radical economic change and developments in the economy affecting the mass of the population.<sup>17</sup> This means that we have to look at the early modern period and the late Middle Ages in another way. We have to turn away from the simplistic dichotomy of the reactionary and progressive; from the increasingly regressive view which suggests we should only be concerned with popular movements which defended custom and tradition (most notably food riots and Church and King disturbances); and from the ideas that “traditional” protest took the form of crowd action, and that a plebeian culture emerged in answer to paternalistic reciprocal relations and within the framework of a moral economy.<sup>18</sup>

### AN ALTERNATIVE VISION

This collection of essays asks whether the image of “a rebellious culture in defence of custom”, which is mainly based upon English research on the eighteenth century, is a too one-sided approach to characterize workers’ combinations and collective actions in pre-industrial Europe. For this purpose it is necessary to widen the geographical horizons, not looking exclusively to England and France, in order to go further back than the eighteenth century, and above all to allow groups other than the urban industrial labourers to be heard. Our approach is a comparative one, looking particularly at the United Kingdom, the Low Countries, Germany and France, but also at Europe in general.

Nineteenth-Century Legacy”, in M. van der Linden (ed.), *The End of Labour History?* (Supplement 1 of *International Review of Social History*; Cambridge, 1993), pp. 145–162.

<sup>16</sup> G. Noiriel, *Workers in French Society in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York [etc.], 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution*, p. 216.

<sup>18</sup> Such views continue to be the predominant tendency in recent work. See, for examples, the statements by Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution*, pp. 205–206, and Kirk, *Labour and Society*, I, pp. 19–22; For Germany see Tenfelde and Volkmann, *Streik*, p. 19, where a sharp distinction is made between the positively appreciated “strike” in the industrial period and the derogatory “social protest” in the time before.

The pioneering research of Steven Kaplan, John Rule and Michael Sonenscher has already mapped much of this territory.<sup>19</sup> Thanks to them and many others pre-industrial actions and organizations of wage labourers can no longer seriously be regarded as a mere footnote to “real” labour history. Now the horizon has to be widened. It is more than likely that the eighteenth century can no longer be seen as the starting-point of labour history, but rather as the provisional culmination of strategies and tactics which had already been in use for centuries by very different groups of workers.

Even more important than alternative visions of strategies, tactics and forms of organization of wage labourers before the Industrial Revolution is the integration of these visions into a coherent framework of early modern labour history. Before beginning such an attempt, let us first see what lessons the contributions to this collection have to offer.

One seemingly obvious but fundamental conclusion has to be drawn from all the contributions: wage labour in Europe had already emerged in the thirteenth century as a structural feature, not only in the towns where one would expect it, but also in rural areas and at sea.

The spread of wage labour, or proletarianization, implies a powerful sense of basic entitlements “to consideration of their [workers] interests and those of their families; to a degree of control over their pay and conditions of work and the right to protest against and if necessary resist arbitrary treatment by their employers”, as David Levine and Keith Wrightson put it in their study of Whickham.<sup>20</sup> These entitlements are not exclusively materialistic. Self-esteem as well as wages were at stake. This sense can be expressed in individual and collective behaviour. In this collection we have chosen to concentrate on collective behaviour and organizations and their public activities, rather than on individual or secret acts of resistance such as embezzlement, go-slows, charivari, mob violence and similar crowd actions. For the same reasons, revolutionary situations or periods are not our main concern here. Continuous associations of wage labourers are central to this collection of essays.

H. A. Turner has suggested, however, that a formal organization is not necessary for such continuous association: “people of the same occupation, who are regularly brought together in the same workplace or town, may acknowledge regular leaders, develop customs of work regulation and systematic ‘trade practices’, and can produce a disciplined

<sup>19</sup> See especially J. Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth-Century Industry* (London, 1981); S. L. Kaplan and C. J. Koepp (eds), *Work in France. Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice* (Ithaca, 1986); M. Sonenscher, *Work and Wages. Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades* (Cambridge, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> D. Levine and K. Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560–1765* (Oxford, 1991), p. 404.

observance of the latter without embedding these procedures in any formal records".<sup>21</sup>

Capitalist production relationships had been penetrating the fabric of rural and urban life long before the eighteenth century, albeit to varying degrees and with differing effects. One therefore has to ask how much resilience and what means to defend themselves various groups of workers had developed centuries before the Industrial Revolution, bearing in mind the margins within which they were able to operate.

Virtually all known forms of wage struggles and their repertoire of actions are as old as the existence of labourers. It is not known in detail whether they were handed from one group or generation to another, or whether they were reinvented from time to time and in different places. These forms of struggle can occur singly or in various combinations.

A clear picture emerges from these essays of carefully selected means of protest. Public demonstrations of strength and occasional acts of revenge were chosen only when unavoidable and were therefore often based on despair rather than real power. The basis of this power consisted of four main, often interconnected strategies:

- Control over the relationship between output and payment by piece-working under co-operative conditions, avoiding direct management or supervision as well as sweated-labour systems.<sup>22</sup>
- Control over the labour supply, and thus over the labour conditions and the level of payment, ranging from a mutually recognized closed shop system to violence, aimed less at employers than fellow wage earners intruding as candidates for a job.
- The exertion of pressure on the employer by means of strikes, the withdrawal of labour or violence.
- Mutual assistance in the form of benefit societies.

Even more striking than the early occurrence of all these forms is the similarity between such different spheres as home industries, manufactures, rural gang-work, artisanal shops and sailing ships, which are all traditionally studied separately by labour historians. Large-scale labour migration without a doubt played a role. Workers in these different surroundings were very well aware of the possibility of blocking an

<sup>21</sup> H. A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy: A Comparative Study of the Cotton Unions* (London, 1962), p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> More study needs to be done on the remarkable fact, stressed by many labour historians, that trade unionism implies regular payments, in particular time wages. Therefore, it is maintained, unions are always hostile to "bargain"-systems (R. Samuel, "Mineral Workers", in R. Samuel (ed.), *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers* (London, 1977), pp. 1-97, especially pp. 74-75). However, Jones has shown that this was not always the case (M. Jones, "Y chwarelwyr: The Slate Quarrymen of North Wales", in Samuel, *Miners*, pp. 99-135, especially pp. 105-106); a balanced view is presented in L. Bernhard, *Die Akkordarbeit in Deutschland* (Leipzig, 1903), p. 137.

employer's access to the workforce. One of the origins of this is the common ideal of securing job opportunities for kinsmen, particularly sons and especially in closed groups without formal apprenticeships.<sup>23</sup>

How should we subdivide the seven centuries of European wage labour history? As the contributions to this collection show, effective workers' coalitions existed at least half a millennium prior to the Industrial Revolution in western Europe. In that sense, there were "unions before the unions" and the distinction between a period "before" and a period "since" the unions should be put in perspective.<sup>24</sup>

Having said this, we provisionally suggest, perhaps surprisingly for many readers, dividing the history of European workers' coalitions into two periods, the first period spanning at least five centuries from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century, and the second ranging over the last two centuries. However, our reasons differ from those criticized in the first paragraphs. If the emergence of the Industrial Revolution was not the common denominator of the last two centuries, what was?

We would like to suggest that during the second stage the arena for labour disputes is no longer the workplace, the village or the city, but the state. This is the key to our understanding of unionism. It is no wonder, as E. P. Thompson has so eloquently put it, that the craftsmen were the first to unionize on a national level, for they were also the first workers to put their hopes in the state and to believe in their participation in civic life as rightful partners in the national ideal. Class formation is part of this process. Classes can best, or maybe exclusively, perform on the national stage. The formation of the nation state and the integration of the different classes might far better explain the differences between the emergence of more or less permanent unions in England, France, Germany and other countries, than the coming of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>25</sup> It is impossible to elaborate fully upon these thoughts here.<sup>26</sup> One of the consequences of the second or "national" period of labour history was the diminishing possibility of continuing inherited strategies in the nineteenth century. The outcome of workers' struggles no longer depended solely on colleagues in the trade, for example, but on much wider layers of society. Chartism in Great Britain is a good example of this.

<sup>23</sup> It is perhaps not a coincidence that those trades with formal apprenticeships knew pseudo-familial institutions like the houses of call in France run by *mères* (mothers).

<sup>24</sup> Also see K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660–1900* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 263–265.

<sup>25</sup> This suggestion is consonant with the concluding remarks of Lenger, "Beyond Exceptionalism", pp. 20–23. Compare P. Birnbaum, *States and Collective Action: The European Experience* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> See also H. Zwahr, "Class Formation and the Labour Movement as the Subject of Dialectic Social History", in van der Linden, *The End of Labour History?*, pp. 85–103.

Subdivisions within the first period are not readily evident. One shift that suggests itself is that from collective “exits” in the Middle Ages to the gradual popularity of the rolling strikes of the eighteenth century. Exactly when this change took place is hard to pinpoint. It might have had something to do with the growth of many industrial enterprises, making enterprise units large enough to organize separately compared to the unity of a medieval town with its small workshops.

Whatever the similarities between actions and organizations in different regions and countries during the first period, national peculiarities should not be forgotten. For the sake of argument, roughly two tendencies might be considered. One is the attempt of the medieval and early modern state to fix wages and influence organizations like guilds. This is exemplified by legislation in England from the fourteenth century, in the Hapsburg Netherlands in the sixteenth century and in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The other is the more “liberal” attitude of weaker central governments, such as the Dutch Republic, which lacked a great deal of central interference in the labour market. However, these legal aspects need further research.

If indeed mainstream labour history and its prevailing concepts are so closely tied to the nation state and its civic ideals, then the study of the first period is particularly important because it enables us to develop concepts and tools of analysis independently of that peculiar societal form.

Moreover, such an approach might further comparative analysis. Many societies outside Europe had also for a long time been characterized by the monetarization of their economies and the spread of wage labour.<sup>27</sup> This raises the question to what extent these societies witnessed similar developments of workers’ organizations and repertoires of action. Doing away with the misleading periodization of European labour history may open up new possibilities for a non-Eurocentric approach.

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<sup>27</sup> F. Perlin, “Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia”, *Past and Present*, 98 (1983), pp. 30–95.