

# Remunerating Labour in a Long-Term Perspective: An Introduction

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Remuneration of work has long represented a central topic in the history of work.<sup>1</sup> Research has specifically investigated the timing and rhythm of a movement that, starting from a lack of remuneration through slavery, eventually led to the emergence and proliferation of salaried work and of remuneration in its monetary form: the wage. This transformation largely characterized the emergence of capitalism, beginning in the sixteenth century (if not earlier) with the linking together of different modes of production (slavery, feudalism, and capitalism) to different forms of remuneration and labour relations (based on slavery, servanthood, and wages) marked by a shift towards greater freedom in individual or collective bargaining.<sup>2</sup>

Remuneration research has remained connected both to the study of wages and to the study of the emergence of wage earners as a working class. In the first case, research – for a long time intertwined with the history of prices – aimed at assessing the evolution of income and purchasing power amongst past populations, with a focus on reconstructing long historical series that appear increasingly weaker on closer inspection.<sup>3</sup> As regards

- 1 The reader is referred to the first major studies on the subject: G. d'Avenel, *Histoire économique de la propriété, des salaires, des denrées et de tous les prix en général depuis l'an 1200 jusqu'en l'an 1800*, 8 vols, Paris 1894–1931; J. E. Thorold Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, London 1884; E. Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France et en Angleterre au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1984 [1933]; W. Beveridge, *Prices and Wages in England from the twelfth to the nineteenth century*, London 1965 [1939].
- 2 K. Marx, *Le capital. Critique de l'économie politique*, Livre I : *Le développement de la production capitaliste*, Paris, 1967 and in general all Marxist historiography; for example, B. Geremek, *Le salariat dans l'artisanat parisien aux XIIIe–XVe siècle*, Paris 1968 [1962].
- 3 See quantitative approaches in S. Hopkins/H. Phelps Brown, *Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables Compared with Builders' Wage-Rates*, in: *Economica* 23 (1956) 92, pp. 296–314; Id., *Wage-Rates and Prices: Evidence for Population Pressure in the Sixteenth Century*, in: *Economica* 24 (1957) 97, pp. 289–306. Id., *A Perspective of Wages and Prices*, Londres, 1981. Several studies for France, for instance: C. Beutler, *Bâtiments et salaires: un*

research on the history of wage-earners, on the other hand, the focus of the investigation has been the progressive loss of autonomy – which, since the Middle Ages, craftsmen and labourers had been undergoing vis-à-vis merchants and merchant-manufacturers – together with the identification of precedents of the modern wage earner in common struggles, collective protests, and wage demands.<sup>4</sup>

The effect of these approaches has been twofold. On the one hand, the *non-monetary* forms of remuneration (payments in kind or by piecework wages, obligatory services, or donations disbursed) have been neglected or seen as “supplements” to monetary wage, sometimes as mere archaic vestiges of the past, similar to wage-level regulations by civil and corporate authorities. On the other hand, the dichotomy between owners of the means of production and those who exchange their workforce for a wage does not call attention to hybrid forms of work – being the product of an extremely varied reality of employment methods as well as contractual and remuneration forms – in sectors where it was quite common to come across figures that were recipients of wages and employers at the same time.<sup>5</sup>

Over the last decades, thanks to the studies undertaken within global labour history (in addition to other research), a similar approach to the study of remuneration has begun to change. Firstly, there has been an appeal to avoid an excessively teleological and Eurocentric reading of the linear shift from slavery to wage labour, or in other words, from

chantier à Saint-Germain-des-Prés, de 1644 à 1646, in: *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 26 (1971) 2, pp. 484–517; M. Baulant, Les salaires des ouvriers du bâtiment à Paris de 1400 à 1726, in: *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 26 (1971) 2, pp. 463–483; L. Ridolfi, Six Centuries of Real Wages in France from Louis IX to Napoleon III: 1250–1860, in: *Journal of Economic History* 79 (2019) 3, pp. 589–627. For Italy, some of the most important essays: B. Pullan, Wage-earners and the Venetian Economy, 1550–1650, in: *Economic History Review* XVI (1964) 3, pp. 407–426; R. Ruggiero, Storia dei salari e storia economica, *Rivista storica italiana*, 2 (1966), pp. 311–320; D. Sella, Salari e lavoro nell'edilizia lombarda durante il secolo XVII, Pavia 1968; G. Vigo, Real Wages of the Working Class in Italy: Building Workers' Wages (14th to 18th Century), in: *Journal of European Economic History* 3 (1974) 2, pp. 378–399; R. A. Goldthwaite, La costruzione della Firenze rinascimentale: una storia economica e sociale, Bologna 1984; M. Rota/J. Weisdorf, Italy and the Little Divergence in Wages and Prices: New Data, New Results, in: *The Journal of Economic History* 80 (2020) 4, pp. 931–960; M. Rota/J. Weisdorf, Italy and the Little Divergence in Wages and Prices: Evidence from Stable Employment in Rural Areas, 1500–1850, in: *Economic History Review* 74 (2021) 2, pp. 449–470. These last two articles discuss the issue of the “small divergence” between European countries, an issue initiated by R. C. Allen, The Great Divergence in European Wages and Prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War, in: *Explorations in Economic History* 38 (2001), pp. 411–447; G. Clark, The Long March of History: Farm Wages, Population, and Economic Growth, England 1209–1869, in: *Economic History Review* 60 (2007) 1, pp. 97–135; R. C. Allen/J. L. Weisdorf, Was there an ‘industrious revolution’ before the industrial revolution? An empirical exercise for England, c. 1300–1830, in: *Economic History Review* 64 (2011) 3, pp. 715–729; R. C. Allen, The high wage economy and the industrial revolution: a restatement, in: *Economic History Review* 68 (2015), pp. 1–22; J. Humphries/J. Weisdorf, The wages of women in England, 1260–1850, in: *Journal of Economic History* 75 (2015), pp. 405–447; J. Humphries/J. Weisdorf, Unreal Wages? Real Income and Economic Growth in England, 1260–1850, in: *The Economic Journal* 129 (2019) 623, pp. 2867–2887. For reference to German case studies, see U. Pfister, The timing and pattern of real wage divergence in pre-industrial Europe: evidence from Germany, c. 1500–1850, in: *Economic History Review* 70 (2017) 3, pp. 701–729. For a critique of these reconstructions, see J. Hatcher/J. Z. Stephenson (eds.), *Seven Centuries of Unreal Wages. The Unreliable Data, Sources and methods that have been used for Measuring Standard of Living in the Past*, London 2018.

4 See, for example, Geremek, *Le salariat*; C. Lis/J. Lucassen/H. Soly (eds.), *Before the Unions: Wage Earners and Collective Action in Europe, 1300–1850*, in: *International Review of Social History* (1994), pp. 1–193.

5 See on this point the important volume by the medievalists: P. Beck/P. Bernardi/L. Feller (eds.), *Rémunérer le travail au Moyen Âge. Pour une histoire sociale du salariat*, Paris 2014.

the lack of remuneration to the emergence of wages.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the clear-cut divisions between pre-industrial and industrial times have likewise undergone a reappraisal, in turn favouring a longer-term approach that, stretching in its analysis well beyond (or well before) the emergence of capitalism, is able to highlight not only the phenomena of change but also the long continuities and analogies between the different epochs.<sup>7</sup>

This issue of *Comparativ* accordingly aims to place the topic of remuneration back at the centre of studies on global labour history through the use of two perspectives. The first perspective is to detach the study of remuneration from that of the wage–wage labour dyad in order to instead focus on a concrete study of the different forms of payment for work. Over the centuries – and even today – remuneration of work has taken on a variety of forms, starting from the way in which it has been calculated and disbursed. Male and female workers, individually or in groups, can in fact reach agreements and receive remuneration depending on the time spent, the quantity of work produced, or the activity carried out. This remuneration can be shaped in different ways, the monetary form being one of them, though not necessarily the dominant one. On the other hand, even within forms of work that are “not free” (such as slavery, prisoners, or indentured servants), we come across extensive forms of payment/remuneration (such as food, accommodation, and monetary remuneration as well) and therefore we cannot regard remuneration as being exclusively linked to salaried employment.

Furthermore, the very timing of payments can vary depending on the period; the sector; the hierarchical position; and if it is regulated on an annual, daily, monthly, or annual basis, as well as before or after the work is performed – leading to far-reaching repercussions on the evaluation of the work. The inclusion of some benefits, such as accommodation, food, or clothing, as well as financial aid and tax relief, can bind some workers more than others, raising the overall remuneration in an ostensibly hidden manner. Fines or days of absence, poor quality of work, and rental of tools, on the other hand, might alter the remuneration received at the end of the work, whereas other forms (such as profit-sharing or company stock options) make it more attractive.

The second perspective is to concentrate on the formation of remuneration rather than on its evolution over time. Remuneration of work is the result of a whole set of socio-economic relationships that includes the connection between not only capital and labour but also the family and public authorities. Our aim is to avoid a dichotomy of freedom and constraint with regard to remuneration setting and to try to instead identify the way in which different elements come into play. The variety of remuneration levels has always been the outcome of relations that include struggles and conflicts as well as formal or informal organizations. Reducing our gaze to a mere dichotomy between “ancient”

6 We refer the reader to several works edited by A. Stanziani: *Le travail contraint en Asie et en Europe, XVIIe–XXe siècles*, Paris 2010; *Bondage. Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries*, New York/Oxford 2014; *Les métamorphoses du travail contraint*, Paris 2020.

7 There is by now an extensive bibliography on the global history of work. See, in particular, K. Hofmeester/M. van der Linden, *Handbook Global History of Work*, Berlin 2018; C. G. De Vito/J. Schiel/M. van Rossum, *From Bondage to Precariousness? New Perspectives on Labor and Social History*, in: *Journal of Social History* 54 (2020) 2, pp. 644–662.

economies and “market” economies does nothing but prevent us from noticing the complexity of remuneration forms even today, where remuneration in kind has by no means vanished.

The aim of this special issue, therefore, is to analyse the variety of forms and mechanisms for the formation of remuneration from a long-term perspective and in different socioeconomic contexts, refuting any teleological approach that assumes the natural succession from one form to another. While focusing on case studies from Europe, the approach used invites spatial comparisons across the globe, focusing on the similarities and intersections that link remuneration forms mutually distant in time and space from one another.

In the first article, François Rivière returns to an important historiographical problem: that of the setting of the level of remuneration by medieval craft guilds and local authorities. It is well known that Boris Geremek claimed that trades played an essential role in setting wages,<sup>8</sup> while Stephan Epstein rejected it years later.<sup>9</sup> Both based themselves on limited examples, which subsequent research has helped to deepen by showing the diversity of cases. This article deals specifically with the case of medieval Normandy, an important province in economic terms, which provided the king with a quarter of his income and whose capital, Rouen, was the second largest city in the kingdom with 40,000 to 60,000 inhabitants at the height of its population. Guy Bois,<sup>10</sup> following Geremek, stated in his study on the crisis of feudalism that guilds were the cause of the rigidity of urban wages, but without going into detail. The question is therefore taken up here in an exhaustive manner by Rivière. The study of the many statutes of the region, more than 140 known texts for 75 trades, allows him to go beyond the building sector alone, which although long considered exemplary has been shown through current research to often be exceptional compared to other branches.<sup>11</sup> This conclusion is both important and nuanced in relation to current historiographical debates: very few texts issued by the guilds, or even by the urban authorities, directly regulate the level of wages (only 15 over the entire period considered). These are therefore largely the result of power relations in the market, both before and after the Black Death, which did not alter the number of decisions in this area: there were no general attempts to limit the level of wages, as was the case in a number of monarchies, from Catalonia to France to England.<sup>12</sup> But this weak direct action of the guilds or the authorities did not prevent them from playing a role in setting wages, notably by reducing competition between actors (limiting the number of apprentices, for example) or by a large number of decisions concerning working hours,

8 Geremek, *Le salariat*, pp. 131–40.

9 S. A. Epstein, *Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe*, Chapel Hill/London 1991, p. 116.

10 G. Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, Paris 1976, pp. 91–110, at p. 108 for the mention of guilds and customs.

11 D. Morsa, *Salaire et salariat dans les économies préindustrielles (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)*. Quelques considérations critiques, in: *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 65 (1987) 4, pp. 751–84, at p. 754; Beck/Bernardi/Feller, *Introduction*, in: *Id.*, *Rémunérer*, p. 9; J. Gautié, *Salaire et salariat au Moyen Âge : le regard d'un économiste*, *ibid.*, pp. 125–33, at pp. 131–3; Bourin, *Conclusion*. De la dépendance à la marchandisation du travail, *ibid.*, pp. 496–9.

12 See R. Braid, *Et non ultra*: Politiques royales du travail en Europe occidentale au XIVe siècle, in: *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* 161 (2003), pp. 437–491.

which of course had an influence on the level of wages. This article therefore invites us not to give in to an easy black-and-white reading and, above all, not to limit ourselves strictly to wage rates when deciding on the role of corporations and authorities in this area.

Vittoria Bufanio's article focuses on the issue of wages in the construction sector, which has been the subject of much discussion. As we said before, numerous studies have used the abundant wage records found in this sector over a long period of time to produce large, multi-century diagrams dealing with the evolution of wages and living standards. Some historians have, however, denounced the "unreal wages" that have often been recreated in this way.<sup>13</sup> By studying wages very closely and using accounting sources of the many buildings constructed in Piedmont during the fourteenth century, Bufanio shows "how an analysis of individual workers and the local socio-economic context is crucial for a more precise understanding of labour dynamics. Any attempt to simplify and rigidly categorise the workforce is unable to explain the heterogeneity that characterised [...] wage levels and labour relations". She thus inserts herself into another debate, that of labour relations. Far from showing a linear evolution, from forced labour to free and wage labour, as some reconstructions once traced, the sources she analyses allow her to underline the multiple comings and goings, the porous borders, and the crossings between one form to the other:<sup>14</sup> "There were different degrees of dependency and mechanisms of control of the workforce, making it difficult to think that there were workers who were entirely free and others who were not at all so." In fact, the wide use of the *corvée* (here qualified as *royde*) allowed the prince to mobilize a whole group of workers without paying them but who could nevertheless be paid by their communities, on whom the *corvée* was collectively imposed. In the same way, the author shows that workers considered as unskilled were far from comprising a homogeneous and undifferentiated group, contrary to what historiography has long presupposed. In fact, some "unskilled" workers could earn as much, if not more, than certain skilled workers: "Thus, skills were not a guarantee for higher wages or even longer-term employment." This prompts us, once again, to reconsider the legitimacy of econometric reconstructions based on merging all wage data into two simple categories (skilled vs. unskilled).

Gabriele Marcon's article studies the wages of miners in the Medici silver mines in sixteenth-century Tuscany. Germanic expertise in mining explains why Saxons and Tyroleans were called in to manage these mines, which also attracted a number of men and women from these regions. Marcon wants to challenge the image inherited from a long chain of historiography that identifies the miners of medieval and modern times as free men, in their full maturity, paid in piece rate or time wages. On the contrary, Marcon shows that different forms of remuneration, including a significant part in kind (food, clothing, housing, transportation costs, etc.), coexisted not only for men but also for women employed. In these mines, skills, gender, and ethnicity influenced policy-makers'

13 Hatcher/Stephenson, *Seven Centuries*.

14 We refer the reader to the works by A. Stanziani mentioned in footnote 6 above.

considerations in allocating labour, insofar as different conditions were created for “Germans” and for natives. For instance, German women performed better remunerated activities than local women, whereas female labour in general were paid less than men when they undertook similar work to men. The remuneration is thus a composite whole, to be patiently reconstituted at the individual level if we hope to grasp all its components. This is all the more true since forms of multiple activities were at work: the alliance between mining and mercenarism, for example, is not as incongruous here as it may seem. Above all, systems of indebtedness formed important levels of constraint. The German miners signed contracts that obliged them for a given period and eventually forced them to move between the Tuscan mines at the whim of their superiors, whereas the natives were obliged to stay put. All this allows us, as Marcon points out, to “challenge European exceptionalism and shed new light on forms of coercion in labour relations mediated by wages”.

Leonard Rosenband’s article offers a general perspective on the production of paper in Europe, from the mid-sixteenth century up to the age of revolutions. The author focuses on some elements, such as productive processes, workloads, and remuneration systems. Workers’ experience, beginning right from the phase of learning the trade and teamwork, is essential to understand the different individual and group affairs, the continuous negotiations between manufacturers and journeymen, and, in particular, the conflicts and pressure that used to be exercised. Paper manufacturing was a capitalist system within a corporate mode of work; Rosenband succeeds in showing that the models normally used to interpret this period (Thompson’s “moral economy” or De Vries’s “industrious revolution”) are ill equipped to explain how industry functions. This is because market forces not only were present, but also, already since the sixteenth century, had steered working choices and remuneration formation. Elements such as the division of work, gender segmentation, the different levels of skills, and the frenzied pace of production contaminate the idyllic image of the ancient regime artisan. Exhausting working hours, as well as health-related difficulties, pushed journeymen to form associations and defend their interests. It follows that the idea that time was money came long before mechanization; remuneration was thus the result of a complex system that linked quality and quantity of work, the time spent, and the bonuses and incentives available to employers and workers. Therefore, the increased working hours were not necessarily related to new consumerist aspirations, since the boundary between choice and coercion was blurred and the resultant effort limited the free time used. At the same time, however, Rosenband pointedly highlights another key issue: the monetary wage received tells us little about the standard of life, inasmuch as bonuses and meals acted as a basis for remuneration that one is hardly able to calculate. This system – consisting of customs and traditions within the process of market negotiation on remuneration – was undermined and forced out by the advent of mechanization. The latter, however, was but another “restless remaking” of capitalism in the organization of production forms and its own social relationships.

The article by Mohamed Kasdi and Didier Terrier is the final text in this special issue, with a study that takes into account wages in the textile factories of the Belgian indus-

trial revolution. In the nineteenth century, cotton mills were indeed laboratories where managerial techniques designed to constantly stimulate the workforce in the accomplishment of prescribed tasks were put in place. The way in which remuneration methods were developed was part of this management designed to ensure that the workforce demonstrated maximum productivity. In Ghent, in Voortman enterprise as in all the other mills, wages were calculated on the basis of time (the day, divided into shifts, and then the hour, based on the same principle) for certain categories of employees and on a piecework basis for others. In the middle of the century, only (or almost only) spinners were paid by performance. Two decades later, a close examination of payroll records shows that performance-based payment included some of the preparation tasks. Towards the end of the century, individualization of wages ended up being based on a multitude of rates that, within each job, varied independently of each other. This was a clever way of mitigating discontent amongst workers. The individual analysis of how spinners' wages were determined allows us to understand this employer's skill even better. As the century progressed, the output of each individual became more and more predictable thanks to the increasing reliability of machines. As a result, by the early 1890s, while piecework wages were maintained, they no longer encompassed as large a wage differential as had been noted four decades earlier. In fact, it can be considered that the performance wage, more than ever in force, had become a mode of compensation by time without being actually named so. If it continued to stimulate spinners, then it also forbid them to slacken their efforts and force them to work almost in unison. The worker, whose activity was increasingly governed by the performance of the machine, had become the "meticulous and silent automaton" that entrepreneurs were hoping for in the middle of the century. Here we wish to highlight some elements that have surfaced in the various articles in order to call for a comparative approach with other areas, including non-European ones, in future research. The first point, already stressed before, concerns the lack of any evolution towards free work and time wages, not even one from a "moral economy" to a "market economy". This is strikingly clear in Vittoria Bufanio's essay, dedicated to the Piedmont construction sites of the fourteenth century, where forced work and free work coexist, with a blend of individual bargaining and remuneration forced on the community. The degree of coercion, in the end, varied depending on the multiple activities that workers, and consequently, their wages, were subjected to. The absence of a clear-cut opposition between monetary/non-monetary and market/non-market is also found in the paper industry of revolutionary France. As shown by Rosenband's article, capitalism features prominently in the country even before the Industrial Revolution. There is likewise no transition to capitalism, but a (re)formation of industry, together with its organization and its social relationships. If we then go back across the centuries, more precisely to medieval Normandy, we can detect the coexistence of market mechanisms and indirect ones (especially the decrease in competition). Nevertheless, public and corporate authorities did not *directly* intervene in remuneration determination and instead did so at the most through the need to change taxation for monetary reasons that was separated as such from the labour market.



The second point we offer to the discussion concerns the factors determining remuneration. In addition to being regulated by the simple supply and demand mechanism, several elements for determining remuneration emerge. Age, marital status, gender, as well as ethnicity are all elements that play a significant role in the Medici mines studied by Gabriele Marcon. Furthermore, the interpersonal relationship, particularly with the prince, is another element that falls within the scope of the Piedmont construction sites. Moreover, to study remuneration determination, individual sectors must be considered and examined. It is important for us to investigate the way the production process as a whole operates to understand how remuneration is formed. Mohamed Kasdi and Didier Terrier, for instance, demonstrate the difficulty in calculating working hours and the policies to determine such working hours. The technology and productivity linked to it are no doubt important, but it is also necessary to include the economic context, the labour market, the social climate, the structure of work within the enterprise, as well as the sectoral policies in general. From a methodological viewpoint, we must focus more and more on the individual level, given that each person was paid weekly depending on the work he/she performed (days, hours) and/or the quantity involved (pieces processed). The amount of remuneration was thus complex because it was linked not only to the machine but also to theoretical expectations.

This clearly emerges even in Rosenband's study, which emphasizes the importance of investigating daily activities in paper mills, as well as deconstructs the romantic image of the pre-industrial craftsman; in this way, everyday circumstances that are not always true, as in the case of skills, can similarly be averted. In the construction sector, for example, Vittoria Bufanio shows that these skills are not an invariably decisive element when it comes to determining the level of wages. This is instead different for mines, as evidenced by Marcon, since there the advance payment of wages influenced the mobility of individuals as well to attract and tie them firmly to the place.<sup>15</sup>

This calls into question, in a general way, the methodological presuppositions that have led to the production of long series of decontextualized wages, whose heuristic scope is totally challenged by the case studies gathered here: "by calculating average wages of abstract categories of workers on the basis of a hypothetical number of working days, many historians have gone missing in the shifting sands of fiction. It is therefore time to leave quantitative abstractions behind and return to the world of identifying the actual remuneration received by each individual."<sup>16</sup>

15 On advance payment of wages, see M. Sonenscher, *Work and wages: natural law, politics and the eighteenth-century French trades*, Cambridge 1989; in general, on the factors determining remuneration, see A. Caracausi, *I giusti salari nelle manifatture della lana di Padova e Firenze (secc. XVI–XVII)*, in: *Quaderni storici* 136 (2010), 3, pp. 857–884 and Idem, *The just wage in Early Modern Italy. A reflection on Zacchia's De Salario seu mercede operariorum*, in: *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011), 519, pp. 107–124.

16 C. Maitte, *Rémunérer et compter le travail sur les chantiers Médicis (fin xvie siècle–début xviii siècle)*, in: *Histoire & Mesure* 36 (2021) 1, pp. 3–36. See also Caracausi, *I giusti salari*, esp. pp. 875–876; Hatcher/Stephenson, *Seven Centuries*.