

Editorial

While many issues of our journal in the recent past have focused on the last two to two and a half centuries, following the unfolding of the global condition in which the interconnectedness of different societies is in the foreground, this issue takes a different perspective. It inquires into changes over the long span of seven or eight centuries, observing larger regions or individual societies initially in relative isolation from one another – keeping in mind, of course, that these societies remained continuously the same neither in their form of government, nor in their population composition, nor in their territorial extent. But for the purpose of diachronic comparison, this well-known complexity of change must be reduced to the fiction of a unity existing over time. In contrast to attempts to calculate GDP backwards for the territories of today's nation-states, this is not problematic in the case of the studies published here on the development of wages and other remunerations for labour and services, because the concern is not to fictitious national statistics before the respective territory was even filled by an integrated economy, but rather to trends and significant examples. These are only possible where there is an exceptionally good tradition of suitable documents or where new procedures make it possible to construct data series from labouriously collected material.

If we consider the large gaps we are confronted with between the selected examples, the problematic nature of some grand theories becomes even clearer. Recent global labour history has already shattered many such certainties in the last three decades, rejecting the idea of a linear (and therefore consequential) emergence of modern wage labour as well as the notion that coerced labour and free wage labour could coexist only in exceptional situations. In this way, theories that make a very clear distinction between the pre-industrial and industrial eras are also put to the test, for it is evident that there are serious differences in this respect between economic sectors and their regional manifestations.

In this context, it proves productive to use the term remuneration to refer to a considerable diversity that the term wage obviously conceals rather than allows us to see. The term remuneration addresses a diversity of forms in which work is paid – the monetary form is an important one, but by no means the only one – and also of the diversity of the yardsticks by which remuneration is measured: working time spent, quantity of product achieved, completeness of activity (for example, in the area of care work).

Remuneration, according to another thesis of this issue, also plays an important role outside of salaried employment, namely in the most diverse forms of granting food, accommodation, clothes, tax exemptions, participation in the economic success of the company, and many other forms of privileged access to resources. However, this also entails additional costs, for example if employees have to bring their own tools (i.e. purchase and maintain them) in order to be able to perform the work. With the focus on remunerations, a more complex picture of income and expenses emerges than simple lists of wages paid allow. But this more complex picture also captures more accurately the importance that the activity performed had on the livelihood and reproduction of the labour force. Where sufficient data exist to measure remunerations in their entirety, it is also possible to compare them with earnings from wage labour. The conversion is complicated, but studies that for example compare the amount of calories provided to slaves in the highly productive plantation economies with those that wage labourers could acquire for their salaries in early industrialization point to a way to relate subsistence resources.

At the same time, the contributions in this issue show the many factors that played a role in the negotiation of remunerations: Institutions such as guilds or communities, collective and individual agency, demography, gender and ethnicity, and many others.

If one follows the shift in perspective on remunerations, it may at first seem like a return to a complexity of many individual cases that seemed to have been overcome by the painstakingly established homogenized data series (primarily based on surviving payrolls). However, the arguments are more than convincing that in this way the criticism of “unreal wages” that has arisen from the extrapolation of such data series for macro theories can be countered much more effectively.

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