

BOOK REVIEWS

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<i>Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe</i>	Steven A. Epstein	Jürgen Kuczynski
<i>La fabrique des prolétaires</i>	Alain Dewerpe and Yves Gaułupeau	Christian Simon
<i>The Dilemmas of Internationalism</i>	Susan Milner	Wayne Thorpe
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EPSTEIN, STEVEN A. *Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill [etc.] 1991. vii, 307 pp. \$ 39.95.

In this book Epstein, the author of *Wills and Wealth in Medieval Genoa, 1150–1250*, tackles a much wider theme both in terms of period and contents. He examines wage labour and guilds from the late Roman Empire until the fourteenth century. He gives the following justification for the early beginning: “Several reasons point to starting in antiquity a study of medieval guilds and wage labor. Rome provides a perfect example of how several systems of labor (free, enslaved, state-coerced) could exist in harmony for a long time, and Rome certainly knew both wage labour and a guild – the *collegium*” (p. 4).

It is absolutely right in my view to begin the history of wage labour and guilds in the Western Roman Empire, even though, as Epstein shows, they then disappeared as an important social phenomenon until they reappeared in the Middle Ages. The same fate may be observed with the *coloni* with regard to the position they held from the second to the fourth centuries AD, namely as “Hörige”, as otherwise free tenants tied to the soil. They too disappeared as such towards the end of the fourth century and were transformed under Roman law into *quasi servi* or *servi terrae*, that is, from serfs tied to the soil but otherwise free into slaves.

But Epstein is wrong when he claims that the various forms of labour in Western Rome existed in harmony. Quite the contrary. At the time when wage labour and *coloni* in the form of “Hörige” flourished, the contrast between the city and its surroundings (*municipium*) working primarily with slaves and the *latifundia* working with *coloni* was particularly sharp. Just as it would be in the Middle Ages, during

which, as Epstein rightly notes, labour in the city was relatively free, quite unlike labour in the countryside.

Curious is also the chapter heading “Early Medieval Guilds in the West, ca. 450–1000”. Epstein is quite right when he states that “The best place to look for any colleges that survived is Italy, where a number of sizable towns like Milan, Naples and Rome were fortunate enough to fall for a time under Ostrogothic rule. In the period before the Lombard invasions (568) and Byzantine efforts at reconquest, the able Theodoric (493–526) created a kingdom known for its conscious efforts to preserve elements of Roman civilization” (p. 30). But is he right to speak of the Middle Ages, the feudal period, this early? Or would Epstein basically like to set the beginning of the Middle Ages around 450 with an economic structure which cannot yet be considered feudal?

It is clear, then, that Epstein’s initial observations already throw up a range of interesting problems, not least because of his general, theoretically interesting considerations in conjunction with a wealth of factual material.

To end the study in the fourteenth century seems justified, since the author, with his special knowledge and affinity for Genoa (whose conditions play a special role in this book), would otherwise have had to leave the Middle Ages. For at the end of the fourteenth century conditions in Northern Italy – in Genoa as well as Venice and above all in Florence – are no longer feudal and medieval but capitalist.

After an introduction which provides an excellent overview, Epstein deals with his theme in five chapters: (i) Roman and Early Medieval Guilds, (ii) Early Craft and Professional Guilds, (iii) Internal Organization of Guilds and the Labor Market, (iv) Guilds and Labor in the Wide World, and (v) Labor and Guilds in Crisis – The Fourteenth Century. These are followed by a “Conclusion”. This last heading is the only inappropriate one in the volume, since it contains, to the delight of the reader, a wealth of suggestions for further study. So it is both a conclusion and a new beginning. Let us hope that Epstein will provide this shortly.

Ostensibly Epstein’s main theme is the formation of the guilds. But in fact he is mainly concerned with the reappearance of wage labour. “Roman law on contracts was sophisticated, and the rebirth of wage labor in the eleventh and twelfth centuries took place at a time when people also revered the idea of contract [. . .] The triumph of wage labor meant the demise of slavery in medieval Europe. In this regard the cities became islands of personal freedom, even as they also harbored neighborhoods of extremely poor people working at dismal subsistence wages” (p. 257). Geographically the book covers England, France and northern Italy, while the Rhineland and the Low Countries receive less attention; a large part of Germany is ignored altogether.

Epstein has a special gift of providing extensive surveys and highly interesting, by no means only characteristic, individual facts. As early as the introduction he cannot desist – to our delight – from imparting astonishing facts. He tells the following story: “The master dyers of Tournai in 1356 decided to pay their journeymen wages of four sous four pence on Monday, three sous eight pence on Tuesday, and two sous eight pence a day for the rest of the workweek. Practical experience, in 1356 or today, suggests that this was a marvelous idea, a way to counteract absenteeism on Monday, one of the absolute constants of labor history. Some nimble mind in Tournai actually thought to carry the premium over to Tuesday as well. Whether

this wage scale was simply too clever, cumbersome, or caused problems of its own (perhaps on Wednesday), as far as I know, it was unique to Tournai, and I have found elsewhere only uniformity of wages for workdays" (p. 8f.).

And in the conclusion he recounts the following: "On 1 March 1348, a Genoese woman named Castella placed her nephew Jacobo as an apprentice with Andrea the tailor. In this case the master promised to pay his apprentice L 16 over the five-year term according to a sliding scale that began at L 2 a year and finished at L 5. What makes this ordinary contract remarkable is that it occurred at the same time that the bubonic plague was devastating Genoa. [. . .] Life contracted to its basics in these first grim weeks of the plague. Yet even then, work continued, and the changes in the ways people agreed to work, something new in the past three centuries, remained essentially even in the worst of times" (p. 261).

A shortcoming in my view is the small number of statistical tables, in particular on wages. The list of tables is paltry indeed: Wages of London carpenters per day; Length of apprenticeship, thirteenth century; Annual income of Genoese journeymen and -women in selected trades, 1230–1256; London admission to freedom by apprenticeship, 1309–1312; London admission to freedom by redemption, 1309–1312; and Daily wage rates of building craftsmen in southern England, 1264–1350. There is room for improvement here in a second edition.

Very questionable seems to me Epstein's view that the craftsmen as employers of wage labourers should be ranked below the merchants in social terms. That certainly applies to Genoa, Epstein's special field, and certainly also to the Hansa cities or Nuremberg, the main trading centre between northern and southern Europe. But in many other cities the merchants were subordinate to the great guild masters.

Epstein's book is valuable not only because of the wealth of factual material it contains, but also because of its wealth of ideas. And above all: the reader reads it with joy and feels involved in the history of the period under discussion.

Jürgen Kuczynski

DEWERPE, ALAIN [et] YVES GAULUPEAU. *La fabrique des prolétaires. Les ouvriers de la manufacture d'Oberkampf à Jouy-en-Josas (1760–1815)*. Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure, n.p. [Paris] 1990. 222 pp. Ill. F.fr. 150.00.

This study on the most famous manufacturer of printed textiles in France has been long awaited. Results published by the authors, together with Serge Chassagne, back in 1976, indicated that useful conclusions could be drawn from analysis of the workforce and that the authors had suggested an interesting line of questioning. This new book fulfils the expectations raised by the former study, though the results can no longer claim to be absolutely innovative. It has profited from the support given the authors by Serge Chassagne, the well-known authority on the history of the French cotton industry. Their achievement lies in two particular areas: (a) the empirical assembly of material concerning the workforce of one specific well-documented firm; (b) the discussion of theories on the rise of the proletariat in the early "first" Industrial Revolution.