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Vittorio Klostermann
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Audrey Dauchy
Laila Scheuch
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Arbeit und Familie in
Nordwesteuropa
im Spätmittelalter und
in der Frühen Neuzeit

Travail et famille en
Europe du Nord-Ouest
au bas Moyen Âge
et à l'époque moderne



Vittorio Klostermann
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Louis Le Nain, La Famille de la laitière,

Eremitage Museum (St. Petersburg), ca. 1640

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I.

Historiographie und Konzepte
Historiographie et concepts

Work and Family in Medieval and Early Modern Northwest Europe – Historiographical Developments

1. Introduction

For around the last decade, there has been a renewed interest in the history of work, be it modern or pre-modern, across Western, Southern and Northern European countries.¹ This interest seems to be stimulated, on the one hand, by contemporary social conflicts, such as the widening disparity between rich and poor, youth unemployment, or the gender pay gap, and, on the other, by the ongoing developments of present-day working life, such as digitalisation or home working. While the first of these stimuli to research concerns the question of how the individual and society are interlinked with regard to work – and therefore also raises the issue of social networks and groups like the family and kinship – the latter touches on the perceived boundaries between the ›private‹ and the ›public‹ lives of people.² In historical studies, this interest has often been formulated as research on work *and x*, exploring the interplay of work with often

- 1 These academic activities involve researchers working in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, among others. Examples of research on work and family in the modern and contemporary periods are the Dutch project *Industriousness in an Imperial Economy*, led by Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, the post graduate programme *Soziale Folgen des Wandels der Arbeitswelt in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, led by Frank Bösch, Winfried Süß, Stefan Berger and Andreas Wirsching, and the conference organised by Ingrid Artus, Judith Holland, Nadja Morgenstern, Nadja Bennewitz, Annette Keilhauer, Annette Henninger and Stefan Kerber-Clasen on *Arbeitskonflikte und Gender – aktuelle und historische Perspektiven* (Nürnberg). NEDERVEEN MEERKERK (2013–2017); BÖSCH et al. (2016–2019); ARTUS et al. (2019). Projects and publications on pre-modern history will be discussed in the text and corresponding footnotes below.
- 2 Many of the historians who have recently dealt with the history of work and family in the broadest sense cite present developments as a motivation, cf. for

seemingly distinct parts of life, such as leisure or freedom, or various media, like film or literature.³

One of these areas of interplay that has lately been vigorously taken up (again) is work and gender in the early modern period, sometimes more specifically women and work.⁴ Historians in various European countries (as well as in joint European efforts) addressing work and family⁵ as an explicit research interest or investigating a topic closely related to it have been and are revisiting the subject from new perspectives and methodological angles.⁶ In the late 1980s, scholars

instance SARTI et al. (2018), 1; KOCKA (2010), 1 and the ›rationale‹ of the *Forms of Labour*-project (WHITTLE (2019–2024)). On the distinction between private and public, see OPITZ-BELAKHAL (2010), 98–101; with particular regard to work and family: SARTI et al. (2018), 22–23.

- 3 For work and leisure, see the conference organised by Josef Ehmer and Reinhold Kreis, *Ein ungleiches Paar – Arbeit und Freizeit in den Industriegesellschaften des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*; for work and freedom the project *Forms of Labour*; for work and media the conference organised by Nicole Colin and Catherine Teissier, *Parlons travail! Entgrenzungen von Arbeit und ihre Darstellung*. EHMER/KREIS (2016); WHITTLE (2019–2024); COLIN/TEISSIER (2020).
- 4 At least eight projects and one network have dealt with gender and/or women and work in different European countries in the last two decades. See the British ERC project *Forms of Labour: Gender, Freedom and Work in the Preindustrial Economy*, led by Jane Whittle; her previous project *Women's Work in Rural England, 1500–1700: A New Methodological Approach*; the network *Producing Change: Gender and Work in Early Modern Europe*, which brings together partners from the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Sweden and the Netherlands, led by Alexandra Shepard; the three consecutive *Gender and Work* projects under the leadership of Maria Ågren; the project *Women's Work in the Early Modern Northern Netherlands, c. 1500–1850*, led by Ariadne Schmidt; the collaborative project *Travail en famille, travail non rémunéré. Formes et acteurs du travail domestique productif en Europe (XV^e–XXI^e siècle)*, led by Anna Bellavitis, Manuela Martini and Raffaella Sarti, and the collaborative project *Garzoni: Apprenticeship, Work, Society*, under the leadership of Frédéric Kaplan, Valentina Sapienza and Anna Bellavitis. The majority of these projects was carried out during the 2010s, while two of them (*Forms of Labour* and *Gender and Work 3*) are still under way. Members of *Producing Change*, moreover, are still collaborating despite the network's formal ending. WHITTLE (2019–2024); WHITTLE (2015–2018); SHEPARD (2015–2018); ÅGREN (2010–2014); ÅGREN (2017–2021); ÅGREN (2020–2029); SCHMIDT (2003–2009); BELLAVITIS et al. (2012–2016); KAPLAN, F. et al. (2015–2017).
- 5 The term ›family‹ only entered the German language at the beginning of the 18th century. Beforehand, the common term for denoting the married couple, its children, but also its servants, was *Haus*. Not all European languages share this history of the term ›family‹, however, including the French language. See GESTRICH/BERGER (2005–2012), par. 2. Therefore, ›family‹ is used in the following European approach as an analytic term for describing the nuclear family and any other relatives possibly living in the same household.
- 6 For an explicit interest, see the projects *Garzoni* and *Travail en famille*. KAPLAN, F. et al. (2015–2017); BELLAVITIS et al. (2012–2016).

influenced by modern history frequently saw ›work and family‹ as a dichotomy, implying a hierarchical relation between men and women, in which women were in the inferior position. While ›work‹ was identified with the – paid and socially valued – occupation of men in the ›public sphere‹ outside the household, ›family‹ was the – unpaid and socially little valued – occupation of women in the ›private sphere‹ of the household.⁷ Our intention in this volume is to counter such assumptions by arguing that pre-modern European societies did not share the narrow understanding of work as referring only to paid work (*Erwerbsarbeit*) that has developed since the late 18th century. In this, we profit from the work of women’s and gender historians who have challenged this dichotomy since the 1970s. Based on their insights, this volume is able to put the *interplay* between these two notions and practices centre-stage.⁸ The contributions testify to the major role of women’s work in pre-industrial economies, whether they were paid directly, as self-employed workers, or indirectly, when their work in collaboration with their husbands was part of the household economy.

Social reproduction is another one of the topics of research stimulated by current concerns, with recent studies undermining the long-standing assumption that it was based exclusively on the transmission of patrimony to the eldest son. In fact, it has become apparent that the younger children’s interests were not necessarily sacrificed for the benefit of their older siblings, regardless of the inheritance model applied locally.⁹ Moreover, highlighting the social mobility made possible by work has helped to relativise the importance of inheritance for career paths.¹⁰ Finally, the role of collateral relatives and the social environment

7 BOCK (1991), 46–49.

8 For the early modern understanding of work and the development from a broad to a narrow concept of work in the late 18th and 19th centuries, see KOCKA (2010), 8–9; SARTI et al. (2018), 2 and 15–22. Merry Wiesner-Hanks, in contrast, argues that the narrow understanding of work began already in the early modern period. She sees this period »as a time when the meaning of work changed because of the rise of capitalism from a medieval notion of work as all tasks that contributed to a family’s sustenance to work as participation in the market economy and particularly in production«. WIESNER-HANKS (2008), 105. For criticisms of Merry Wiesner-Hanks’ argument in more recent research, see the discussion of the decline thesis below. Regarding the fruits of the academic challenges to the dichotomy of work and family, see, for instance, Raffaella Sarti, Anna Bellavitis and Manuela Martini, who state that nowadays there is a »large consensus on the need for such a revision and ›complexification‹ of that very notion [i. e. work]« and, similarly, Jürgen Kocka, who notes that the concept of work as *Erwerbsarbeit* is being challenged and in the process of being modified. SARTI et al. (2018), 2; KOCKA (2010), 10–11.

9 BOUDJAABA (2014), 13.

10 MORICEAU (1993); BOUDJAABA (2014). On the issue of social mobility, see also: BELLAVITIS et al. (eds.) (2009); VIRET (2013), 311–325.

in access to work beyond the nuclear family should not be neglected.¹¹ The fact remains, however, that the fundamentally unequal, hierarchical and patriarchal structures of Ancien Régime societies favoured certain social backgrounds with regard to professional careers or, on the contrary, trapped people in undervalued or marginal status.

The articles gathered here consider the relationship between work and the family in a long-term perspective, from the 13th century to the beginning of the 19th century, using a multi-normative approach that draws on legal history as well as on social, cultural and religious history. They benefit from, and contribute to, the recent research on the gendered structures of work and social reproduction.

2. Gender and Work, Women and Work

2.1 Current Trends in European Research

Despite obvious differences between the various European research efforts, such as in the regions and time periods studied, they also show striking similarities that hint at a similarly perceived need for research in the area of gender, women and work. Starting from the observation that earlier studies focussed too much on the contribution of men, many of the projects aim to *integrate* – instead of merely ›adding‹ – women into the history of work in order to be able to recognise their function in the development of the economy in pre-modern Europe.¹² The common question is what people, especially women, *did* as work, in the sense of what kind of everyday activities they engaged in to sustain themselves (and their families), whether paid and/or unpaid work, work in- and/or outside the household, market- or non-market-related work.¹³ In many of the projects, research objectives are widened to include other members of the household, for instance children, servants or apprentices, and how their work related to each other.¹⁴ The volume at hand reveals a broad panoply of female tasks – from financial transactions, textile-related work of all kinds, adminis-

11 KAPLAN, S. L. (1993), 454–455; CAVALLO (2007), 191–193, 196–197.

12 See, for instance, WHITTLE (2019–2024); SHEPARD (2015–2018); cf. SCHMIDT (2003–2009).

13 See WHITTLE (2015–2018); ÅGREN (2010–2014); ÅGREN (2017–2021); SARTI et al. (2018), esp. 3–4.

14 E. g. *Travail en famille* asked explicitly for work carried out in the household by all its members, were they part of the core family, servants or apprentices. *Forms of Labour* is interested in ›women's work and the work of servants‹, albeit defining the latter quite narrowly as referring only to ›live-in workers employed on long-term contracts«. The project *Garzoni* even focused on apprentices ›in

tration or counselling to fortune telling, begging and stealing – undertaken in diverse family settings, including the married couple, widowhood, or family networks.

Regarding methodological aspects, the European projects display an interest in wider timeframes of at least two to three centuries, if not several epochs, and thus in the changes that occurred over longer periods – an approach shared by the present volume.¹⁵ The wider framework of time is frequently complemented by the wish to be able to compare findings between different geographical areas.¹⁶ In terms of source material, various types of court records play a major role.¹⁷ These and other source categories, such as administrative records, are often studied using an integrated approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Some of the projects have built up digital infrastructures in the form of databases that can be used by other researchers as well.¹⁸ The contributors to this volume also analyse their French, Italian, German and Swiss case studies using a range of methodologies, including normative, sociological, microhistorical and biographical ones, to yield results from court records, guild regulations, private marital correspondence, legislative sources, customary law, doctrinal writings, civil status records and municipal registers.

relation with family and gender roles«. The second *Gender and Work* project asks »[w]hat [...] people's repertoires of work practices [were] on the level of the household« as well as »outside the household, e.g. in the service and labour markets«. BELLAVITIS et al. (2012–2016); KAPLAN, F. et al. (2015–2017); ÅGREN (2017–2021). See also the contribution of the Working Group *Labour and Family Economy*, led by Manuela Martini and Cristina Borderías, to the Fourth Conference of the European Labour History Network (ELHN): »In other people's households: children and youth as rural servants and live-in apprentices in the past« (organised by Maria Papathanassiou): MARTINI et al. (2021).

15 See the bibliography for the periods studied by the projects. ÅGREN (2010–2014); ÅGREN (2017–2021); BELLAVITIS (2012–2016); KAPLAN, F. et al. (2015–2017); SCHMIDT (2003–2009); WHITTLE (2015–2018); WHITTLE (2019–2024).

16 Especially the *Producing Change* network pursued this perspective. Others are *Forms of Labour* and *Travail en famille*. See SHEPARD (2015–2018); BELLAVITIS (2012–2016); WHITTLE (2019–2024).

17 WHITTLE (2015–2018); WHITTLE (2019–2024); ÅGREN (2010–2014); ÅGREN (2017–2021).

18 For the integrated methodological approach, see SCHMIDT (2003–2009); ÅGREN (2010–2014); ÅGREN (2017–2021); WHITTLE (2015–2018). Databases and other digital resources have been created in the framework of *Gender and Work 1 and 2*, *Women's Work in Rural England* and *Garzoni*. See ÅGREN (2010–2014); ÅGREN (2017–2021); WHITTLE (2015–2018); KAPLAN, F. et al. (2015–2017).

2.2 The Gendered Division of Labour and Women's Agency

Interest in the study of women's work in the Middle Ages surged in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly in Anglo-American research, with a series of studies that were brought together in various edited volumes in the late 1980s.¹⁹ While acknowledging the work done by Eileen Power and Marian K. Dale in the first half of the 20th century,²⁰ the introductory remarks of these works commented on the paucity of academic literature on the subject.²¹ The question of women's economic independence in the Middle Ages lay at the centre of these studies, which highlighted the agency that women built up within the limits of a patriarchal framework.²² Local studies also began to emerge in the late 1980s. The economic role of women and their work in the Late Middle Ages was studied for the cities of Leiden and Cologne²³ as well as for York and the county of Yorkshire.²⁴ In a synthesis published in 1990, *Opera muliebría*, David Herlihy emphasised the range of women's occupations in medieval Europe, though the textile sector clearly predominated.²⁵

A central controversy concerned the idea of a supposed medieval ›golden age‹ for women's work that was then followed by a decline during the early modern period. This so-called ›decline thesis‹ argued that women were driven out of the crafts in the early modern period and progressively restricted to the household as their ›appropriate‹ field of activity, thus preparing the way for modern bourgeois society and its division between the ›private‹ and ›public‹ spheres.²⁶ Although the pioneering character of Alice Clark's book, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, first published in 1919, is widely recognised, the decline

19 HANAWALT (ed.) (1986); BENNETT et al. (eds.) (1989).

20 BENNETT et al. (1989), 2.

21 HANAWALT (1986), VII. The remark concerns both the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

22 BENNETT et al. (1989), 1.

23 HOWELL (1986).

24 GOLDBERG (1992).

25 HERLIHY (1990).

26 For the decline thesis as a research objective in itself, see WERKSTETTER (2001), 20 and GONZÁLEZ ATHENAS (2014), 9–11; SCHÖTZ (2004), 8–16. Discussions of the decline thesis have focussed on when and why the changes took place. For (very) brief summaries of the arguments, see EHMER/SAURER (2005–2012), par. 3.1.; SARTI et al. (2018), 25–26; in greater detail: WIESNER-HANKS (2008), 124–126. Key contributions of women's and gender history on the decline thesis include OGIIVIE (2003); ROPER (1989); WIESNER (1986); HOWELL (1986). For this comprehensive line of argumentation, which is emphasised here, cf. WIESNER-HANKS (2008), 127–128 and 136; VANJA (1992), 459 and 481–482; EHMER/SAURER (2005–2012), par. 3.1. For a description of the spheres, see HAUSEN (2010), 81.