5. Attitudes To Work

The importance of research on attitudes to work

Attitudes to work are an important aspect of the history of work. In addition to providing income, in kind or as money, work invests one with status, low or high. For many people work determines their position in society, and not having work – either by choice or involuntarily – in part determines an individual’s identity. One important question concerns the grounds on which we categorize work as status-enhancing or status-diminishing, as honourable or dishonourable, or as useful or not useful. Work can provide satisfaction, but it can also be numbing, sickening, and even potentially fatal. If people have a choice, why do they opt for a certain type of work? Do status or background play a role? What about the desire for autonomy? And if people are forced to work, how is that coercion legitimized? In sixteenth-century Brazil, Portuguese slave owners legitimized their owning of slaves and their own “not-working” by reference to the European medieval ranking of “those who pray”, “those who fight”, and “those who labour”. In the colony, the slave owners, who were originally traders, regarded themselves as belonging to the nobler classes who were not expected to work. Jesuit missionaries at the time argued too that it was to save their souls that slaves were being confined and forced to work, comparing the suffering of slaves with that of Christ.¹ Both of those extremely different ideologies were intended to legitimize what is the most extreme form of unfree labour.

Another important question is how different labour ideologies determined how workers viewed their own labour and how the rest of the world viewed it. Negative impressions and lack of respect from others – coupled with dissatisfaction over poor working conditions – might lead some workers to protest, as in the Zanj rebellion of black African slaves and other labourers in and around Basra at the end of the ninth century, or the various Dalit protests in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² Based on a comparison of worldwide attitudes to work from 1500 to 1650, we


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may conclude that people define themselves and have always been defined by others in terms of their work.³ Some authors claim that the adage “you are what you work” was particularly true for people dependent on wages, but is even more likely to have applied to people working under other forms of labour relations.⁴

Work, workers, and labour relations have changed over the past five centuries. Do those changes – such as the increase or decrease in the extent of wage labour – give cause to think differently about work, workers, and labour? In what follows, we shall first consider the sources and methods that one might use to investigate attitudes to work. Next, we shall provide a survey of the current literature in the field, while the final section is largely a consideration of Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly’s *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe*. The main findings of their study, which focused exclusively on Europe, will be considered in light of whether they too can be tested and substantiated for other parts of the world.

**Sources and methods**

In seeking answers to the questions just outlined concerning attitudes to work, it is important to distinguish – as Lis and Soly did – between work and workers. People often appreciate work done, or rather, they appreciate the results of work such as the harvest gathered by farmers; but the same people are less likely to appreciate the farmers themselves. The same often applies to trade and merchants.⁵ Important too is the distinction between what others thought and wrote about work and workers – something of which we know a great deal – and how workers saw themselves and their work – something of which we know much less. Often the sources researchers have at their disposal are normative texts: religious works, texts written by theologians or philosophers, enlightened thinkers, world travellers, or they might be legal texts and manuals. They tell us a lot about how influential members of the administrative, religious, and intellectual elite viewed work, though such people often had a certain ideal in mind that did not necessarily correspond to reality. They tell us little or nothing about how workers themselves regarded the work they did. To interpret normative texts properly it is important to contextualize and analyse them carefully. For Europe, Lis and Soly looked at an enormous number of texts and asked themselves, “Who says what to whom, about what, where, when and why?”⁶ We

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might also ask “How and using what words?”, because the semantics of the terms and concepts associated with work and workers can be significant.\textsuperscript{7}

In his contribution to \textit{The Joy and Pain of Work: Global Attitudes and Valuations, 1500 – 1650}, Marcel van der Linden urged scholars to look not only at normative texts and their social impact on entrepreneurs, but more importantly to look too at how the labouring poor regarded their work and labour relations.\textsuperscript{8} Van der Linden suggested that for the early modern period it is advisable to look at things like the songs people sang while working, at proverbs, and at collective fantasies of another, better, life. Christine Moll-Murata in her essay in the same volume, on work ethics and work valuation in Ming China, offers several good examples of work songs that tell us something about labour relations and how they were experienced. Hired labourers in particular complained about poor working and living conditions and the bad character of their bosses.\textsuperscript{9} Regine Mathias’s essay on work ethics in Japan, again in that same volume, offers examples that illustrate the same relationship between employer and employee.\textsuperscript{10} Shireen Moosvi describes the religious songs of a group of manual labourers in Mughal India which emphasized the dignity of their profession in the eyes of God, while they also, in passing, deprecated both Hinduism and Islam because of their caste-based constraints.\textsuperscript{11}

Sources of that type, and particularly collective fantasies of a better life, may be interpreted in multiple ways. Van der Linden, for instance, regards Cockaigne as an imaginary better world where food flies into people’s mouths without any effort needing to be expended and where nobody can be forced to work against their will. Lis and Soly on the other hand explain the popularity of that sort of story in terms of comic effect, rather than because a world in which there is no obligation to work was considered a “worthy ideal”.\textsuperscript{12} In this respect, Henk Looijesteijn’s chapter on the writings of Pieter Plockhoy offer a revealing insight into the ideal of a seventeenth-century Dutch artisan, who envisaged a community where everyone could work under reciprocal labour relations while also having enough time to pursue spi-

\textsuperscript{7} Jörn Leonhard and Willibald Steinmetz (eds), \textit{Semantiken von Arbeit: Diachrone und vergleichende Perspektiven} (Cologne, 2016).
\textsuperscript{12} Van der Linden, “Studying Attitudes to Work Worldwide”, p. 33; Lis and Soly, \textit{Worthy Efforts}, p. 551.
ritual obligations. For subsequent periods we have workers’ autobiographies, although workers seldom wrote explicitly about work and their attitudes to it.

For many parts of the world in the early modern period we have to rely for our sources on visitors from elsewhere who wrote such things as travel accounts and missionary reports. However, many of the descriptions of work and workers – and of those not working – we find in those sources are distorted by the ideas such “visitors” had of the societies they encountered in foreign lands. As van der Linden shows, many of their descriptions tell us more about the ideal of work in their own society than about the actual work practices they found, let alone about how local labourers themselves looked upon their work. We may infer something from their texts, though a degree of caution is required. Official texts, such as reports on the local situation and laws regulating work and labour relations, often show not only what workers were expected to do, but also what they actually did do, or what they failed to do. Finally, different observations drawn from different parts of the world can be used heuristically, for example to infer the almost universal deprecation among elites of manual labour in societies in which slavery was prevalent.

In addition to texts, there are other sources that allow us to infer what workers and others thought about work: Roman tombstones and epitaphs referring proudly to the professions of the deceased; signed pieces from Ancient Greece and the Mediterranean Islamic countries during the Middle Ages, as well as portraits and frescoes in studios and workshops. Besides archaeology and art history, ethnography too can provide useful material from participatory research and interviews. A good example here is the work of Gerd Spittler, who spoke with the Tuareg as they herded their

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camels and noted the semantics of words associated with work and working. Spittler was interested in identifying any age- or gender-related differences in views regarding certain tasks.\(^7\) Within the anthropology of work there is a focus too on attitudes to work, although much of that research relates to the modern period.\(^8\) For those periods and regions for which we have no easily available first-hand written sources, a combined multidisciplinary approach to different types of source is probably the best way to identify what workers themselves thought about work.

Where written records do exist but are written mainly by visitors from elsewhere, the danger of projection is considerable. Van der Linden in his article gives examples of alleged East Asian “decadence” which, it is claimed, caused the natives to be indisposable to work, and resulted in the lack of economic development. The “myth of the lazy native”, the idea among Europeans that most non-Europeans did as little work as they could, is perhaps the most widespread form of projection, and we shall say more about it later.\(^9\) The researcher should therefore be aware of this matter of projection, and of false generalization. An extremely critical approach to sources, self-reflection, and an acknowledgement of one’s own prejudices as well as due consideration of contextual explanations of observations found in sources – all those will certainly help scholars to make fruitful use of those sources.\(^10\) The “Who says what to whom, about what, where, when, and why?” questions posed by Linda and Soly will serve as a useful guide here, supplemented by the question, “How and in what words?”

In their volume *The Joy and Pain of Work*, editors Hofmeester and Moll-Murata raise a number of other questions that might give an insight into attitudes to work, workers, and labour relations. Have there been hierarchies of professions in different societies? If so, on what were they based? Who was permitted to do what sort of work? What was the division of labour relating to gender and age, to ethnic and religious affiliation, or to belonging to particular families or lineages. What

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were the roles of voluntary associations, such as guilds? How was free labour valued, and unfree labour legitimized?

**Historiography**

We have already discussed a number of studies on attitudes to work, but a systematic, albeit non-exhaustive survey is useful as a “pre-history” of the work by Lis and Soly. Their work, although admittedly only about Europe, offers a research agenda that is valuable to a global approach too. Influential studies on the concept of work in European history can be traced to Herbert Applebaum’s impressively pioneering work *The Concept of Work*, which described and analysed trends and tendencies from antiquity to the industrial age. In an earlier study, the same author had already addressed the subject of work from an anthropological perspective. The volume he edited entitled *Work in Non-Market and Transitional Societies* comprises collected essays on work organization among hunters and gatherers in pastoralist societies, among cultivators and gardeners in villages, and in cultures and societies where non-market and market-oriented work values underwent change and adaptation. The studies discuss mostly contemporary non-European cases. In his categorizations of work in non-market societies Applebaum defines work as being embedded in the total cultural fabric, with strong communal aspects that involve mutuality and reciprocal exchange. Work is intended mostly for subsistence, is not very specialized, and is task-oriented rather than time-oriented. While Applebaum treated Europe and many non-European regions and communities separately, other historians have focused on both.

The volume edited by Michel Cartier, *Le travail et ses représentations*, follows in the tradition of Maurice Godelier and has a strong anthropological and linguistic focus. The case studies there discuss extra-European communities in Oceania, Africa, and South America from the eighteenth century to the present, and the book includes an essay by the editor himself on work in ancient China. Of particular interest in this collection are the contemporary articles on rituals and work, but also the discourse analysis of eighteenth-century texts from Madagascar that focus on the various forms of labour relations, including reciprocal, tributary, and commodified

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labour relations. Similarly based on texts, but mainly literary ones, is the work of Keith Thomas, who in *The Oxford Book of Work* provides a thematically structured anthology of mainly European and especially British poetry and literature on work. In his interesting introduction Thomas describes how for a long time work was not a popular theme in poetry and literature, and how that fact relates to attitudes to work among the writing elite.

More recently Jürgen Kocka and Manfred Bierwisch have separately edited collected volumes of articles on the history of work. Both share a concern about contemporary changes in work, the decrease in the extent of wage labour and long-term commitment on the part of employers. They both link to periods when dependent wage labour was not the norm, and they look to extra-European regions too for patterns of work organization that diverged from the West European case. They do so for reasons of contrast in a situation where the West is in crisis rather than on the rise. As for the European historical experience, both still offer the standard narrative. In their introduction, Kocka and Offe stress the impact on the rise of capitalism of Christianity, the discipline imposed on urban citizens, the Protestant work ethic, and the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The non-European cases they present are from India, Japan, Malaya, Africa, and the Islamic world and mostly refer to the present. They can be understood as providing a contrast with the European, to be more precise the German, case. The intention of these volumes is to explain the current occupational crisis in Europe and to offer suggestions for “therapy”, or to propose a new orientation for the relationship between work and life. Bierwisch’s collection intends not to offer new details but to provide overviews. He looks at work from the time of European antiquity, work organization in twentieth-century industrial Russia with its rural roots, conceptual aspects of work in China from antiquity to the present, work in Islam, and offers a case study of concepts of work in a present-day African rural community.

The recent study by Jörn Leonhard and Willibald Steinmetz, *Semantiken von Arbeit*, is in line with that tradition. The prevailing history of the concept of work is no longer adequate now that so many new forms of work and non-work have emerged. Instead of taking that history as a given, Leonhard and Steinmetz follow the historical and semantic development of how work has been conceived, linking it to socio-

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31 Leonhard and Steinmetz, *Semantiken von Arbeit*. 
historical developments and to ethnographic insights specific to a particular period and place. Their collection contains a number of articles on Europe in the pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial periods, as well as one about Europe in the Middle Ages and another on the early modern period. It also includes five articles on regions outside Europe: the Iberian empires and their colonies; Africa; the Arab world; and Japan. The historical-semantic approach taken shows how many different terms for work – and thus forms of work and opinions about it – circulated, not only in post-industrial Europe and Asia where its pluriformity was growing but also in earlier periods than that as well as elsewhere in the world. That polyphony can be found in non-European regions too as sooner or later most of them came into contact with European colonizers and the attitudes to work they brought with them and to which they obliged their subjects to relate.32 Alongside the dynamics of how work was discussed, the authors identify continuity, and repeated reversion to more traditional “interpretations” of work.33

It was in their The Idea of Work in Europe from Antiquity to Modern Times that Josef Ehmer and Catharina Lis as editors first presented their view that the standard narrative – which borrows heavily from Max Weber – of linear development from a work ethic based on sixteenth-century Christian values to one rooted in capitalist culture and directed towards success remains largely unchallenged in the current literature.34 That perspective not only neglects variant views on work in earlier periods, it lacks differentiation in the linear narrative, which moreover remains excessively focused on the perspective of the “Rise of the West”.35 An important feature of the volume by Ehmer and Lis, in addition to the critical analysis of the standard narrative, is the long period it covers and the wide variety of sources used, especially to determine the attitudes of workers. Those sources include merchants’ handbooks, workers’ autobiographies, and court documents. The merchants’ handbooks reveal a strong sense of professional ethics and a professional mentality, both of which helped craft the social identity of merchants. Artisans have left us autobiographies, from which it is clear that they were often organized into guilds, each with its own rituals and regalia to demonstrate their professional pride and self-esteem. For example, from court documents relating to porters working in Milan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we discern a strong group identity and sense of pride based on a shared immigrant background and support from the political representatives of their native country, from which they had emigrated, but temporarily, in order to carry out their demanding and dirty work in Milan.36

33 Ibid., p. 42.
35 Ibid., p. 16.
36 Jaume Aurell, “Reading Renaissance Merchants’ Handbooks: Confronting Professional Ethics and Social Identity”, in: Ehmer and Lis, Idea of Work, pp. 71–90; Luca Mocarelli, “The Attitude of Mila-
Some of the criticism voiced by Ehmer and Lis and by Lis and Soly regarding the standard narrative on the discontinuity between ideas about work in antiquity and in the Middle Ages can be found too in Birgit van den Hoven’s study, *Work in Ancient and Medieval Thought*, where the ideas of ancient philosophers, medieval monks, and theologians and their concept of work, occupations, and technology are given a central role. Van den Hoven shows that there was not necessarily any real discontinuity in ideas about work such as those cherished in ancient times and those described in the Middle Ages, while the Christian appreciation of work initially applied chiefly to spiritual work. A fine addition to the studies by Ehmer and Lis and by van den Hoven is the collection of essays edited by Verena Postel, *Arbeit im Mittelalter: Vorstellungen und Wirklichkeiten*. The contributions to that volume are based on the history of the concept of work and on the semantics of Latin and Middle High German, and on legal historical and art historical approaches. Like Lis, Johannes Engels refers to the writings of a number of Greek philosophers not necessarily all of whom always viewed manual work with disdain. Kay Peter Jankrift details how the work of physicians was described by members of the profession itself and by others, with the physicians themselves emphasizing largely the human, more empathetic aspect of their profession while the outside world tended to regard what they did as the work of God, with the physicians serving merely as intermediaries.

As part of the project “A Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations 1500 – 2000” (see chapter 4.0 of the present volume), Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata edited a collection of essays – *The Joy and Pain of Work: Global Attitudes and Valuations, 1500 – 1650*. For the earliest years in the sample, 1500 and 1650, quantitative data on work were based mainly on rough estimates. A qualitative approach is needed to interpret the data properly, and an inventory of attitudes to work can help in that. In addition to the essays already mentioned, the collection includes contributions examining labour ideologies and women in the Northern Netherlands, attitudes to work and fair wages in Italy, and religious aspects of labour ethics in Russia. Though some of the case studies relate to Europe, others are drawn from other parts of the world, namely the Arab-Islamic world, Ming China, Tokugawa Japan, Mughal India, Portuguese America, and the Colonial Andes.

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In almost all the regions described, for the period 1500 to 1650 we can see the effects of an expanding global market economy and as a consequence shifts towards commodified labour. In some areas wage labour became more extensive, in others reciprocal labour was transformed into slave labour. In all cases the changes led to debates and action. To the extent the sources allow, one may conclude that – if at all possible – workers themselves made choices. Tributary workers in Potosí performed heavy and burdensome work in the silver mines as “free” wage labour in order to buy off their tribute. Normative texts, both religious and “secular”, have been found for all regions, and usually such texts, many of them written in response to socio-economic and political changes, depict an ideal rather than the actual situation. Almost everywhere one can find texts that say something about labour – and wage labour – done by women. Many of those texts are worded disapprovingly but, as the articles by Ariadne Schmidt and Karin Hofmeester show, the paid work performed by women was valued, as long as it was neither too publicly visible nor carried out in a public space frequented by men. That kind of text reveals to us that women did actually perform paid work – in addition to all the unpaid work they were obliged to do. Moreover, almost every society had a hierarchy of occupations which, although in practice it could be interpreted in various ways and was constantly changing, nonetheless determined attitudes to work.

The idea of work in Europe

The most remarkable recent study in the field of attitudes to work is undoubtedly that by Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe, to which we have already made many references. The main question in their book is “which population groups in pre-industrial Europe defined which efforts as work, and which they did not, how these activities were valorized, and in what measure those performing them were appreciated”. Lis and Soly’s work is based on an impressive list of primary and secondary sources meticulously analysed and above all contextualized, on the basis of “Who says what to whom, about what, where, when and why?” As a result of their robust and critical approach

the standard narrative concerning the development of a work ethic in Europe has had to be rejected once and for all. Their study shows that there is no major difference between the work ethic of Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, and the early Middle Ages; the prevailing norm of work as important and necessary was ubiquitous. However, for a philosopher-scientist like Aristotle and other members of the elite the possibility of a broader-based democracy with the threat that it would undermine their position was cause to express their disdain of workers who were dependent for their income on others. Because of their dependence, workers lost their moral integrity and were therefore unsuitable for citizenship and political influence. For both the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages Lis and Soly argue that similar expressions of disdain for work did not reflect a generally accepted view of work but rather informed the defensive mechanisms of members of the elite towards the nascent middle groups. Moreover, within Western Christianity no single continuous linear development can be observed of a work ethic that would have enabled the emergence of a prosperous, capitalist Western Europe through monasticism, urban expansion, humanism, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. Lis and Soly show in minute detail how many different views concerning the nature of work co-existed within Christianity. At the same time, they also show that there was in fact nothing new in the ideas of Luther and Calvin, paralleling this polyphony, that work is a calling from God and that everyone must work in their God-given vocations. It is important to scrutinize the Weber narrative critically because it was projected not only onto modern Europe but onto earlier periods too, as Lis and Soly demonstrate with reference to the work of Moses Finley. Moreover, Finley’s characterization of the ancient economy again plays a role in the interpretation of economic developments in the Islamic world in the Middle Ages. In assessing work ethics in India too Weber’s thesis plays a role, as the work of Shashi Bhushan Upadhay shows.

Lis and Soly’s approach is highly effective and worth adopting, as evidenced by the various review articles in a special debates section devoted to Worthy Efforts. Their premise is that “changes in social positions and sets of relations brought on recurrent debates and polemics about work and workers”. It was the aforesaid defensive mechanisms to counter the emergence of social middle groups (artisans, merchants, but also intellectuals) “demanding permanent space to manoeuvre, intending to distinguish themselves, and having every interest in basing status on achievement or merit” that gave rise to debates about what value should be ascribed

43 Ibid., pp. 33–34.
44 Ibid., pp. 148–152.
46 Shatzmiller, Labour in the Medieval Islamic World, p. 401.
49 Lis and Soly, Worthy Efforts, p. 6.
to work and workers.\textsuperscript{50} From the late Middle Ages the increase in the number of individuals wholly or partly dependent on wage labour and the corresponding geographic and social mobility of workers, both upwards and downwards, confused both the elite and some of the middle groups.\textsuperscript{51} For the medieval and early modern periods Lis and Soly focus on three occupational groups: farmers, merchants, and artisans. They examine both the attitudes of others to those workers and their work, and – as far as possible – the attitudes of the workers themselves. For farmers, that is much more difficult than for merchants and craftsmen, who, as we saw earlier, expressed pride in their profession in a number of different ways. Further, Lis and Soly devote by far the longest chapter of their book to a single type of labour relation, namely wage work. Wage workers could, of course, be found among peasants and artisans, so there is some overlap in their chapters; but their view is that it was wage labour that led to such major debates about work, and so their approach can be justified. From the perspective of a global history of work it is unfortunate that they ignore other forms of labour relations, but one cannot hope to cover everything in a single book.\textsuperscript{52} They also put forward two important propositions, both of which say something about the rest of the world. The first is that the imperative to work hard can be found not only in pre-industrial Europe; it can be found in religions, philosophies, and cultural traditions all over the world. It was only pre-industrial Europe that saw the polyphony of “co-existence of different criteria for qualifying activities as worthy efforts”.\textsuperscript{53} Their second proposition is that “the process of proletarianization in many parts of Europe between the eleventh-twelfth centuries and the mid-nineteenth century influenced attitudes towards work and workers more deeply than any other social change, also more deeply than the rise of new religious doctrines, the introduction of new ideas about knowledge/science, or the emergence of new schools of thought”. It was this proletarianization, a “gradual but continuous and ultimately massive process that distinguished late-medieval and early-modern Europe both from Classical Antiquity and from other parts of the world”.\textsuperscript{54} We might hold reservations about both propositions. We see, or rather hear, similar polyphony in other parts of the world too, even if the voices are not always as audible nor distinct. However, just as in Europe “the power of the messenger set the volume of the megaphone”,\textsuperscript{55} so it did elsewhere in the world. Furthermore,

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 561.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 568.
\textsuperscript{52} On slavery, see, for example, Jan Lucassen, “Worthy and Unworthy Efforts: Europe as a Comparative Unit”, \textit{TSEG / The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History}, 11:1 (2014), pp. 117–126.
\textsuperscript{54} Lis and Soly, \textit{Worthy Efforts}, p. 567.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 556.
from very early on several parts of Asia were characterized by large population
groups active in commercialized agriculture and manufacturing, as we shall see
below. The interesting question, then, is whether in those regions too the growing
prevalence of wage labour led to increased debate on attitudes to work. Moreover,
do we see defensive mechanisms being used there too by elites and middle groups
attempting to contain the mobility of new groups, for example by drawing up labour
laws? The elites wanted to maintain social order while at the same time ensuring that
labour was cheap. In order to force workers to perform wage labour the elites were
prompted to categorize as “idle” those who combined different forms of labour in an
effort to keep their heads above water. In regions where instead of wage labour
other, more unfree forms of labour were the result of the transition to commodified
production, the question arises as to whether that transition too stimulated debate.
In both cases, the question of what workers thought about their work and labour re-
lations is highly relevant. In what follows we shall look in more detail at attitudes to
work in the Islamic world, then briefly discuss developments in several parts of Asia
and Africa. Not all the questions set out above can be addressed in this brief discus-
sion, but the research agenda will perhaps be broadened slightly as a result.

The idea of work in the Islamic world, Asia
and Africa

Like Christianity, Islam ascribes no abstract social significance to work. How work
is valued depends on the tasks fulfilled by an individual or group for the community
of believers. At several points in the Koran, prayer and work are said to be equally
important. Individuals have an obligation to use the tools and talents given them by
God to support themselves and, where possible, further the well-being of the Muslim
community. Those able to work should work; begging is reprehensible if there is no
immediate need. Alongside strictly religious texts there are also the medieval Is-
lamic writings on the subject of work by religious and social thinkers, men of letters,
and philosophers. Even in a “limited region” such as the Islamic lands of the Med-
terranean and a “limited period” such as the Middle Ages, one finds differences in
opinions, and especially shifts in them. In her Labour in the Medieval Islamic World,
Maya Shatzmiller includes a chapter on concepts of work that can serve as a useful
introduction to the polyphony of the Islamic world, but that can also be qualified on

56 Ibid., p. 440.
57 Rudiger Klein, “Arbeit und Arbeiteridentitäten in Islamischen Gesellschaften”, in: Kocka and
Offe, Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit, pp. 163–174, 165.
59 Reinhard Schulze, “Arbeit als Problem der arabischen Sozialgeschichte”, in: Leonhard and Stein-
metz, Semantiken von Arbeit, pp. 191–208, makes an impassioned plea for the contextualization of
the concept of “work” in socio-historical processes within Islamic societies.
the basis of subsequent literature and in particular in light of the questions posed by Lis and Soly. Shatzmiller describes various texts written by urban intellectuals from the eighth century onwards in which are expressed respect for commerce and contempt for manual labour. In the literature, one reason given for the high status attributed to trade is that Muhammad was originally a merchant, and that his wife enjoyed a highly successful mercantile career herself. It was also partly a reflection of the context within which Islam emerged: the region prospered owing to international trade. The aversion to manual labour is more difficult to explain, and can probably be attributed to the pre-Islamic beliefs of Arab Bedouin and other, sedentary, populations. Influenced by the Islamic conquests of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, a link was then established between manual labour and the ethnic background of workers, since it was often non-Arabs who did the work. Moreover, black slaves from Africa were recruited for lower manual occupations, while white slaves, later manumitted, were conscripted into the army. All this did nothing to raise the status of manual labour in the eyes of the Arabs.

With the economy growing and both agriculture and manufacturing becoming increasingly commercialized, commerce flourished in the ninth century, and therefore so too did cities such as Baghdad and Basra. These developments led to debates concerning the position of manual labour, and the debates also found their way into the literature. Al-Jāḥīz was an eighth-century writer, philosopher, and theologian who wrote on diverse subjects and was the first to enrich the literature with humour. One element of this new genre was “compositions about tradesmen”, in which representatives of various professions played a specific role, as if in a kind of play. More works in the same genre appeared, and they continued to be popular for centuries. Shatzmiller argues that this new genre ridiculed the lives of manual workers and depicted their behaviour as offensive, ridiculous, and repulsive. If we apply the questions posed by Lis and Soly to al-Jāḥīz and his work – “Who says what to whom, about what, where, when and why?” – it becomes apparent that the reality was more complex. Although we have little information about al-Jāḥīz’s background, we do know that he was of humble origin and spent his childhood among Basra’s craftsmen and market traders, so presumably he earned a living from that type of work. Moreover – as one of his biographers claims – during his studies in philosophy

61 Ibid., p. 365.
64 Shatzmiller, Labour in the Medieval Islamic World, p. 327.
65 Sadan, “Kings and Craftsmen II”, p. 93, note 142, gives a summary of this literature.
and theology al-Jāḥīẓ had learned that he should no longer “despise those who appear lowly”.  

⁶⁷ His writings show that he assumed each individual is automatically “biased in favour of his own type of work and role in society”. At the same time, his acceptance of the differences in professions and their corresponding status was consistent with his desire to preserve the existing social order.  

⁶⁸ In his “On the Crafts of the Masters” (*Risāla fi ṣīnāt al-quwwād*) al-Jāḥīẓ humorously juxtaposed the world and language of educated upper-class Arabs with the world and language of tradesmen. The latter are instructed to draw up an account, in their own way, for the caliph and his entourage of a battle between two parties. This leads to hilarious monologues, in which each representative of a profession (a physician, tailor, farmer, baker, schoolmaster, keeper of a Turkish bath, sweeper, wine merchant, cook, and manservant) is required to describe in terms that would be used by their own profession the place where the battle had been fought, the timeframe, and the weapons employed.  

⁶⁹ Charles Pellat claims that the document should be interpreted as a warning against too one-sided an education, and a plea for a general education. The parody ends as follows: (Caliph) al-Mu'tasim “laughed heartily; then he sent for his children's tutor and instructed him to teach them all branches of knowledge”.  

⁷⁰ But there is more. After describing the battle, the representatives of each profession were required to recite a poem in which two lovers part.  

⁷¹ To express the pain of separation, some tradesmen used very colourful words: the doctor refers to diarrhoea, the keeper of the Turkish bath to depilatory paste.  

⁷² It is not just who says what to whom, about what, where, and why that are important questions, “how and in what words” also yields some interesting insights. The words used to express love are terms derived from classical Arabic, while the “occupation-related words” used to express pain are often vulgar and non-Arabic in origin.  

⁷³ The non-Arabic background of the tradesmen in the work of al-Jāḥīẓ, as expressed in their language, is consistent to some extent with the reality described above. The ninth century was not only the century of urbanization but also of incorporation, and especially of the integration of large groups of non-Arabs into Islamic-controlled territories.  

⁷⁴ Was this description a way to maintain the existing social order? Or to confront elite readers with their own preconceptions?

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⁶⁷ Sadan, “Kings and Craftsmen II”, p. 92.  
⁷¹ Pellat does not reproduce this part of the text in his book. For the text, see Joseph Sadan, “Kings and Craftsmen, a Pattern of Contrasts: On the History of a Medieval Arabic Humoristic Form (Part I)”, *Studia Islamica*, 56 (1982), pp. 5–49, at 13, note 7.  
Real debates about work and non-work emerged after groups within Sufi circles began to reject all worldly possessions and all activities that would lead to economic gain. We know of this Zuhd movement mainly from the writings of those opposed to it, including the Ḥanbalites, a school of Sunni law which was of especially traditionalist orientation during the period.\textsuperscript{75} Abū Bakr al-Khallal was a leading Ḥanbalite scholar, and in the tenth century he wrote a “Call to engage in commerce, in production, in labour, and to reject those who call for indifference in forsaking of labour”.\textsuperscript{76} It states \textit{inter alia} that there is no difference between commerce and manual labour. Other religious and intellectual circles too began to re-evaluate manual labour. In a late tenth- or eleventh-century “encyclopaedia” written by an ascetic religious and political community called the “Brethren of Purity” (Eḵwān al-Ṣafā) there is an entry on craftsmanship and a hierarchy of occupations based, in part, on their “usefulness” to society. Weaving, agriculture, and building are at the top. The text also examines the various work processes.\textsuperscript{77} Finally, reference should be made to \textit{Muqadimma}, the work of the historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldūn, written in 1377 in the Maghreb. He also compiled different occupational hierarchies based on social utility, and they closely resemble that of the Brethren of Purity. New, however, is Khaldūn’s Adam Smith-like appreciation of wage work. “But human labour is necessary for every profit and capital accumulation ... the capital a person earns and acquires, if resulting from a craft is the value realized from his labour”.\textsuperscript{78} Moreover, from the terms used by Ibn Khaldūn we can discern his appreciation of “creative work”, which was greater than his appreciation of “practical work”: for “creative work” a plan, a design, was required and knowledge was necessary; that was not the case for practical work.\textsuperscript{79}

This brief overview of Islamic views on work in the Middle Ages shows a clear polyphony, which could be extended to the early modern and modern periods in which “guilds” (\textit{asnāf})\textsuperscript{80} played an important role. Perhaps too we could say more about how workers saw their work – apart from the fact that we know that even in the early Middle Ages craftsmen signed their work\textsuperscript{81} – up to and including the nineteenth century when efforts were made to develop a new “Islamic work ethic” in the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{82} Let us now turn our gaze to Asia.

\textsuperscript{75} http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hanbalite-madhab.
\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in Shatzmiller, \textit{Labour in the Medieval Islamic World}, p. 377.
\textsuperscript{78} Quoted in Shatzmiller, \textit{Labour in the Medieval Islamic World}, p. 395.
\textsuperscript{79} For the wording used by Ibn Khaldūn, see Schulze, “Arbeit als Problem”, pp. 199 and 202–203.
\textsuperscript{80} For the debates on the role of guilds, see Klein, “Arbeit und Arbeiteridentitäten”, pp. 166–168; Schulze, “Arbeit als Problem”, pp. 203–204.
\textsuperscript{81} Dijkman, “Worthy Efforts in the Medieval Economy”, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{82} Melis Hafez, “The Lazy, the Idle, the Industrious: Discourse and Practice of Work and Productivity in Late Ottoman Society” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 2012).
In late Ming China agriculture and manufacturing were being commercialized on a considerable scale. In the cities, where wage labour had been a feature since 1000, wage labour continued to expand while a process of urbanization took place at the expense of rural areas in which reciprocal and tributary labour was transformed into commodified labour. This led to defensive texts by members of the Confucian elite, who emphasized the traditional subdivision into scholar/officials and farmers (the roots of society) on the one hand and merchants and artisans (the branches) on the other. However, several other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Confucian thinkers took the view that the occupational groups were all equally fundamental and important. In some Confucian writings we can even detect a slight irony in relation to the traditional hierarchy, probably because by then this ideal situation had long succumbed to reality. One particular case study on the attitudes of the late Ming elite compared with those of courtesans shows even more clearly that the subject of work as “worthy efforts” was debated in Confucian circles during this period, and that attitudes were changing owing to a blurring of social strata. The courtesans operated within elite circles and were often indistinguishable from women from the upper or gentry class. Courtesans’ skills in music, poetry, and painting became so valued that even the upper classes came to regard them as a cultural ideal.

In Tokugawa Japan (1600–1868) the feudal system was abolished, leaving agriculture restructured and commercialized based on labour-intensive cultivation methods in which the entire household, including women, played a role. Cities grew, and they too saw an increase in commercialized labour. The traditional labour relations – serfdom, lifelong service, and corvée labour – disappeared to some extent as a result, a development the shogunate would have preferred to stifle. A wide range of measures designed to constrain the mobility of wage labourers were put into effect, but in practice they failed. Some neo-Confucian scholars approved of the new developments; others did not. In Japan, just as in early modern Europe, there was significant fear of vagrants – de facto migrant wage labourers on short-term contracts. The shogunate therefore switched to actively disseminating among workers a specific work ethic based on the neo-Confucian concept of shokubun: “one’s occupation or

86 See also Gareth Austin and Kaoru Sugihara (eds), Labour-Intensive Industrialization in Global History (London, 2013), and the role of work discipline.
trade (shoku), fulfilling an allotted part (bun) in society”. Self-cultivation was encouraged, but everyone had their own role in society and there had to be mutual respect among the different status groups. The doctrine was widely disseminated by the authorities, but was it also internalized? Satirical literature of the period ridicules unreliable, lazy, gossiping servants. But was it amusing because it ran counter to Confucian ideals? Or was it just what you see when workers are on short-term contracts, and bonds to their masters become looser?

In India in the seventeenth century wage labour developed on a large scale as a result of the commercialization of agriculture and manufacturing. In analysing attitudes to that type of labour relation, the specific situation of the caste system must be considered. Since ancient times India had developed a hereditary hierarchical system in which one’s origin in a particular community, or jati, was linked to a certain occupation, and ritual degradation of certain kinds of work and contempt for manual work in general played a role. Work deemed impure was performed by untouchables, or Dalits. In rural communities, members of the jatis were required to render services to the dominant castes, with a plot of land, a share of the grain harvest, or sometimes cash being given in exchange for those services. In practice, not every caste was strictly bound by the occupation assigned to it, and vertical social mobility did occur. For some groups, the early development of wage labour brought an end to labour relations based strictly on the community or village. There was even a term for the wage labourer: “cooler”. Under subsequent colonial rule the word came to mean an unfree labourer, but in eighteenth-century Madras it was applied to a free wage labourer. As such, the position of “cooler” and the term associated with it were valued, as is suggested by the statement “he was a cooler, and no one’s servant”.

Colonialism did cause major shifts in the role of the caste system and its relationship with wage labour, and the coupling of caste to occupation became much more inflexible than had hitherto been the case. Moreover, the British master and servant law was implemented, which, as in England, greatly limited the mobility of wage labour and endeavoured to ensure a stable supply of cheap labour. In rural areas the

88 Ibid., pp. 238–239.
89 Ibid., p. 241.
91 Ibid., pp. 159–160. While in theory Muslims were not part of the caste system, they too adopted the idea of a hierarchical framework which related occupation to birth. Moosvi, “The World of Labour in Mughal India”, p. 253.
93 Ahuja, “Geschichte der Arbeit”, p. 125.
94 Ibid., p. 126, and Douglas Hay and Paul Craven (eds), Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955 (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).
colonial administration allied itself with the dominant class, causing the Dalits there to resume their servant-like roles, while in the cities they could become wage labourers. Untouchables too found work, in the mining industry; it was hard and dangerous but it was wage labour nonetheless. They glorified their new role in their work songs, and described it in their stories as a form of liberation.

Labour laws were one way to limit the mobility of wage labour. Another was to label those workers who had a multiform subsistence base as “idle”, and then “force” them to work. This consciously or unconsciously ignoring of work is reflected in the myth of the lazy native. As Norani Othman for Malaysia and S.H. Alatas for Malaysia, the Philippines, and Java have shown, various traders, travellers, and colonial administrators from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries regarded Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese as lazy. Especially for the nineteenth century, Alatas explains that designation with reference to the colonial context. Malays were not wage labourers and therefore did not fit into the strict colonial definition of work. That they fished, grew rice, sold fruit, and made mats was not registered as work. Moreover, they refused to grow cash crops and to work on plantations. This demonstrates therefore not only the colonial attitude to the work done by the local population, but also the attitude of the population to the work the colonial ruler tried to impose on them.

For West Africa, Klas Rönnbäck has analysed a large number of travel accounts to explore the context of the “myth of the lazy native”. Like many of the scholars from whose work he quotes he takes the view that this myth was used to justify slavery and other forms of unfree labour. He shows on what the stereotype was based: ideas about idleness that were imported from Europe, the idea that Africans were satisfied with very little, and that they could easily live off the land. Such claims failed to perceive the seasonality of certain types of work and the difficult and demanding agricultural work performed by women. However, Rönnbäck also found references to industriousness. Curiously, any such reference was always to a designation more specific than “the African”, and was more likely to be to “the Banhu” or “Balanta” and often – though not always – to men with a specific occupation. The first people to really attack the stereotype were convinced abolitionists, who believed laziness was “a fate of slaves”. Rönnbäck claims that the persistence of the stereotype
can be explained partly by the fact that it served the interests of the colonizers: in the nineteenth century it became increasingly popular in order to justify various forms of coerced labour, to encourage Africans to work as wage labourers – something they were often reluctant to do since wages were low and they could earn more doing other types of work – and to make them work longer.¹⁰³

What Nguni workers in Natal in the nineteenth century and the Kazi in Congo in the twentieth century thought about work, including wage work, is nicely reflected in studies by Keletso T. Atkins and Julia Seibert.¹⁰⁴

Concluding remarks

In recent years, a number of important steps have been made in research on attitudes to work and workers. The research field has expanded in terms of both periodization – with the classic split between antiquity and the Middle Ages effectively eliminated – and geography, with a number of studies discussing non-European regions. Moreover, we are seeing the deployment of new methods and disciplines, such as semantics, a development that is certain to prove valuable given the progress being made in text-mining techniques. If this expansion in time and place continues, expansion in terms of labour relations too will have to be considered, and scholars will need to explore all possible types of work and labour relations, and the relationship between the two.

Suggested Reading


Kocka, Jürgen and Claus Offe (eds). *Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2000).


