

Work in a
Modern Society
The German Historical Experience
in Comparative Perspective

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Contents

Editorial Preface	vii
<i>Jane Caplan (Executive Editor), Timothy Garton Ash, Jürgen Kocka, Gerhard A. Ritter, Nicholas Stargardt, Margit Szöllösi-Janze</i>	
1 Work as a Problem in European History	1
<i>Jürgen Kocka</i>	
2 Discourses on Work and Labour in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Germany	17
<i>Josef Ehmer</i>	
3 Beginnings of the Anthropology of Work: Nineteenth-Century Social Scientists and Their Influence on Ethnography	37
<i>Gerd Spittler</i>	
4 The Vision(s) of Work in the Nineteenth-Century German Labour Movement	55
<i>Thomas Welskopp</i>	
5 Work in Gender, Gender in Work: The German Case in Comparative Perspective	73
<i>Karin Hausen</i>	
6 Trust as Work	93
<i>Ute Frevert</i>	

7 Soldiering and Working: Almost the Same? Reviewing Practices in Industry and the Military in Twentieth-Century Contexts <i>Alf Lüdtke</i>	109
8 Forced Labour in the Second World War: The German Case and Responsibility <i>Klaus Tenfelde</i>	131
9 Work, Max Weber, Confucianism: The Confucian Ethic and the Spirit of Japanese Capitalism <i>Sebastian Conrad</i>	153
10 What is Global Labour History Good For? <i>Andreas Eckert</i>	169
Bibliography	183
Notes on Contributors	215
Index	219

1

Work as a Problem in European History

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This is a broad topic for a historian: treating it within a short essay means being both very general and very selective. Why such a broad topic?

First, it allows us to bring together specialists from different fields whose contributions may appear in a new light if seen together.¹ Second, by dealing with the history of work in a general way, historians can relate to ongoing debates of the present time. In several European countries, certainly in Germany, mass unemployment and the changing nature of work under the impact of globalization and computerization have fuelled interesting debates about access to work as an economic and social resource, its political relevance and cultural meaning, about *Arbeitsgesellschaft* (labour society) and its possible alternatives if it is about to end, as some commentators think. It is against this background that it may be rewarding to reflect upon work (and labour) in a historical perspective.² If it can be done, third, a history of work would seem to be highly attractive, because it would have to integrate very different approaches, methods and aspects, ranging from straightforward economic history to cultural constructivism, including the analysis of institutions and politics.

But can it be done? There is reason for doubt, since the concept 'work' is not very precise, very changeable over time and between cultures and highly contested. Very often what it means is not easily separated from other human activities, but embedded, which makes its separate conceptualization appear a bit artificial and problematic. In addition, concepts like 'work' are highly aggregate and abstract; they comprise very different phenomena. This diversity makes it difficult to formulate observations valid for the whole aggregate, i.e., work in general.

Maybe this is why one knows, in fact, a lot about many single aspects of the history of work in different contexts. Some general surveys, it is true, exist.³ But it is not yet clear what the leading questions and viewpoints structuring the history of work as a general field of research might be.

I.

I start with some remarks on *Begriffsgeschichte*, the history of the concept and problems of definition. This is the subfield with the best and most elaborate literature: although it is very much restricted to Europe, especially Western Europe, and the West.⁴

There have been many, and there still are some, cultures and languages that do not have anything like a general concept of work. In addition, cultures and languages differ with respect to which human activities they lump together under a label like 'work' in order to distinguish them from other activities. This makes comparison interesting and translation difficult.

It is, for example, reported that the Yir-Yoront, native inhabitants of Australia, use the same word for work and play, while the Dogons in Mali seem to have the same word for agriculture and religious dancing, without needing a general concept of work.⁵ The Greeks of the Classical period would not have seen much sense in categorizing the manual work of slaves in the fields, the inferior work of women in the house, the production of texts by a writer and the activities of a politician under one and the same concept. They used different words for these different activities; they did not have a general concept of work.⁶ In the Middle Ages the semantic situation was complex and changing, but there was a tendency to limit the meaning of *labor*, *Arbeit*, *travail* and 'labour' to physical work. Still, in Zedler's *Universallexikon*, a major German encyclopaedia of 1732, the entry on *Arbeit* does not give a general definition of the word, but its author is satisfied with the enumeration of different activities (including, however, manual work and the work of artists, as well as the travels of Paulus and the 'schwere Amts- und Erlösungsarbeit Christi', i.e., the duties of clerics).⁷

One should not be surprised to see that a general concept of work – in the sense of a purposeful application of physical and mental forces in order to fulfil needs (or something like this) – emerged only slowly and sometimes not at all. For such a concept becomes possible and meaningful only if and when different activities appear sufficiently similar or related under certain viewpoints while they are sufficiently separable from other activities as well. There were and are many constellations in which such a differentiation of activities and such a need for semantic construction did not and do not exist.

One can turn this around and ask for typical constellations in European history, which invited contemporaries to think and speak about work in general, i.e., discursive situations that contributed to the construction of a general concept of work. On the one hand, it was the context of Christian piety and theology that offered opportunities and incentives to reflect and form opinions about work in relation to industry or idleness. This occurred already in late antiquity, in the monastic movements and theological reasoning of medieval time, and particularly in the Reformation when, for example, Luther wrote about work in general, seeing it as a kind of worship and equalizing all kinds of work and activities relative to their recognition by God. On the other hand, there were governments, first in the

late medieval towns, then in the early modern territorial states, which tried to fight poverty by getting people to work, by praising the virtues of work and by setting up institutions for spreading a work ethic and work discipline. Again, this discourse dealt with work in general, not only with specific trades and professions. Third, different activities were seen as comparable and formally similar with respect to their values on the market wherever capitalist mechanisms spread into the world of work. In market-related contexts, work was usually categorized as labour. 'A man's labour', Hobbes wrote in 1651, 'is a commodity exchangeable for benefit, as well as any other thing.' Finally, it was in the thinking and writing of the Enlightenment that work was perceived as a general human activity.⁸

Clearly, these were different notions of work, *travail*, *Arbeit* and 'labour', but they resembled one another in that they did not refer to very specific types of work, but to an abstraction of work in general. These were different contributions to a development, which certainly had other ingredients as well. But by the eighteenth century a general concept of work had emerged in Western languages. It differed from context to context, from speaker to speaker, remained changeable and without sharp definition. But essentially work had come to mean a human activity, which 'has an end beyond itself, being designed to produce or achieve something; it involves a degree of obligation or necessity, being a task that others set us or that we set ourselves; and it is arduous, involving effort and persistence beyond the point at which the task ceases to be wholly pleasurable.'⁹ Opposite concepts were idleness, play and, increasingly, leisure. The notion of leisure emerged in the same early modern period in which the general notion of work took shape: the other side of the coin.¹⁰

So we have addressed processes of semantic construction in practical contexts that took place before the era of the Industrial Revolution. These were intertwined with fundamental processes: the spread of the market and industrious discipline, state building and attempts towards more regulation, as well as new ideas about progress and human identity.

The formation of a general concept of work went hand in hand with a steady reevaluation of work. Again, this was a phenomenon of remarkable complexity to which I cannot do justice here, so I will limit myself to just a few points. In Greek and Roman Antiquity a sceptical assessment of most types of work predominated, corresponding to a reality of work that was largely characterized by bondage and inferiority. Work and freedom, work and citizenship, stood in deep tension with each other while one presupposed the other: like *oikos* and *polis*. The etymological roots of *Arbeit*, *travail*, 'labour' and *robot* are dark and harsh, connected with suffering, toil, hardship and punishment. A much-discussed ambivalence in many ways characterized the notion of work in the Hebrew-Christian tradition: work between curse and blessing, between punishment and divine order. Even in the most outspoken pleas in favour of recognizing work, each kind of work, as justified by God and service to God in medieval monastic rules and the writings of the sixteenth-century Reformation, there was usually a subtext implied according to which the toil and trouble of hard work had to be accepted as a sort

of penance or punishment for human sinfulness ('In the sweat of thy face', Genesis 3: 17–19).

In the European towns of the Medieval and early modern periods, economically based on craft and trade, craftsmen and merchants, guilds and corporations, qualified work gained new relevance, respectability and recognition. Here, work status and citizenship were intrinsically intertwined and mutually reinforcing. This stood in sharp contrast to what had been the case in the ancient polis. Work was now central to the emerging culture of the urban bourgeoisie, and this in turn helped to upgrade the social status of work, at least of some types of work. And it was in the writings of the Enlightenment and the emerging discipline of Political Economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that a nearly emphatic upgrading of work took place: work as the major source of wealth, as well as a core element of civility, very much in a bourgeois spirit, frequently with an anti-aristocratic thrust, often supported by religious self-assuredness and a progressive mood. Hundreds of quotes could be given. Take as an example Immanuel Kant, who devalued leisure and praised work – in the broad sense of the word – as a central element of life. 'Je mehr wir beschäftigt sind, je mehr fühlen wir, dass wir leben und desto mehr sind wir uns unseres Lebens bewusst. In der Muße fühlen wir nicht allein, dass uns das Leben so vorbeistreicht, sondern wir fühlen auch sogar eine Lebllosigkeit.'¹¹

It would be necessary to add many differentiations, exceptions, even counter-evidence. For instance: in all the emphatic upgrading of work, sensibility for ambivalence did not disappear altogether. Take the entry for *travail* in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, written by Diderot himself and published in a volume of 1765. He defined work (*travail*) as 'occupation journalière à laquelle l'homme est condamné par son besoin, et à laquelle il doit, en même temps, sa santé, sa subsistance, sa sérénité, son bon sens et sa vertu peut-être'. In addition, many of those intellectuals who celebrated the economic centrality and civilizing power of work also knew that, to quote Adam Smith, most labour meant 'toil and trouble', and that most people, if they had the choice, would prefer idleness. It also should be said that writers like Adam Ferguson differentiated pointedly between different types of work: some uplifting, some degrading. And what about regional differences between Protestant and Catholic Europe, between West, South and East?¹²

Still, the main trend is clear. By 1800 the originally close connection between work on the one hand and struggle, hardship and toil on the other had been loosened, and the fundamentally creative and formative dimension of work had been emphasized, giving work an unprecedented centrality as to wealth, civility and human identity. Was this upgrading of work within the discourses of intellectuals paralleled by a corresponding change in the values and attitudes, mentalities and habits of the common people?

II.

Due to problems of sources and methods, this question is hard to answer. An indirect way is provided by the study of 'utopias': utopian novels, science fiction from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, bestsellers in several European languages, widely-read books, all of which had something to say about work in an unlikely but desired utopian future. All of them gave substantial attention to problems of work.

Thomas More's *Utopia* was published in 1516. The author regarded work – or labour – as a 'service of the body'. On the island of Utopia – nowhere-land – working hours would be limited to six per day in order to have sufficient time for other 'productive tasks', for literature, scientific studies or contemplation, but also for sports and games, conversation, music and recreation. Six working hours per day would be enough. High productivity would be achieved through central planning and good organization, including an obligatory work service for men and women, collectivized consumption, the abandonment of wage work and the banning of idleness.¹³

More than one hundred years later the German novel *Insel Felsenburg* by Johann Gottfried Schnabel appeared (around 1740). It presented a similar picture of work in the future: with one novelty worth mentioning. Unlike Thomas More, this eighteenth-century author dreamt of machines and trained monkeys, which would liberate men from 'cruel troubles and labour', facilitate work and reduce working time.¹⁴ This motive was to stay: ever more effective technical innovations maintained a central place in utopian novels, usually as signs and instruments of progress, in the twentieth century as indicators of a threatening machinery (for example, in Huxley's *Brave New World* from 1937).

Luis-Sébastien Mercier wrote in the spirit of early Enlightenment. He published a European bestseller in 1717 under the title *The Year 2440*. The story is framed as a dream. The narrator wakes up in Paris in 2440 and walks through the city. People are reasonable, diligent, thrifty, peaceful, honest and serious. The army and prostitution are abandoned. Inns and other eating-houses have been replaced by general hospitality. The theatre is a place for moral education. Physicists and astronomers serve as clerics of the highly respected religion of reason. The world of work has changed. Daily work is moderate. Breaks, games and rural dances stimulate interest in one's tasks. Labour has stopped being ugly, since it no longer resembles the lot of slaves. Since one has got rid of idlers, monks and the masses of useless servants, no class has to live in bonds to benefit another class anymore. 'Childish' luxury goods have been abandoned. Consequently, a few working hours suffice to produce more than what is necessary for fulfilling the needs of the public. But gender difference would still exist: women in domestic work, men in the fields. And the enlightened author suggested a specific solution for the most unpleasant jobs. He wrote that it was bad enough that Nature has condemned human beings to eating the meat of animals. The Parisians of the future would be spared the view of how they were

slaughtered. The butchers' trade would be taken care of by foreigners who had had to leave their home countries. They would be protected by law, but not accepted as citizens. 'None of us will have to do this bloody and cruel job.'¹⁵

Another century later: early socialists like Saint-Simon, Fourier and Weitling dreamt of shortening the work hours and were ready to pay for it with compulsory work service, at least temporarily. A senate was supposed to decide, instead of the market. Wage work, wage labour, was to be abandoned. And there was a new utopian element in their writings: life-long careers in one and the same specialization were to be overcome. By changing the workplace every two hours, everybody would be able to pursue several occupations, several professions, several jobs side by side. Remember the young Karl Marx who in the 1840s dreamt of hunting in the morning, fishing at noon, breeding cattle in the evening, also criticizing the food: without, as he wrote, ever becoming a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman or a critic ('wie ich gerade Lust habe').¹⁶

Later on, socialists were in favour of planning and efficient organization of work, as well sceptical vis-à-vis wage work, the market and idleness. They were always for shorter hours and for work regulation. Both Edward Bellamy's bestseller *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887* and August Bebel's *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* anticipated the liberation of women and servants from household work, thanks to public laundries and communal kitchens, electrification and technical progress.¹⁷

So we have addressed the future of work in utopias of the past. Utopian constructions can be read as critical comments on the time in which they were formulated.¹⁸ It is sufficiently clear what they opposed and what their authors saw as particularly unsatisfactory and unbearable in the world that they knew. It was, first of all, and without exception, the hardship of manual work, labour's toil and trouble, which was to be overcome: through the shortening of work hours, monkeys and the liberating effects of modern technology. Second, already in the eighteenth century the unequal distribution of work and its returns was to be overcome in the future. Moreover, those authors did not regard wage labour as a source of freedom but as an irritation to be replaced by organization, even at the price of limited compulsion. Finally, it was the monotony of specialized work that they wished to remedy by permanent alternation, so that work could better serve the purpose of human self-realization. One does not find this before very late in the eighteenth century.

Of course, this is only indirect evidence. No doubt, different types of work offered very different degrees of satisfaction. There was always joy in some work as well.¹⁹ But those utopias were widely read. They must have hit a chord. In order to be good utopians, the authors had to be realistic observers. I believe they were. Their views are supported by other evidence we have, for example, by the many comments and evaluations collected in the *Oxford Book of Work*. Its editor, Keith Thomas, quotes a seventeenth-century writer: 'If it was agreeable to do anything called work, it was not really so but pleasure ... It is incident to the true nature of work not to delight in it.' And Thomas continues: 'Much of this

anthology is taken up with similar negative reactions to work. They evoke the dreariness, discomfort and tedium of repetitive factory work; the horrors of plantation slavery; the petty tyrannies of office life; and the major tyrannies of penal labour... [The documents] confirm the inescapable fact that, through the centuries, the lot of most of the human race has been hard toil for small reward.²⁰ Pertinent folk songs and popular proverbs rarely mentioned the joy or the praise of work; rather, they expressed sympathy for rest and laziness. And when Adolf Levenstein published the first German survey based on interviews with industrial workers at the beginning of the twentieth century, they had little to say on the joy, but much on the stress and the dreariness of their work.²¹

III.

The third part of this article will deal with the 'long nineteenth century', which lasted from the French Revolution to the First World War.²² Most evidence will come from the German case, and emphasis will be laid on structures, processes and institutions. What did the nineteenth century, the century of the industrial revolution, change?

1. On the continent, it was only after the revolutions and reforms around 1800 and with industrialization proper that the mechanisms of a capitalist market economy spread widely and thoroughly. It was only now that they became the dominant principles of the economic order, including the organization of work. Work, including work for a living, had always been performed in different institutional contexts: within houses and households, under different regimes of compulsion, in feudal and corporate settings. In most parts of Europe market-related work or labour had existed for centuries, but, with the exception of England, it had been a minority phenomenon, and the distinction between market-relatedness and non-market-relatedness had been blurred for a long time. Now, in the course of the nineteenth century, market-related work became the rule, of course in very different forms, wage work being only one of them.²³
2. In the course of the nineteenth century, an increasing proportion of market-related work was done in manufacturing centres and workshops, factories and mines, offices and administrative agencies. There were innumerable transitions, mixtures and hybrids, certainly, but the dominant trend was to separate the workplace, where a living was earned and perhaps gains were made, from the sphere of the house and the family. Such a separation had not been the rule before, neither for peasants nor for domestic or cottage workers, neither for the artisans nor for the merchants or scholars, many of whom had worked at home or near to home (and some of them continued to do so). Work had usually been closely tied to other activities and

expressions of life. Now, the separate 'work place' emerged. Work now got its own space and its own time. Work and its products became more measurable. The distinction between work in this sense and non-work (including other activities) became clearer, easier to experience and a topic of discussion. It was against the background of this differentiation between work and non-work that the lack of work became an identifiable phenomenon, a topic, a problem. It was not before the 1880s that the concepts of *Arbeitslosigkeit*, 'unemployment' and *chômage* appeared in the dictionaries and the social discourses, and soon in legislation.²⁴

3. Work had always been gender-specific to some degree. The division of work had always been gendered. Now, the connection between gender and work changed as a consequence of the increasing separation of workplace and the family/household. In the world of work, male-female inequality became more pronounced than in previous centuries.²⁵
4. There had always been differences, tensions and conflicts between those who held different positions in the social system of work: between lords and peasants, masters and men or women, owners and labourers, employers and employees, and the many hybrids in between. Now, since market-related work became to some extent less embedded, more distinguishable and located in a sphere per se, such differences could play themselves out fully. Class became a major dimension of collective self-identification, class conflict one of the major topics of the century.²⁶
5. For centuries, work had been regulated, one way or another, by authorities of different kinds. For a while, the breakthrough of a market economy and of legal liberalization reduced the public regulation of work, particularly in the second third and third quarter of the nineteenth century. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century a new process of legal and administrative regulation gained momentum, now dealing with a subject matter to some degree separable from other activities and expressions of life. Consequently, legal and administrative regulation of work led to a specialized legal sphere and a specialized arm of government whose impact, in return, reinforced the existence of work as a separate sphere under specific rules and regulations.

These were the five most important structural changes related to work in the century of the industrial revolution. Correspondingly, something changed in the language of work. The concept of work became narrower, got closer to 'labour', gradually narrowed down to mean work for a living and for an earning, work and work-products to be sold some way or another, market-related work, in German: *Erwerbsarbeit*. Work for wages and salaries was just one form of it, although soon the most numerous one, obviously. But *Erwerbsarbeit* also included the work of

self-employed peasants, artisans and business persons, managers and entrepreneurs, professionals, politicians and soldiers, artists, intellectuals etc.: as long as they sold their services or products on markets in order to make a living or an earning. In the course of this semantic process of narrowing, some activities, which earlier had been regarded as work, ceased to be counted as work in the full sense of the word. Think of work in the house, especially woman's work in the household and in the sphere of reproduction; think of unpaid work in the civic field; think of work one does for oneself. One can document this narrowing down of the concept by analysing the categories used by statisticians, census bureaus and the like.²⁷

Something else happened in the long nineteenth century. A basic contradiction became more acute, was partly politicized and became an important dynamic force. I am thinking of the tension between the emphatic concepts of work in the Western Enlightenment tradition on the one hand and the reality of work as it developed in the century of industrialization on the other. The emphatic discourse about work as a core element of human existence, as a human right and duty, continued throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. It became even more pronounced and ambitious: from Hegel through Marx to Max Weber, with many other contributors who are less well-known today. On the other hand, the reality of work was characterized by increasing division and specialization; it was mostly dependent on markets, superiors or machines, frequently hard and dreary, exhausting and miserable. This incongruity, tension or contradiction was not new, but it was coming to a point and, in the emerging civil society of the nineteenth century, it became a topic of public debate. Out of this publicly discussed contradiction emerged the sharp and mobilizing critique of work under capitalism as alienated and exploited, seen most clearly in the writings of Marx. This contradiction also helped to fuel the demands of the emerging labour movement, the socialist and social-democratic claims aiming at the recognition of work and workers, their inclusion and participation as citizens, improvement and political change. Work served as a legitimating basis for social and political claims. This was not just the content of programmes and the strategy of functionaries. By looking more closely at the grassroots level of the emerging socialist labour movement, one can see that active but ordinary workers had a demanding, ambitious understanding of their work as qualified, productive, masculine and culturally important. This understanding of work gave substance to their claims for improvement, as well as to their hostility against 'idlers' and those above them whom they pronounced idlers, because they did not work the way they knew.²⁸

Take this as an example for how deeply, in the nineteenth century, the changing nature of work and the changing interpretations of work penetrated the social and political system as well as the self-identification of people. Notions of work played a central role in many other contexts as well: in the self-understanding of middle-class persons, as reflected by their autobiographies; as a topic of scientific debates, which sometimes developed biological and physics-related overtones; as a central category of the emerging social sciences; in political