

REVIEW ESSAY

Attitudes to Work, Class Structures, and Social Change: A Review of Recent Historical Studies

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LIS, CATHARINA and HUGO SOLY. *Worthy Efforts. Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe*. [Studies in Global Social History, Vol. 10.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2012. xiv, 664 pp. € 129; \$ 179.00.

The Joy and Pain of Work: Global Attitudes and Variations, 1500–1650. Ed. by Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata. [International Review of Social History, Special Issues, vol. 19.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012. 318 pp. Ill. Maps. £19.99.

“Labour history” had a particularly strong standing in historiography in the 1970s and 1980s and lost some of its influence in the following decades, at least in the Northern Hemisphere. “History of work”, in contrast, attracted increasing interest from the 1990s on, and that interest still seems unabated, at least in the Western world.

For some time, labour history and history of work represented quite different paradigms in historiographical practice. Labour history dealt with labour relations and conflicts, with working classes and social movements. History of work, on the other hand, concentrated on work as a philosophical concept and as an element of political language as well as on attitudes towards work and on work ethics. Whereas labour history has been widely acknowledged as a prominent part of social history, history of work developed within the framework of the history of concepts and ideas, of intellectual history and, more recently, of cultural history. Nevertheless, for several years now, scholars have increasingly been calling into question the separation of these two paradigms. The two books being discussed here explicitly attempt to relate concepts and

attitudes towards work to class structures and social change, and particularly to the material and symbolic interests of various social groups.

The first one is written by two highly distinguished scholars. Their book is the fruit of many years of hard work and intellectual reasoning, and it is indeed a magnum opus, as Marcel van der Linden rightly says in his foreword. In their book's introduction, Lis and Soly clearly describe their objectives. They do not begin with a definition of work but rather by pointing out that this term – though still as controversial as ever – describes activities that, in some sense, are considered useful and valuable. This leads to the main questions of the book. Who defined which activities as work, and which as not qualifying as such? According to which criteria were activities valorized or de-valorized and ranked? And how was evaluation of work related to that of workers?

These questions are examined in an extraordinarily long timeframe and in an extensive geographical area – namely, pre-industrial Europe from ancient Greece until about 1800. Lis and Soly cite two reasons for their decision to examine this very long period. First, they assume that previous assessments of attitudes towards work and workers in all periods of pre-industrial Europe “are usually reduced to clichés” (p. 4). To this they contrast their effort to proceed on the basis of a huge variety of written and visual sources to reconstruct the complexity of discourses on work and workers. The intention is to consider as wide a range of speakers as possible in order to analyse “who says what to whom, about what, where, when, and why” (p. 5). The second motive is an empirically well-grounded critique of an established “standard narrative” of changes of perceptions of work in long-term European history.¹ The essence of this standard narrative consists of the assumption of disdain on the part of elites in classical antiquity for work and particularly for manual labour, followed by a continuous revaluation and increasing appreciation in subsequent ages, paving the way to a “labouring society” in advanced industrial capitalism.²

The book consists of two parts. The first three chapters provide a close look at Greek and Roman labour discourses, and then at Christian ideologies of work from the early Church Fathers and the various monastic orders of monks, friars, and mendicants all the way to the

1. The term “standard narrative” (*Standarderzählung*) was coined by Jürgen Kocka to characterize assumptions of evaluations of work in European history, which had become hegemonic in the course of the twentieth century; Jürgen Kocka, “Arbeit früher, heute, morgen: Zur Neuartigkeit der Gegenwart”, in Jürgen Kocka and Claus Offe (eds), *Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit* (Frankfurt/Main, 2000), pp. 476–492, 477.

2. Hannah Arendt was particularly influential; see *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL, 1958), p. 4: “The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labour and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole society into a labouring society.”

Reformation and beyond. Lis and Soly stress the absolute dominance of the Roman Church in Latin Christendom from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries in all intellectual matters (p. 59), but also how strongly Christian discourses on work were influenced by classical antiquity, and how these traditions merged, later on, in humanism and the Enlightenment. Throughout their consideration of all these layers of intellectual history, they reveal the surprising continuity of a work ethic, understood as a set of values based on the appreciation of hard work, exertion of oneself, and diligence. Groups across the entire social spectrum endeavoured to assure that their activities and efforts did qualify as work. In Christian discourses from late antiquity to the late medieval period, for instance, praying and working were quite often seen as identical: prayer as work, work as prayer, in which work certainly did include manual labour. In the urban cultures of the late Middle Ages, mendicant orders argued that preaching is work, and merchants struggled to have their activities acknowledged as work.

It is particularly this first part of the book that effects a fundamental revision of the standard narrative mentioned above. Lis and Soly counter this narrative by applying three approaches. First, they bring out the multiplicity of opinions voiced in the discourses on the subject of work in all the historical epochs they study. They stress the “polyphonic character” of discourses on work in pre-Christian cultures as well as in the Christian era. Second, they also identify among this multiplicity of opinions dominant or hegemonic attitudes: praise and veneration of work and of the active life in general, which spans historical epochs and social classes and various religious systems of belief. Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly take an enormous step from the history of ideas to a discourse analysis (in the best sense of that term), even if they complain quite often about the silence of sources, and even if, in what they call the “polyphonic heritage”³ of perceptions of work and workers, intellectuals are clearly over-represented. Third, the book also goes beyond the sphere of discourses. The authors never forget the historical path-dependency of ideas (such as the long-lasting influence of Stoicism, for instance), but their major aim is to localize them in historical context: in the class structures of the respective periods and regions; in the political and economic balance of power; in the interests and ambitions of the respective social classes, not least of the speech-making intellectuals. As main factors of the intensity of discourse on work in European history, they identify “the rise of economically active groups in various historical periods” (p. 561) throughout the 2,000 years covered by their study, and, therefore, of the coexistence of different class-specific value systems.

3. The title of Part 1 is: “Antiquity and Christianity: A Polyphonic Heritage”.

I am deeply impressed by the wealth of evidence on which Lis and Soly base their arguments. However, I must admit that, after having read their book, I still do not fully understand how they conceive the relationship between “effort” and “work”. The core of their argument is certainly activity and effort, which are diametrically opposed to idleness. Their conclusion seems thoroughly convincing to me: praise of effort and disdain for idleness assumed an extraordinarily high position in the value systems of pre-industrial European societies from antiquity to the eighteenth century. In this sense, effort and idleness appear to be concepts of *longue durée* that scarcely changed over time. Work, in contrast, appears as a variable, disputed, and highly differentiated category. Lis and Soly marshal many examples to show that not every form of effort was automatically understood as work, and that not every form of work was regarded a “worthy effort”. In many of their conclusions, however, they seem to suggest that “work” and “worthy effort” were seen as identical.

The second – and considerably longer – part of the book concentrates on the period from about 1300 to 1800 and analyses “images and self-images” of four social groups that represented the social and economic basis of pre-industrial Europe and stood at the centre of late medieval and early modern discourses on work, both as objects and subjects of the discourse: peasants, merchants, artisans, and wage labourers. Contrasting attitudes towards work with attitudes towards workers is an important aspect of this part. Lis and Soly cite abundant examples illustrating the fact that many authors who glorify work in glowing terms are absolutely uninterested in workers or even disregard their daily practices. The praise of agricultural work, for instance, coexists with stereotyping peasants as animalistic brutes. Perceptions of work and perceptions of workers are neither independent of each other nor identical; rather, they exist in diverse and varying interrelationships. While intellectual history also plays an important role in the second part of the book, this part in particular can also be read as a social history of those groups who participated in or were objects of discourses on work.

One of the virtues of Lis and Soly’s conceptualization of “attitudes to work and workers” is their continuous process of reflection about *whose* attitudes they are dealing with and *whose* attitudes can be reconstructed at all from historical sources. Significantly, the fourth chapter does not deal with peasants, but with “imagined peasantries”. Lis and Soly make it clear that almost all their sources were produced by members of dominant social groups. These sources offer access to the “ideals, expectations, prejudices, fears, or obsessions” (p. 160) of their producers, but hardly to real rural life. Therefore, they look closely at the transformations of the landed nobility, from the landlords and “warlords” of nascent feudalism to the English “gentleman farmers” of eighteenth-century capitalist agriculture. Real peasants are part of the story in two different ways: firstly, they

are included directly as actors and participants in discourses on work, even if to a very limited degree and almost exclusively in the context of uprisings in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, when peasants argued in favour of working with one's hands and thus upgrading the status of manual labour. Secondly, peasants appear more indirectly as one pole of rural class relations. Lis and Soly show how changes in the social and legal position of peasants and in agricultural modes of production influenced upper-class attitudes. The most important social changes, however, the social differentiation of the peasantry and the rise in numbers of small-holders and landless villagers, are not discussed in this chapter, but in the chapter on wage labour.

In the fifth chapter, Lis and Soly reconstruct intensifying discourses on commerce, commercial activities, and those who performed them, in particular wealthy urban merchants. Once more, they reveal a wide range of diverse and contradictory positions, but also an increasing appreciation of commerce, which gradually became acknowledged as work, and above all as a particularly honourable form of work. The social background of these developments can be seen in the general processes of urbanization, rising merchant capitalism, and global trade, and in the practical importance of wealthy merchants for the economic well-being and for the political power structures of many urban communities. Accordingly, particularly high esteem being accorded to commercial wealth can be found, for instance, among Florentine humanists.

Although discourses on commerce and merchants were also dominated by intellectuals – both clerics and laymen – they show a strong active participation by merchants themselves. Most successful businessmen were literate, and many urban intellectuals stemmed from merchant families. An ethic of hard work and risk-taking was part of their identity construction, and served to legitimate the pursuit of wealth and the struggle for political dominance. Part of their self-representation was charitable activity, particularly the foundation of charitable institutions such as the Fuggerei in Augsburg. However, the success story of this type of *homo economicus* was not unquestioned nor did it proceed in linear fashion. Lis and Soly reveal the resistance to these *nouveaux riches* among both traditional aristocratic elites and the urban lower middle classes.

The title of the sixth chapter, “Artisans: Practice and Theory”, refers to two different though closely related topics. On one hand, the chapter deals with attitudes towards artisanal work, with the significance of work for the identity of artisans, with the construction of positive self-images and negative stereotypes of others, and with these people's struggle for social distinction. While most intellectuals still expressed disdain for manual labour, it was the guild system and the urban corporate world in general that enabled artisans to construct a collective identity based on

independent manual work and to demand political rights.⁴ To Lis and Soly “this was indeed revolutionary” (p. 333).

On the other hand, this chapter also offers new perspectives on the social history of knowledge. It is surprising to see how much attention was paid by intellectuals to the relations between manual work, the arts, and the sciences. The concept of skill, or the idea that the combination of hard physical labour with practical experience and scientific interest would be particularly productive, increasingly shaped early modern discourses on work. All this contributed to upgrading the status of particular forms of manual labour. Based both on the fact that they belonged to a corporate world and performed intellectually demanding manual labour, artisans, and groups in the middle of the social spectrum in general, developed a particularly strong work ethic and based their identities and self-esteem more strongly on their work than other social groups did. In respect to artisans, Lis and Soly restrict themselves in this chapter to master artisans, to the self-employed as well as to small-scale employers. Journeymen show up in the next chapter on wage labour, but they are portrayed, as we will see, in quite similar fashion.

The seventh chapter finally deals with “The Many Faces of Wage Labour”. The starting point is the assumption that, between the twelfth and the nineteenth centuries, the “gradual but continuous and ultimately massive” increase in the number of part-time and full-time wage earners “influenced attitudes toward work and workers more deeply than any other social change” (p. 567). In other words, the dynamics of proletarianization fuelled discourses on work to an exceptional degree. Lis and Soly start with the growing differentiation among rural populations and the spread of agricultural wage labour, proceed to the social differentiation of towns, and discuss concepts such as “free wage labour” in theory and in terms of their practical meaning. From the fourteenth century onwards, a series of labour laws throughout large parts of Europe aimed to control and discipline servants and wage labourers. They were accompanied by the stigmatization of labour mobility as “vagrancy” that, in turn, was equated with idleness, and by increasingly restrictive poor laws. “Labour laws, poor laws, and criminal laws became increasingly intertwined” (p. 444). Such legislations constituted a major focus of discourses on work and workers. Their practical consequences, however, remain a field of discussion, in my view. They were certainly a permanent threat to the lower classes,

4. Thus, Lis and Soly make the ongoing “revisionism in guild and artisan historiography” productive for the historiography of work; cf. Josef Ehmer, “Artisans and Guilds, History of”, in Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford, 2001), II, pp. 816–821.

but they did not, for instance, reduce the enormous amount of geographical mobility in early modern Europe.⁵

Once more, this chapter relies on statements from members of the elite and, more generally, of the “speech-making community” (p. 509). A major problem in the search for self-representations of workers is the heterogeneity of wage-dependents, who never formed a homogeneous group in pre-industrial Europe. Lis and Soly find evidence of a strong collective identity based on work mainly in one particular group – journeymen in the crafts and trades. They define their “skill” as a property; they stress their autonomy and independence as “free workers”, being neither servants nor casual labourers; they are proud of their self-reliance based on mutual aid systems; and they are able to pursue their goals by means of organized collective action. However small this group was, Lis and Soly attribute tremendous relevance to them. In their view, early modern journeymen represented a qualitative turn within the long history of the quantitative increase of wage labour, identifying themselves with the artisanal “honour of free labour” and being the first “proletarians [able] to enforce ‘property in labour’” (p. 547).

I am very pleased by this strong emphasis on artisans and artisanal work. It is certainly confirmed by the major studies on the making of the working class, from E.P. Thompson to William Sewell, who coined the well-known phrase that the modern labour movement was not born in the “dark, satanic mill” but in artisans’ workshops.⁶ Nevertheless, I hesitate to regard journeymen as “proletarians”. That certainly makes sense, at least to some degree, with respect to England and some other regions of north-western Europe, and to some occupational groups such as the building trades, but hardly to most crafts and trades and to most European regions, and definitely not to central Europe.⁷ Proletarianization, in my view, implies life-long wage labour, be it full-time or part-time. A particularly significant social phenomenon in early modern Europe, increasing in numbers until the nineteenth century, was life-cycle service,

5. Cf. Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, “The Mobility Transition Revisited, 1500–1900: What the Case of Europe Can Offer to Global History”, *Journal of Global History*, 3 (2009), pp. 347–377.

6. William Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labour from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980). Sewell’s summary of the state of European labour history in 1980 has since been confirmed by a large number of studies: “there is almost universal agreement on one point: that skilled artisans, not workers in the new factory industries, dominated labour movements during the first decades of industrialization. [...] The nineteenth-century labour movement was born in the craft workshop, not in the dark, satanic mill” (p. 1). As a quite similar view, almost twenty years earlier, cf. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), ch. 8.

7. As for comparison between English- and German-speaking central European journeymen cf. Josef Ehmer, *Heiratsverhalten, Sozialstruktur, ökonomischer Wandel. England und Mitteleuropa in der Formationsperiode des Kapitalismus* (Göttingen, 1991), particularly Part 3.

both in husbandry and in crafts and trades, not only for apprentices, but also for journeymen.⁸ Living-in servants were an important alternative to “free” wage labour, economically functional in many sectors, appreciated by (mainly conservative) political thinkers, and welcomed by employers. Moreover, their dependent status was accepted by the servants themselves and the social milieus that were their origins, as long as it remained a temporally limited life-cycle stage. Certainly, many life-cycle servants stemmed from proletarian families and went on to become wage labourers themselves, but a considerable number of them established small businesses of their own and became self-employed or an employer of others.

As German occupational statistics show, even in the late nineteenth century, at least one-third of all young people who started their working careers as apprentices attained the position of independent master artisan by their thirties.⁹ This life-cycle perspective is certainly important for the particular identity of journeymen. Their attitudes towards work, described so emphatically by Lis and Soly, would also fit into the chapter on the middling sort. Generally, I would like to caution against an underestimation of the social and cultural significance of life courses, which combine wage labour in early age with economic independence as employer or self-employed later on.

All in all, I am aware of few books in which intellectual history and social history – history of work and labour history – have been interconnected in such a convincing manner. Nevertheless, I am still surprised that there are so few voices in favour of activities that are not regarded as work. One example discussed in the book concerns the great classical Athenian philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who usually serve as key witnesses for the supposed disdain for work in antiquity. Another example is the Catholic Church in the tenth and eleventh centuries, when the scheme of the three orders made a clear distinction between *oratores* and *laboratores*. Such examples are portrayed as exceptional cases. Lis and Soly explain them by referring to

8. Cf. for England, Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981) and – as a more recent survey – Sheila McIsaac Cooper, “Service to Servitude? The Decline and Demise of Life-Cycle Service in England”, *The History of the Family*, 10 (2005) pp. 367–386. For the whole of Europe, cf. Michael Mitterauer, “Gesindedienst und Jugendphase im europäischen Vergleich”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 11 (1985), pp. 177–204. Service in husbandry had, even in east central Europe, a greater significance than the “Hajnal thesis” of the European Marriage Pattern assumes; cf. Mikolaj Szoltysek, “Life-Cycle Service and Family Systems in the Rural Countryside: A Lesson from Historical East-Central Europe”, *Annales de démographie historique*, 1 (2009), pp. 53–94. In contrast to England, in large parts of central Europe both the agricultural revolution and the growing mass production of urban artisans for global markets relied a good deal on living-in workers, thus integrating traditional labour relations into capitalist modernization; cf. Ehmer, *Heiratsverhalten, Sozialstruktur, ökonomischer Wandel*.

9. Josef Ehmer, “Lohnarbeit und Lebenszyklus im Kaiserreich”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 14 (1988), pp. 448–471.

particular historical contexts: on the one hand, the threat to aristocratic status in Athenian democracy; on the other, the transformation of the Church into an increasingly wealthy and powerful institution.

A similar question concerns *vita contemplativa* and leisure. *Vita contemplativa* does not play a major role in Lis and Soly's analysis, but when they refer to reflections on active and contemplative life – for instance, in the writings of Florentine humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – the result is a pronounced “glorification of *vita activa*” (p. 257). Concepts and practices of “leisure” appear quite prominently in the book and in various historical contexts. Here also, Lis and Soly present a relatively homogeneous picture over the entire period of time under consideration. On the one hand, leisure is generally regarded with suspicion, since it is said to be harmful to health and to foster immorality and inertia; on the other hand, the menace of leisure can be reduced when men know how to use it. The ideal is useful, active and, thus, “good leisure” in contrast to unproductive, conspicuous idleness as “bad leisure”. Furthermore, as Lis and Soly show, a friendlier meaning of leisure seems to arise in early modern times, for instance, as well-deserved rest following work, or as much-needed recreation for hard-working labourers.

However, this does not challenge, as Lis and Soly argue, the primacy of work in the attitudes of all social classes, including the ruling elites. The nobility does not receive a separate chapter in the book but is referred to frequently, of course. In their conclusion, the authors chose an unmistakable formulation: “Nowhere was the aristocracy a leisure class in the sense of an elite that made only a minor, peripheral, and largely symbolic contribution to the wellbeing of the community” (p. 552). The only exception they see is from the late nineteenth century onwards, when the nobility lost its functions in the political system and parts of the former ruling elites indeed became a “leisure class”, as described by Thorstein Veblen.¹⁰ Even hunting is described by Lis and Soly as a kind of training for military and political duties in antiquity, and in the Middle Ages as a kind of work for the feudal elites – for instance, to protect peasants from wild animals.

I wonder whether the historiography of leisure is sufficiently advanced to allow such strict conclusions. In European historiographical discourse, relations between work and leisure have been on the research agenda at least since 1964, when the seventh “Past and Present Conference” was held in London on that subject, paying particular attention to pre-industrial societies.¹¹ There has been very useful research since then on the time spent on work and on leisure, even if both concepts are quite

10. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, 1899).

11. Cf. Keith Thomas, “Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Societies”, *Past and Present*, 29 (1964), pp. 50–66.

often defined according to modern standards. Research on attitudes to leisure before 1850, however, remains unsatisfactory, as it has concentrated on elitist discourses on the assumed idleness or “leisure preference” of the poor. It was Peter Burke, in 1995, who opened new perspectives and provoked a debate on that issue.¹² Burke offers convincing arguments for an increasing appreciation of leisure and an expanding variety of leisure activities among the upper classes, not least to escape boredom. He also does not hesitate to use the term “leisure class” for parts of the European elites since the seventeenth century.¹³ If we proceed a short distance down the social ladder, for instance to the English gentry, we observe at the same time the socio-structural and cultural change of small provincial towns into “leisure towns”, offering an expanding range of leisure facilities for the growing “leisured classes”.¹⁴ There are certainly numerous examples of hard-working aristocrats who depicted “themselves as workaholics” (p. 564), as well as of the time-disciplining education of young noblemen, but there is also a lot of evidence that the symbolic dimension of leisure as a means of social identity and distinction increased.¹⁵

Once more, to identify the attitudes of workers to leisure is the most difficult task. Lis and Soly are convinced that work-shy behaviour would not have been tolerated in working-class communities, and they argue quite forcefully against any assumed leisure preference of the poor. I am prepared to agree in principle, but with some reservations. The idea of a leisure preference among the labouring poor was certainly an upper-class construct and an ideological weapon.¹⁶ The problem of finding sufficient

12. Peter Burke, “The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe”, *Past and Present*, 146 (1995), pp. 136–150; Joan-Lluís Marfany, “Debate: The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe”, *Past and Present*, 156 (1997), pp. 174–191; Peter Burke, “Reply”, *Past and Present*, 156 (1997), pp. 192–197.

13. Among the elites of Amsterdam and Venice Burke observes a transformation of their interests from work to play, from parsimony to conspicuous consumption, from entrepreneur to *rentier*, from bourgeois to aristocrat; Peter Burke, *Venice and Amsterdam: A Study of Seventeenth-Century Elites* (London, 1974), p. 159 (reference from German edn).

14. Cf. Angus McInnes, “The Emergence of a Leisure Town: Shrewsbury 1660–1760”, *Past and Present*, 120 (1988), pp. 53–87; for discussion of the concept, cf. Peter Borsay, “The Emergence of a Leisure Town: Or an Urban Renaissance?”, *Past and Present*, 126 (1990), pp. 189–196.

15. See, for instance, the inspiring comparison between eighteenth-century biographies of German scholars and academics (*Gelehrtenstand*), who were portrayed as the incarnation of a most rigid work ethic, and contemporary biographies of noblemen, which devoted considerable space to leisure activities, including amorous adventures, in Michael Maurer, *Die Biographie des Bürgers. Lebensformen und Denkweisen in der formative Phase des deutschen Bürgertums (1680–1815)* (Göttingen, 1996), pp. 150 ff.

16. John Hatcher, “Labour, Leisure and Economic Thought before the Nineteenth Century”, *Past and Present*, 160 (1998), pp. 64–115; Peter Mathias, “Time for Work, Time for Play: Relations between Work and Leisure in the Early Modern Period”, *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 81 (1997), pp. 305–323.

work and income was certainly a permanent threat to working-class families. Nevertheless, I am wondering whether one has to arrive at the conclusion that members of the pre-industrial working classes were uninterested in leisure activities and would not have enjoyed work-free time if they could afford to do so.

There seems to be some consensus among social and economic historians that the amount and intensity of work increased with the rise of capitalism.¹⁷ If there was indeed a reallocation of “time from leisure and household production to income-earning work”,¹⁸ the main question would not be whether there was something like working-class leisure in past times but how it changed in history. This question certainly concerns practice and not primarily preferences and attitudes. However, these two dimensions are not isolated from each other. Furthermore, there is also some evidence of what might be interpreted as appreciation of leisure among the working classes. One might think that the dreams of life without work in a land of milk and honey (even if the story of the Land of Cockaigne, as Lis and Soly show, started its career as a satirical story),¹⁹ or the hope of gaining riches as a result of chance and luck and not of hard work, as expressed in so many fairy tales of the early modern period,²⁰ are more significant than Lis and Soly suggest. To this can be added evidence of many forms of sociability among labourers and journeymen beyond the world of work and their defence against authorities and masters.²¹

17. Cf. Hans-Joachim Voth, “Time and Work in Eighteenth-Century London”, *The Journal of Economic History*, 58 (1998), 1, pp. 29–58. The explanations, however, differ and range from a particular pietistic work ethic of the poor, to the disciplining effects of new time-regimes and of capitalist labour relations, or to the emergence of a “consumer revolution” which provokes an “industrious revolution”. Cf. Hans Medick, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650–1900* (Göttingen, 1996), especially pp. 552–559; Edward P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism”, in *idem*, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991), pp. 352–402; Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008).

18. Sheilagh Ogilvie, “Consumption, Social Capital, and the ‘Industrious Revolution’ in Early Modern Germany”, *The Journal of Economic History*, 70 (2010), pp. 287–325.

19. As for an elaborated discussion, cf. Herman Pleij, *Der Traum vom Schlaraffenland. Mittelalterliche Phantasien vom vollkommenen Leben* (Frankfurt/Main, 2000) (first Dutch edn: Amsterdam, 1997).

20. Cf. Robert Darnton, “Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose”, in *idem*, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), pp. 9–72, 8. French fairy tales “celebrate the trickster” and not the hard-working peasant.

21. The conflicts concerning “Saint Monday” have received particular attention; cf. Douglas A. Reid, “The Decline of Saint Monday, 1766–1876”, *Past and Present*, 71 (1976), pp. 76–101; Thomas Buchner, “Blauer Montag”, *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit*, 2 (2005), pp. 287–289; Reinhold Reith, *Lohn und Leistung. Lohnformen im Gewerbe 1450–1900* (Stuttgart, 1999), pp. 335–338. However, Gareth Stedman Jones wonders why there was so little defence made of such traditional popular recreation, but he does not hesitate to call them “old patterns of leisure”; *idem*, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 87f.

The tramping system of journeymen in the crafts and trades receives some attention in the book. An analysis of autobiographical evidence and ego-documents, however, for instance by Sigrid Wadauer, shows that to be in tramp did not only serve the regulation of the labour supply, and was not only a search for work. It was also a means to avoid work, to see the world, to experience adventure and the like, and to accomplish all that in a socially acceptable manner and backed by the social networks of guilds.²² I am wondering whether all of these pursuits could be regarded as alternatives to the glorification of work – not as praise of idleness but as an attempt to balance work and toil on the one hand and leisure and rest on the other?

I do not think that such arguments and examples refute the notion of a capitalist or protestant work ethic, arising at the same time. However, when Max Weber wrote his famous book on the “Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism”, his intention was not to discuss the full range of attitudes towards work, but to construct an ideal-type, and in the second edition of the book (1920) he linked this ideal-type closely with a particular social group of small-scale emerging entrepreneurs.²³ Moreover, the Protestant work ethic was also inconsistent with respect to leisure in several different denominations: Sabbath regulations enforced leisure by prohibiting (and penalizing) work on Saturday nights and Sundays and on many other holy days, as well as punishing various leisure activities.²⁴ If we look at the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one of the important social changes was certainly the reduction of working hours, due not only, but to a considerable degree, to the efforts of labour movements. The aim of these movements was not to replace a “right to work” with a “right to laziness”, but to institute a better balance between work and leisure. Perhaps we have not yet focused sufficient attention on efforts for such a balance in the long period of rising capitalism.

Lastly, Lis and Soly show, in connection with the labour laws of the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, that old age was regarded as a phase of life in which an individual was legitimately absolved from the duty to work, either because one was suspected of being incapable of performing it, or because work previously performed entitled one to retire from employment.²⁵ As research on the history of old age shows,

22. Sigrid Wadauer, *Die Tour der Gesellen. Mobilität und Biographie im Handwerk vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/Main, 2005).

23. Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der “Geist” des Kapitalismus*, ed. by Klaus Lichtfeld and Johannes Weiß (Bodenheim, 1993), p. 149.

24. Ogilvie, “Consumption, Social Capital, and the ‘Industrious Revolution’”, pp. 295, 309.

25. See also Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, “Labour Laws in Western Europe. 13th–16th Centuries: Patterns of Political and Socio-Economic Rationality”, in Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *Working on Labor: Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 299–321, 308.

in privileged social groups “retirement from politics and active participation in elite life and institutions” gained importance during the early modern period.²⁶ While retirement is discussed only marginally by Lis and Soly, the increasing discourse on child labour and its positive evaluation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries receives strong attention. However, already in the seventeenth century, there arose a more differentiated discourse on childhood in western Europe as well, including voices in favour of children’s games and plays, as Simon Schama shows in his study on Dutch culture in the Golden Age.²⁷ From a twentieth-century perspective, interested in the historical origins of concepts and practices of childhood and of retirement, I am wondering whether, already in early modern Europe, both represented phases of life in which the glorification of work did not absolutely prevail. Also, in this respect a life-course approach might reveal alternatives to the narrative of the veneration of work and the active life. Generally, there is perhaps a risk inherent in the worthy effort to revise the standard narrative – to wit, the construction of a new master narrative that tends to underestimate oppositional voices and counter-tendencies to the glorification of work.

All the chapters of this book are so rich, both in empirical evidence and intellectual reflections, that it is almost impossible to summarize their content. Nevertheless I would like to draw four basic conclusions. First, the book brings out the *longue durée* and the enormous intensity of discourses on work in European history. It shows not only change and variation in the historical process, but also surprising continuities in attitudes and concepts. Even if the authors restrict themselves to pre-industrial periods, they provide strong arguments against the view that “work, as we know it, is a modern invention”²⁸ (André Gorz). Epochal phenomena such as the rise of capitalism, industrialization, and the reorganization and reconceptualization of work by twentieth-century welfare states and the social sciences seem to have made a smaller impact on discourses on work than both traditional modernization theories and recent constructivist paradigms suggest.

Second, Lis and Soly explain the duration, the intensity, and the “polyphony” of discourses in terms of the long existence in European history of highly differentiated social structures, of social change, and of relatively flexible political systems. The dynamics of social mobility – upwards

26. Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (London, 1989), p. 125. See also Susannah R. Ottoway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 73–89.

27. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London, 1987), pp. 468–516.

28. André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason* (London, 1989), p. 14, quoted in Lis and Soly, *Worthy Efforts*, p. 13.

and downwards – and the competition for status and power were expressed in discourses on work and fuelled them too. To relate discourses on work and workers to changing class structures and to the rise and decline of social groups is certainly one of the major methodological achievements of this book.

Third, discourses are dominated by members of the elites and by intellectuals. In all the periods under consideration, members of the subordinate classes, and particularly wage dependents and manual workers, participate rather indirectly, as objects, in discourses on work. Very seldom do they appear in the sources as active speakers. The great exception, however, is made up of people of the “middling sort” such as merchants and artisans, who based their identities, self-esteem, and political demands upon their work. The strong emphasis on the middle classes in the history of the appreciation of work, including manual labour and wage work, is an important merit of the book, which thus encourages a closer relationship between labour history and history of the “petty bourgeoisie”.

Fourth, despite their “polyphonic” character, discourses are dominated by praise of work as part of a glorification of activity. The book might elicit the conclusion that the appreciation of “worthy efforts” for 2,500 years is so strongly embedded in European culture, and perhaps in present global society, and that the assumed virtues of work are so strong for social cohesion as well as for the identity and self-esteem of individuals, that political reflections and strategies to exclude (or liberate) social groups from the world of work are either illusionary or simply legitimization of economic systems that are unable to provide proper work for all.

Towards the end of their book, Lis and Soly take a brief look beyond Europe and consider various forms of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam. In the societies substantially formed by these religions, they find confirmation of their central hypothesis. Not only in pre-industrial Europe but also in the predominant religious and cultural traditions of Asia, there was high esteem for work as a basic obligation of human beings as opposed to idleness as a source of immorality. “Commitment to hard work was not specific to pre-industrial Europe” (p. 553). On the other hand, Lis and Soly try to identify differences between Europe and other parts of the world. In their view, discourses on work were less heated in pre-industrial non-European cultures, mainly due to less differentiated social structures and to less social mobility. They are certainly aware that their considerations with respect to global comparison are no more than one small step in this direction. A systematic comparison of attitudes towards work and workers would call for research that is more empirical and regionally, as well as temporally, differentiated than is available today. However, their argument of a common appreciation of “worthy efforts” and of disapproval of idleness in Europe as well as in

pre-industrial non-European cultures is quite convincing, even if this conclusion, needless to say, raises many new questions about the origins of these commonalities. Nevertheless, in my opinion, greater caution seems to be called for when it comes to the differences between Europe and non-European societies in respect to class structures and social mobility.

Answers to such questions can be found in the second book under consideration here, the collective volume edited by Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata. This volume is related to a long-term research project on the global history of labour relations conducted at the International Institute of Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam. Whereas this project is collecting quantitative data worldwide for the period from 1500 to 2000, the aim of the book is to look more closely – and not primarily from a quantitative perspective – at the first 150 years of that time-frame. This is done in the form of thirteen case studies: five on different regions of Europe (the Netherlands, northern Italy, Russia), two each on late Ming China, Mughal India, and colonial South America, and individual examinations of Jewish communities in the Arab-Islamic world and of Tokugawa Japan.

Two introductory chapters deal with the theoretical and methodological framework of the volume. First, there is an introduction by the two editors, who explain the starting point of the volume and try to summarize some general results (see below). Secondly, Marcel van der Linden offers reflections on “Studying Attitudes to Work Worldwide” that go far beyond the case studies of this volume. While the chapters of the book deal with relatively highly developed societies that are organized as states and consist of differentiated class structures including literate bureaucrats and intellectuals, Van der Linden includes other types of societies such as hunter-gatherers and sedentary groups without social hierarchies. He discusses concepts and sources which might enable historians to study work and attitudes to work without privileging one of the manifold types of social organization that coexisted worldwide in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (and beyond).

According to the editors, the period from 1500 to 1650 was chosen for two reasons.²⁹ The first is because it is regarded as a crucial period in the

29. I would like to add a further reason, which underlines the innovative character of this volume. As far as I can see, previous approaches to the global history of attitudes to work strongly privilege the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though from two opposed perspectives: Firstly, there is an anthropological approach with a particular emphasis on “underdeveloped” societies; secondly, there is a modernization-theoretical approach with a particular interest in successful non-Western capitalist industrialization, as in Japan. Cf. Sandra Wallmann (ed.), *Social Anthropology of Work* (London, 1979); Gerd Spittler, “Beginnings of the Anthropology of Work: Nineteenth-Century Social Scientists and their Influence on Ethnography”, in Jürgen Kocka (ed.), *Work in a Modern Society: The German Historical Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford [etc.], 2010),

long-term process of globalization, when links between various parts of the world intensified or were established for the first time. Such links are discussed particularly in the case studies on South America (Tarcisio R. Bothelo and Raquel Gil Montero), where labour relations and attitudes towards work interfered with the power relations between Europeans, the indigenous population, and, at least in some areas, African slaves. Henk Looijesteijn's essay on the seventeenth-century Dutch artisan-philosopher Pieter Ploekhoy shows how the notion of slavery influenced thoughts on work, and how North America became a preferred location for the creation of utopian communities based on free labour, both in people's imaginations and in practice.

All the other essays, however, concentrate on internal developments in particular regions, even if "region" has quite different and sometimes highly variable meanings: states (such as China and Japan) with a comparatively high degree of centralization and cultural homogeneity; more complex political entities such as Mughal India; or the southern Mediterranean, where Jewish communities from Spain to Egypt had to adapt to quite different Christian, Arab-Islamic, and finally Ottoman cultural traditions and legal systems. In this volume, "global" does not primarily mean entanglement or comparison, but rather the inclusion of regional case studies from very different parts of the world. One global aspect applicable to all these regional case studies, however, is the increasing importance of European travellers' accounts as historical source material.

The second reason for choosing the period 1500 to 1650 was the assumption that, in this period in many parts of the world, the commodification of work intensified, and that wage labour therefore became increasingly important. A major aim of the essays is to look at the effects of these economic processes on social structures and particularly on labour relations and, furthermore, on the "connection between shifts in labour relations on the one hand and shifts in perceptions of work on the other" (p. 3). This approach is certainly quite similar to that of Lis and Soly. However, the methodological emphasis in this volume is almost exclusively on wage labour. What I miss, compared with Lis and Soly, is a stronger attention to the ruling elites and the various middling groups, from the "nouveau riches" and the merchants to small independent producers in agriculture and urban crafts and trades.

Most chapters offer a wide range of information. They deal with political structures and power relations in the respective regions, with economic developments and class structures, and with predominant systems of values and beliefs. In spite of the very clearly elaborated general aims of

the volume, however, the areas of emphasis in the individual articles differ considerably. Some stress labour relations, others attitudes and valuations of work. Some authors make an effort to encompass an entire society, such as Christine Moll-Murata with respect to China, Shireen Moosvi to India, and Regine Mathias to Japan; others focus primarily on individual groups such as prostitutes and courtesans in Ming China (Harriet T. Zurndorfer) or a secretarial class in Mughal India (Najaf Haider). Luca Mocarelli and Andrea Caracausi focus on the interpretation of particular sources in their chapters on Italy. The timeframes under investigation differ too. The period 1500–1650 is the centre of attention, but most articles go beyond it one way or the other. Karin Hofmeester's chapter, "Jewish Ethics and Women's Work in the Arab-Islamic World", for instance, spans a period from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, and Regine Matthias's paper on Tokugawa Japan includes an time-frame well into the nineteenth century.

I do not think that this heterogeneity does any harm. The current state of research about the individual regions under investigation here varies to a great extent, and the sources available so far are not distributed uniformly over the historical periods. The sixteenth century is connected in various ways to the centuries before and after. The individual authors have obviously made an effort to keep in mind the overarching issues being considered by this volume, but they have flexibly interpreted this assignment. Accordingly, the articles reflect factors specific to the respective regions, the corresponding research traditions, and, of course, the scholarly interests of the individual authors. On the whole, the approach succeeds in striking a balance between a common objective and individual diversity.

Several remarkable perspectives, however, characterize the whole volume. Firstly, urban–rural differences in labour relations are taken very seriously. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a basic distinction between labour relations in rural regions and in towns and cities might indeed have characterized the regions investigated here. Nevertheless, I sometimes got the feeling that the distinction between town and countryside is taken for granted too readily in this book. In many European regions with which I am familiar in the early modern period, the specialization of agrarian production to satisfy the demand of growing cities, the spread of domestic industries in towns and in the countryside, of rural artisanry, of peddling, and of many other forms of labour migration, gradually eroded the social significance of city walls.

Secondly, even more attention is accorded to the work of women, both in theory and in practice, than that of men. Three chapters (Ariadne Schmidt on the northern Netherlands, Karin Hofmeester on the Jewish communities of the southern Mediterranean, and Harriet T. Zurndorfer on China) focus on women, and several other essays give them

considerable space. The prominence of the gender perspective is certainly one of the great virtues of this volume. The proper behaviour of women and their place in society seems to be a major issue of philosophical reasoning, religious beliefs, and legal norms, but also in poetry and visual arts in all the societies studied in this volume.³⁰ This is perhaps not surprising; after all, gender and age are among the oldest and most universal principles of the division of labour. By the way, it is a pity that age is not systematically integrated into the research agenda; it shows up rather occasionally and by chance, mainly in connection with teaching children the virtues of work.

With respect to gender, the essays in this volume demonstrate the ambivalence of perceptions and evaluations of work – not only between discourse and practice (which is not surprising), but also within discourses (which has been studied to a much lesser extent heretofore). Throughout the various cultures examined here, philosophical and religious texts that deal with the order of society in general terms seem to place particular emphasis on the domesticity of women, and, as a corollary, on the risk of their immorality in case of laziness. Legal norms, in contrast, which are closer to everyday practices, seem to be much more open to the variety of work performed by women within and outside their households. Ambivalences of this kind are perhaps characteristic of various types of patriarchal societies. In this way, the volume clearly shows that a gender perspective opens up access to a better general understanding of the ambivalences of discourses on work and labour.

An ongoing leitmotif in this volume is a consideration of the significance of religious-philosophical systems of belief and institutions as arenas of discourse on work. The book brings out many similarities with respect to work ethics among various religious movements within Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism, and Christian denominations including the Russian Orthodox Church (Arkadiy E. Tarasov), which has seldom attracted attention from Western scholars. On the other hand, there are also examples, albeit few, of explicit refusal to work for the purpose of making a living in favour of pursuing spiritual goals or religious studies – for instance, among Jewish men or Buddhist monks. Several essays discuss the role played by religion in the work ethic of ordinary people, and also of religious arguments in their struggle for greater appreciation of their work and their position in society. The volume emphatically reminds us that a global history of attitudes and valuations of work cannot be written without granting religion a prominent place.

30. In the light of these findings it is even more surprising that Lis and Soly, in their volume, complain so clearly about the “dearth of sources [...] on attitudes toward women’s work in pre-industrial Europe” (p. 572).

A final point concerns terminology. Several articles discuss the vocabulary that has been used in various languages to discuss work and labour – in Chinese, Japanese, and Russian, for instance. This approach ought to be systematically developed further in the future. A comparative dictionary of work-related terminologies would be of enormous value for a global history of work. Nevertheless, the book as it stands constitutes a major step forward towards a global history of work in pre-industrial times. I recommend it strongly to anybody interested in one of the regions it considers or in comparative reflections on similarities or differences in labour relations and discourses on work.

The volume by Lis and Soly is a masterpiece that henceforth will have to be taken into consideration by anyone dealing with the history of work. The book edited by Hofmeester and Moll-Murata is a stimulating, complementary addition that ought to encourage other scholars to address the research results and conclusions presented by Lis und Soly in a global context.