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Studying Attitudes to Work Worldwide, 1500–1650: Concepts, Sources, and Problems of Interpretation*

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SUMMARY: The period 1500–1650 was characterized by huge global transformations. These had a major impact on a wide range of societal forms and cultures. As a result, different work ethics clashed and formed hybrid combinations, and new work ethics came into being during many-sided confrontations. The question of how the labouring poor in different parts of the world experienced these changes in the context of their work is an extremely difficult one. The present essay attempts to define a number of key concepts ("work", "attitude"); it evaluates critically the various sources which might give us an insight into attitudes to work; and it reflects on interpretative difficulties. The essay concludes by presenting a few substantive hypotheses.

The period 1500–1650 was, as we know, characterized by huge transformations. Gradually, the modern world system started to extend across the globe, and the influence of market forces increased. That had a major impact on a wide range of societal forms and cultures and as a result in many cases different work ethics clashed and formed hybrid combinations. In other cases, traditional work ethics remained almost unaffected or new work ethics came into being during many-sided confrontations.

Much has been written about some aspects of those developments, especially the rise of a capitalist *Wirtschaftsethik*, with Max Weber's famous hypothesis regarding the "Protestant ethic" in particular leading to an enormous amount of literature.[1] Seen from the point of view of

* I am grateful to Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata for their critical remarks on an earlier version of this essay and for alerting me to additional sources. I would also like to thank Josef Ehmer and Alice Mul for their comments on the penultimate draft.

1. See the surveys in Robert W. Green (ed.), *Protestantism and Capitalism: The Weber Thesis and Its Critics* (Boston, MA, 1959); Johannes Winckelmann (ed.), *Max Weber, Die Protestantische Ethik*, II: *Kritiken und Antikritiken* (Gütersloh, 1978).

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social history, this immense literature has two important shortcomings. First, much of it deals with the views of certain theologians and religious leaders in the period, without asking what the impact of their views was on the societies of their time. Second, if attention is paid to the social impact of ideas, then that research is generally focused more on entrepreneurs and much less on the lower classes.

In this preliminary contribution I will be reflecting on the scope offered by an alternative mode of interpretation, one that attempts to determine more emphatically the relations experienced by the labouring poor in the context of their work. First though, I will endeavour to describe a number of the key concepts ("work", "attitude") before critically discussing the various sources which might give us an insight into attitudes to work. I will conclude by discussing the interpretative difficulties and present a few substantive hypotheses.

CONCEPTS

The first question we need to ask ourselves is of course what do we mean by "work"? Interestingly, there are linguistic indications to suggest that work was originally associated with womanhood. Evans has pointed to "female associations of the English word *labo[u]r* and the French *travailler*. The Greek *techne* included all manual skills: the verb, *tikto*, means 'to bring forth into the world' and is used of the woman in the sense of 'to bring forth.' Its general sense is to 'create' or 'produce'."[2] In addition, there was probably an association with suffering (a woman's labour pains). From there, the past two or three centuries have seen a demarcation emerging between work and other human activities, for example leisure. Prior to that there was no strict dividing line, and indeed the division between work and non-work remains contested and is subject to continuous change.[3]

2. W.N. Evans, "The Cultural Significance of the Changed Attitude to Work in Great Britain", *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 13 (1949), pp. 1–8, 6.

3. Lucien Febvre, "Travail: évolution d'un mot et d'une idée", *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique*, 41 (1948), pp. 19–28; Viktor von Weizsäcker, "Zum Begriffe der Arbeit", in Edgar Salin (ed.), *Synopsis. Festgabe für Alfred Weber* (Heidelberg, 1948), pp. 705–761; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL, 1958); Werner Conze, "Arbeit", in Otto Brunner *et al.* (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, I (Stuttgart, 1972), pp. 154–215; Michel Cartier (ed.), *Le Travail et ses représentations* (Paris, 1984); Jean-Marie Vincent, *Critique du travail: le faire et l'agir* (Paris, 1987); Herbert A. Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Albany, NY, 1992); Keith Thomas (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Work* (Oxford, 1999); Gerd Spittler, "Arbeit – Transformation von Objekten oder Interaktion mit Subjekten?", *Peripherie*, 85–86 (2002), pp. 9–31; Madhavan K. Palat, "Rabochii", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 50 (2002), pp. 345–374; Hélène d'Almeida-Topor *et al.* (eds), *Le Travail en Afrique Noire: représentations et pratiques à l'époque contemporaine* (Paris, 2003); Manfred Füllsack, *Arbeit*

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Discussions of answers to the question "What is work?" have been raging for decades. Many of the definitions proffered limit themselves to situations in which money plays a role. Nels Anderson, for example, talks about the "time given to a job for which one is paid".[4] Such a description is not particularly helpful for our project, unless we wish to assume that unpaid work is not work. Other scholars have proposed broader definitions. Margaret Mead, for instance, has described work as "activity that is purposeful and directed towards ends that lie outside that activity", in contrast to "play", an "activity which is self-rewarding".[5]

A very simple definition could perhaps be: work is the purposive production of useful objects or services.[6] There are two elements here that should be emphasized. Work is a purposive activity ("premeditated"), and work creates objects or services that are useful to some people.[7] Usefulness is, of course, subjective: some people may find extremely useless what others consider to be very useful. Warfare, for example, is – apart from other things – a kind of labour process, but many people do not regard it as a useful activity – generally depending on the war that is being fought and the side those people are on. Work might also take the form of providing symbolic services: exorcism performed by a shaman is work, as is the hearing of confession done by a Catholic priest.

Work can be distinguished from non-work and from anti-work. Here non-work means recovery from work through, for instance, relaxation

(Vienna, 2009); Josef Ehmer and Catharina Lis (eds), *The Idea of Work in Europe from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Farnham, 2009).

4. Nels Anderson, *Work and Leisure* (London, 1961), p. 1; *idem*, *Man's Work and Leisure* (Leiden, 1974).

5. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (London, 1950), p. 163.

6. The definition is essentially the same as that of Charles and Chris Tilly: "Work includes any human effort adding use value to goods and services"; Charles Tilly and Chris Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder, CO, 1998), p. 22. I prefer not to use the Marxian concept "use value" in this context, since use values always exist in conjunction with exchange values (prices) and thus that definition is really only applicable to commodified labour. The anthropologist Gerd Spittler has defined work as "a continuous human activity aimed at producing goods and services"; Gerd Spittler, "Work: Anthropological Aspects", *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, XXIV (Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 16565–16569, 16565. I share his view to a large extent, though I would include discontinuous activity too. My definition is entirely compatible with that of the sociologist Heiner Ganßmann: "Work is human activity that transforms matter/energy and applies information for the purpose ultimately of providing resources to satisfy needs"; Heiner Ganßmann, "Ein Versuch über Arbeit", in Frithjof Hager (ed.), *Geschichte denken. Ein Notizbuch für Leo Löwental* (Leipzig, 1992), pp. 254–293, 263.

7. What consciously directed or purposive action means precisely is in itself a complex question. See, for example, Tim Ingold, "The Architect and the Bee: Reflections on the Work of Animals and Men", *Man*, New Series, 18 (1983), pp. 1–20.

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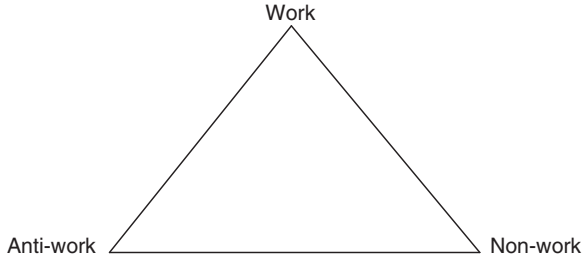
or sleeping. Anti-work covers all playful activities that cost a lot of energy but are not meant to produce useful objects or services.



Naturally, those three components cannot always be distinguished neatly as they overlap to some extent; nor are they clearly separated in time. During work time workers sometimes do things other than work, such as playing, sleeping, or relaxing. Cottage labourers, modern teleworkers, and many self-employed people working from home combine different activities.

The boundaries between those three types of activity are therefore vague and continue to be contested. That can be seen in the *Eigensinn* shown by workers during their work.[8] At the same time, there is not necessarily a sharp distinction between leisure activities and work: "Many hobbies and leisure pursuits are utilitarian activities which, though in themselves a source of interest and satisfaction, are undertaken initially for economic reasons. There is no clear line of demarcation between gardening or house-painting done from necessity and done from choice."[9]

When we ascribe these categories to reality, it is obviously important to distinguish between our own classifications and the classifications applied by the people we are studying. For example, in numerous societies men (and, often women) believe that many things done by women are not work at all – while we, basing ourselves on a certain definition of work, would certainly consider those female activities to be work.

The second question is: "Why do people work?" Here I would distinguish three kinds of work incentive: coercion; compensation, and commitment.[10]

8. Alf Lüdtke, *Eigensinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg, 1993). For an extensive review of this important work, see my "Keeping Distance: Alf Lüdtke's 'Decentred' Labour History", *International Review of Social History*, 40 (1995), pp. 285–294. Exemplary studies of *Eigensinn* include Douglas A. Reid, "The Decline of Saint Monday, 1766–1876", *Past and Present*, 71 (1976), pp. 76–101; and Shankar Ramaswami, "Masculinity, Respect, and the Tragic: Themes of Proletarian Humor in Contemporary Industrial Delhi", in Rana P. Behal and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *India's Labouring Poor: Historical Studies, c.1600–c.2000* (New Delhi, 2007), pp. 203–227.

9. Sylvia Shimmin, "Concepts of Work", *Occupational Psychology*, 40 (1966), pp. 195–201, 195.

10. Tilly and Tilly, *Work under Capitalism*, pp. 74–75, 87, 259; Johannes Berger, "Warum arbeiten die Arbeiter? Neomarxistische und neodurkheimianische Erklärungen", *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 24 (1995), pp. 407–421, 416.

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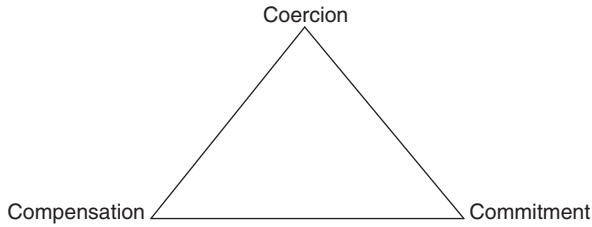
Coercion includes threats with or without the application of force, including incarceration, tormenting, mutilation, sale (of slaves), dismissal (of wage workers), or even death. Commitment is based on persuasion and sometimes joy, on workers being convinced that what they are doing is useful, important, and honorific. Compensation encompasses all material and non-material rewards, including wages and food rations.



The three work incentives never occur in isolation but always in constantly changing combinations and, again, their mutual boundaries cannot always be drawn sharply. A university professor, for instance, will work because it gives her or him status, but also because the job is paid handsomely.

Furthermore, we should recognize that during the various phases of a work relationship the combination of incentives can change. "The incentive to take up a particular kind of work or even to work at all has a logic distinct from incentives to working *well*."[11]

The third question then is: "What do we mean by attitudes to work?" An attitude could be described as: "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor".[12] Incentive structures and attitudes to work are closely related. The core concept here is that of internalization: if at time t_1 an individual must be induced to work by external compensation or coercion and at time t_2 does so on their own initiative, then he or she can be said to have internalized those external incentives. Internalization is thus a psychological process that converts external incentives (coercion, compensation) either entirely or partly into internal incentives (commitment).[13]

Consistent with that, David Landes has made a distinction between "time-discipline" and "time-obedience", or punctuality coming "from within" or "from without".[14] In relation to chattel slaves in the

11. Sandra Wallman, "Introduction", in *idem* (ed.), *Social Anthropology of Work* (London, 1979), pp. 1–24, 6.
12. Alice H. Eagly and Shelly Chaiken, *The Psychology of Attitudes* (Fort Worth, TX, 1993), p. 1. See also the special issue of *Social Cognition*, 25 (2007), on "What Is an Attitude?".
13. See, for example, Kenneth C. Wallis and James L. Poulton, *Internalization* (Buckingham [etc.], 2001), esp. pp. 3–14.
14. David S. Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p. 7.

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antebellum American South, Mark Smith has defined that difference as follows:

> [...] time-obedience refers to a respect for mechanical time among workers that, unlike time-discipline, was not internalized, but was rather enforced by time-conscious planters, either with the threat or the use of violence or with the constant repetition of mechanically defined time through sound, as with the chiming of clock-regulated bells.[15]

How such internalization occurs is an issue that lies beyond the scope of this article.

Attitudes to work relate primarily to the duration, intensity, and quality of the work. The Pakistani sociologist, Shahid Alam, has proposed a slightly more extensive taxonomy, distinguishing three elements that, when combined, characterize an attitude to work (work ethic). First, effort propensity: this dimension covers work–leisure choices. Effort propensity is larger when the time devoted to work is larger too. Second, social efficiency, which covers socially acquired attributes that determine the effectiveness with which work or leisure activities are performed. The aspects involved are dexterity, perfectionism, consistency, and discipline. And third, social rationality: this dimension indicates in what measure labour relations and other social relations are characterized by such factors as trust, honesty, orderliness, discipline, courtesy, and foresight.[16]

Many types of factor can play roles in analysing attitudes to work. First and foremost, we must know, of course, whether we are dealing with an ego-perspective or an alter-perspective. In the case of an ego-perspective, we shall be considering what individuals or groups think about themselves; in the case of an alter-perspective we shall be considering the views of individuals or groups about other individuals or groups. Within the ego-perspective, we can identify two levels, which, following Anthony Giddens, we could term practical consciousness and discursive consciousness. Practical consciousness is what people think when they actually do something, while discursive consciousness is what people say when they talk about what they do. Those two levels are not necessarily congruent. People may, for instance, say that they are orderly and efficient, while their actual behaviour reveals that they are not. Practical consciousness is much more difficult to study than discursive consciousness, since it is easier to find out what people say than what they actually do.

15. Mark M. Smith, "Time, Slavery and Plantation Capitalism in the Ante-bellum American South", *Past and Present*, 150 (1996), pp. 142–168, 145.

16. M. Shahid Alam, "Some Notes on Work Ethos and Economic Development", *World Development*, 13 (1985), pp. 251–254; *idem*, "Some European Perceptions of Japan's Work-Ethos in the Tokugawa Era: A Limited Survey of Observations from the West's First Encounters Offers Parallels to Today's", *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 46 (1987), pp. 229–243.

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Related to that is a second distinction, between general and specific attitudes. People can regard "work" in an abstract sense as meaningful while at the same time loathing certain forms of work. In almost all societies, gender differentiation has resulted in some tasks being carried out principally or exclusively by men, or principally or exclusively by women.[17] Further, many sources create the impression that women have to work harder than men and have less power than men. For instance, Jean Barbot writes about Senegal around 1700 that the men "do not care to exert themselves greatly, either in body or mind", while most women

> [...] work at weaving cloths from cotton, or mats from straw or rushes [...]. Wives and daughters also look after the house. They pound millet and make bread from it. They attend to the cooking. They fetch water from the river or the nearest supply. They feed their infants. Finally, they have to be responsible for keeping going all night a fire which burns near where their husband sleeps.[18]

And François Valentijn noted that in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), "the men here are mostly lords and the women generally in the Indies mostly slaves of the men".[19]

Moreover, different specializations within a given social division of labour are perceived differently. In Senegal, Barbot writes, "they occupy themselves either in tilling the fields or sowing them, because this occupation is the most honoured after that of soldiering. Those who make fishing-nets, and the potters, the fishermen, the weavers and the weapon-makers, are considered mere mechanics."[20] In contrast, in Scandinavia, according to Bishop Olaus Magnus, referring to a slightly earlier period, "men generally hold smiths in extraordinary esteem, whether blacksmiths, founders, or metal-turners".[21] A similar differentiation can be found for various other types of labour relation. While today wage labour is preferred by many to other available forms of work, in sixteenth- and

17. The discussion of why the gendered division of labour is so persistent has been going on since the nineteenth century. For recent discussion see, *inter alia*, Rayna R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York [etc.], 1975); Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson (eds), *Women's Work, Men's Property: The Origins of Gender and Class* (London, 1986); or Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford [etc.], 1990).

18. P.E.H. Hair *et al.* (eds), *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678–1712*, I [Works Issued by the Hakluyt Society, Second Series, No. 175] (London, 1992), pp. 89–90.

19. Sinnappah Arasaratnam (ed. and trans.), *François Valentijn's Description of Ceylon*, [Works Issued by the Hakluyt Society, Second Series, No. 149] (London, 1978), p. 165.

20. Hair, *Barbot on Guinea*, p. 89.

21. Olaus Magnus, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus/Description of the Northern Peoples* (Rome, 1555), II, Peter Foote (ed.) and Peter Fisher and Humphrey Higgens (trans.), [Works Issued by the Hakluyt Society, Second Series, No. 187] (London, 1998), p. 295.

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seventeenth-century England it was regarded as very lowly because it was associated with a completely uncertain existence, and entailed no rights.[22]

A third aspect is that attitudes to work may be individual or group-based. Implicitly, contemporary Western researchers are often inclined to assume that relations and behaviours are based broadly on perceptions of individual self-interest. However, in the West as well as in many other societies work is often interpreted as a fundamental social activity which individuals engage in not only for themselves but also for others (compare the English servant/service or the German *Diener/Dienst*). Thomas Smith, a scholar of Japan, has observed that:

> The language of Tokugawa agriculture was rich in vocabulary expressing work in a context of obligation to others. *Suke* was labour given by a dependent to a protector in return and gratitude for benefits such as the loan of land, animals and a house. *Yui* was an equal exchange of like labour such as mutual help in transplanting rice. [...]. It is difficult to find any word that suggests work in a social context without carrying a sense of obligation to others.
>
> After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, this limitation of vocabulary became an inconvenience. None of the words mentioned could properly be used for factory employment, which in both theory and law was held by the new westernizing government to result from a contract freely entered into by autonomous and equal parties. So foreign to social experience was this notion, however, that no satisfactory general term for worker was found until the 1930s.[23]

SOURCES

How can we identify what attitudes to work existed between 1500 and 1650? We can sometimes discover sources through which "the subaltern speaks", to quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, but such sources are not numerous. One example is the traditional songs sung by people performing labour.[24] It is likely that, in many parts of the world, a great deal of singing took place during work. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (c.1601), Duke Orsino says:

> O, fellow! come, the song we had last night.
> Mark it, Cesario; it is old and plain;

22. Christopher Hill, "Pottage for Freeborn Englishmen: Attitudes to Wage Labour in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", in C.H. Feinstein (ed.), *Socialism, Capitalism and Economic Growth: Essays Presented to Maurice Dobb* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 338–350.

23. Thomas C. Smith, "Peasant Time and Factory Time in Japan", *Past and Present*, 111 (1986), pp. 165–197, 183.

24. Compare Gerald Porter, "'Work the Old Lady Out of the Ditch': Singing at Work by English Lacemakers", *Journal of Folklore Research*, 31:1–3 (1994), pp. 35–55, 39. As early as the 1950s, the author noted, with regard to the Caribbean island of St Lucia: "It is unusual for two or more people working together at the same task not to be singing work songs, and a woman working alone will nearly always be humming or singing to herself"; Daniel J. Crowley, "Song and Dance in St Lucia", *Ethnomusicology*, 1:9 (1957), pp. 4–14, 13.

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The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,
And the free maids that weave their threads with bones,
Do use to chant it; (Act 2, Scene 4, 42–46)

Such work songs encouraged not only a willingness to work, they could also facilitate the synchronization of activity, as in construction work, or in hoisting and lowering the sails of a ship, or planting rice in long rows.[25] In the case of Chinese earth-pounding songs, the singing was designed to encourage perseverance, because the longer the workers pounded the earth the stronger the walls would be.[26]

Another potential direct source is the collective fantasies of another, better, life, as expressed in stories about Cockaigne and similar constructs – in all utopias we encounter a society without sorrow. Referring to European narratives of the kind, Piero Camporesi spoke of:

> [...] the idea of eradicating barons and dukes, rejecting the parasitic and suffocating logic of the rich classes, the dream of the naked body carefree in its innocence, the yearning for physical health and the struggle for victory over disease, famine and cold, and freedom from the brutality of forced and inhuman labour.[27]

That kind of utopia is not typically European, however, and we can find it in a tributary society such as China, where the origins of such stories date back even further.[28]

Proverbs passed down through the ages can be used too, though it is particularly difficult to interpret them correctly since they are generally extremely short. Consider, for example, the following traditional proverbs from sub-Saharan Africa:

"You cannot kill game by looking at it."
"Laziness lends assistance to fatigue."

25. Marek Korczynski, "Music at Work: Towards a Historical Overview", *Folk Music Journal*, 8 (2003), pp. 314–334, 317; Harold Whates, "The Background of Sea Shanties", *Music and Letters*, 18 (1937), pp. 259–264; Hans-Jürgen Wanner, "Die Hauptformen des Hochseeshantys", *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung*, 11 (1966), pp. 26–36; Helge Gerndt, *Kultur als Forschungsfeld. Über volkskundliches Denken und Arbeiten* (Munich, 1981), pp. 98–117.
26. Wolfram Eberhard, "Pekinger Stampferlieder, gesammelt von Hong Fengju", *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 67 (1935), pp. 232–248; Christine Moll-Murata, "Maintenance and Renovation of the Metropolitan City God Temple and the Peking City Wall during the Qing Dynasty", in *idem et al.* (eds), *Chinese Handicraft Regulations of the Qing Dynasty* (Munich, 2005), pp. 233–262, 255.
27. Piero Camporesi, *The Land of Hunger*, Tania Croft-Murray (trans.) (Cambridge, 1996), p. 52.
28. Wolfgang Bauer, *China und die Hoffnung auf Glück. Paradiese, Utopien, Idealvorstellungen in der Geistesgeschichte Chinas* (Munich, 1971), ch. 3/3; Romer Cornejo Bustamante, "On Utopia and Its Limits in China", in David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Studies on Asia and Africa from Latin America* (Mexico City, 1990), pp. 25–36.

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"A lazy man looks for light employment."
"The sieve never sifts meal by itself."[29]

It is not easy to draw conclusions about attitudes to work from such proverbs, other than that work inevitably involves effort.

Naturally, this list of possible sources could be expanded.[30] But the difficulty with all these sources, which directly reflect what people thought four centuries ago, is that they are seldom transmitted to us in a pure form; usually "they are narrative in form and go through mutations and interpolations in being handed down through generations".[31] Such sources therefore constitute only "soft evidence" – unlike archaeological material or authentic texts.[32]

The reports of contemporaries from elsewhere, usually written by the elite including travellers and missionaries, form a second type of source. We have a large number of travel narratives for our period, varying from Richard Hakluyt (1589) to Samuel Purchas (1625).[33] Some of the travel narratives are reflective, but by far the most are, as Ter Ellingson has put it, "unphilosophical"; they "describe without reflecting much on the significance of what they see, particularly on the meanings of similarities and differences in the ways of life of human communities".[34] Such sources

29. A.O. Stafford, "The Mind of the African Negro as Reflected in His Proverbs", *Journal of Negro History*, 1 (1916), pp. 42–48, 45–46.

30. See e.g., the contributions of Gerhard Jaritz, Ilja M. Veldman, and Peter Burke in Ehmer and Lis, *Idea of Work*.

31. Vijaya Ramaswamy, "Women and Farm Work in Tamil Folk Songs", *Social Scientist*, 21:9–11 (1993), pp. 113–129, 114. See also, however, Imre Katona, "Reminiscences of Primitive Divisions of Labor Between Sexes and Age Groups in the Peasant Folklore of Modern Times", in Stanley Diamond (ed.), *Toward a Marxist Anthropology: Problems and Perspectives* (The Hague, 1979), pp. 377–383.

32. Jan Vansina, *De la tradition orale. Essai de méthode historique* (Tervuren, 1961). For an example of how labour historians can use mural paintings as a source, see Alec Gordon and Napat Sirisambhand, "Evidence for Thailand's Missing Social History: Thai Women in Old Mural Paintings", *International Review of Social History*, 47 (2002), pp. 261–275. In Europe, countless paintings were made which can serve as a source. For the Low Countries, see Annette de Vries, *Ingelijst werk. De verbeelding van arbeid en beroep in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden* (Zwolle, 2004).

33. For surveys see, for example, J.N.L. Baker, *A History of Geographical Discovery and Exploration* (London, 1931); Percy G. Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars, 1660–1800* (Berkeley, CA, 1962); Helen Delpar, *The Discoverers: An Encyclopedia of Explorers and Exploration* (New York, 1980); Felipe Fernández-Armesto (ed.), *The Times Atlas of World Exploration* (New York, 1991). Examples of missionary reports chosen more or less at random include: William Campbell, *Formosa under the Dutch, Described from Contemporary Records* (London, 1903); Alfonso de Sandoval, *De instauranda Aethiopum salute. El mundo de la esclavitud negra en América* (Bogota, 1956); C.R. Boxer (ed.), *South China in the Sixteenth Century: Being the Narrative of Galeote Pereira, Fr Gaspar da Cruz, OP, Fr Martín de Rada, OESA. (1550–1575)* (Nendeln, 1967).

34. Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, CA, 2001), p. 47.

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may be used only with the utmost caution, because often they are partly projections and sometimes contain imaginative fabrications – a problem to which I will return shortly.

One might expect reports to be more reliable the longer the observer had lived in the society about which he or she was writing – one reason why reports written by captives, diplomats, and missionaries, who stayed for many years, would seem worthy of special attention. In the case of the Scottish missionary Thomas Cullen Young (1880–1955), for example, it has been noted that the "objectivity" of his writings on the Tumbuka-Kamanga peoples "increased the longer he spent in Malawi. Initially he suffered from one strong prejudice: he was affronted by the apparent lack of a work ethic." Later he would change his position and "*refute* the notion that Africans are lazy, stressing hard work within the village context, and showing that laziness is a serious offence in traditional values".[35]

Third, there is a miscellany of official texts, including reports on local relations and on the regulation of work. Naturally, such texts were a feature only of societies with literate bureaucracies. Insofar as it relates to the work process and work relations, legislation offers an initial point of access; it tells us something not only about the economy and culture, but also about what the labouring population was expected to do and what they apparently sometimes or frequently did not do.[36] The descriptive inventories of local relations are another variant. For the Spanish-speaking world we have, for example, Juan López de Valesca's *Geografía y descripción de las Indias* (1574) and Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, *Compendio y descripción de las Indias Occidentales* (c.1628) – two large-scale surveys, one of which covers

35. Peter G. Forster, "Missionaries and Anthropology: The Case of the Scots of Northern Malawi", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 16:2 (1986), pp. 101–120, 110. A fine exploration of the stories of British captives in North Africa, India, and the Americas is Linda Colley's *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (New York, 2002); Colley also gives a provisional survey of British captivity narratives on pp. 380–385. For North American narratives see, *inter alia*, Alden T. Vaughan, *Narratives of North American Indian Captivity: A Selective Bibliography* (New York, 1983); Frances Roe Kestler (ed.), *The Indian Captivity Narrative: A Woman's View* (New York, 1990); and Paul Baepler (ed.), *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives* (Chicago, IL, 1999). For examples of Spanish and German captivity narratives, see, for example, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca* [1542], Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz (trans.) (Lincoln, NE, 2003), and Neil L. Whitehead and Michael Harbsmeier (eds), *Hans Staden's True History: An Account of Cannibal Captivity in Brazil* [1557] (Durham, NC, 2008).

36. See, *inter alia*, Karl Heinz Ludwig and Peter Sika (eds), *Bergbau und Arbeitsrecht. Die Arbeitsverfassung im europäischen Bergbau des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Vienna, 1989); Maya Shatzmiller, "Women and Wage Labour in the Medieval Islamic West: Legal Issues in an Economic Context", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 40 (1997), pp. 174–206; *The Great Ming Code: Da Ming lü*, trans. Jiang Yonglin (Seattle, WA, 2005), including penal-law clauses on work-related crimes; Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies: Literary and Legal Productions in Britain, 1350–1500* (Basingstoke, 2006).

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not only the entire Spanish-American continent but also the Philippines and the Moluccas.[37]

Fourth, studies from later periods can be used heuristically. In societies in which slave labour was widespread the major slave owners and their families generally looked down on menial labour. Ancient Greece and the American South are classic examples of that, and the same attitude can be found in other societies too. Mary Kingsley, who travelled through the French Congo during the 1890s, wrote, for example, about the Igalwa, who lived on Lambaréné Island:

> The Igalwa is truly great at sitting, the men pursuing a policy of masterly inactivity, broken occasionally by leisurely netting a fishing net, the end of the netting hitched up on the roof thatch, and not held by a stirrup. The ladies are employed in the manufacture of articles pertaining to a higher culture [...] – the most gorgeous bed-quilts and pillow-cases – made of patchwork [...]. On the island they [...] laze their lives away like lotus-eaters. Their slaves work their large plantations, and bring up to them magnificent yams, ready prepared agooma, sweet-potatoes, papaw, &c., not forgetting that delicacy Odeaka cheese.[38]

And about the Californios, the Spanish-speaking inhabitants who dominated California before it was acquired by the United States, observers wrote unanimously that they "were lazy and lacked all semblance of personal enterprise or willingness to work" – that they had all the heavy work done by Native Americans, who received a nominal wage in return for their labour but who were, effectively, a kind of slave.[39] Such a pattern leads one to presume that in other societies too in which unfree labour played an important role the elite shared similar attitudes to labour, though it should be noted that often this negative work ethic in slave societies was much less evident among free groups of poor and the less affluent.[40] Based on other historical experiences, there is every reason

37. Juan López de Valesca, *Geografía y descripción de las Indias*, M. Jiménez de la Espada (ed.) (Madrid, 1971); Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, *Compendio y descripción de las Indias Occidentales*, B. Velasco Bayón (ed.) (Madrid, 1969); *idem*, *Compendium and Description of the West Indies*, Charles Upson Clark (trans.) (Washington DC, 1942). López de Valesca wrote reports on Brazil, China, Japan, New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. The two surveys mentioned here form the basis of the study of Spanish America c.1600 written by Bernard Slicher van Bath and published as *Spaans Amerika omstreeks 1600* (Utrecht [etc.], 1979) (available only in Dutch).

38. Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa* (London, 2000 [1897]), pp. 84 and 89.

39. David J. Langum, "Californios and the Image of Indolence", *Western Historical Quarterly*, 9 (1978), pp. 181–196, 181.

40. See, for example, Carl R. Osthaus, "The Work Ethic of the Plain Folk: Labor and Religion in the Old South", *Journal of Southern History*, 70 (2004), pp. 745–782. Osthaus argues that for many smaller farmers in the US South, even those who owned a few slaves, "Manual labor performed at one's own behest and for the benefit of one's own family [...] was admirable"; p. 746.

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to suppose therefore that this type of work ethic was prevalent among large slave owners in the period 1500–1650 too.

PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

Work processes are always embedded in wider social relations. Attitudes to work reflect not only labour relations in a narrow sense, but also the society in which those labour relations are situated. The anthropologist Maurice Godelier, who studied this issue thirty years ago, noted rightly that "what we in the West today call 'working,' 'worker,' and 'work' may be expected to have many different representations in other societies".[41] Furthermore, attitudes to work depend on social status and change over time. Shashi Upadhyay has perceptibly observed then that:

> Even within a given society, the meaning of work may change over time, and the various groups or classes too may view work differently. Thus it is possible that capitalists, artisans and the proletariat may have different notions of work. In fact, even within a class, different attitudes towards work are likely to exist. Attitudes regarding work vary depending on whether the country is at war or at peace, whether work is to be found easily or with difficulty, whether the worker is a supervisor or a labourer, whether he is the employer or an employee, and finally depending on the nature and amount of wages. There is no essential and universal meaning attached to "work", nor one that transcends time, space, class or status.[42]

It is precisely because of that variation and fluidity that historians are repeatedly tempted to be led astray by two different types of error. The first is that of projection: we tend to see what we want to see. Often, the images we form of a different society say more about ourselves than about that other society.[43] Europeans in the nineteenth century believed, for example, that East Asians were decadent: "At a time when the industrial nations of the West were strong and social ideologies such as Calvinism and social-Darwinism exuded a sense of direction and determination, the lesser races, it was held, were backward and would remain so because they were indisposed to work." When, after 1868, Japan embarked on a programme of modernization, European observers were therefore sceptical since the Japanese lacked "the requisite powers not only of industry but

41. Maurice Godelier, "Aide-Mémoire for a Survey of Work and Its Representations", *Current Anthropology*, 21 (1980), pp. 831É835, 832–833.

42. Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, "Dalits and the Ideology of Work in India", in Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu P. Mohapatra (eds), *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories. Studies in Honour of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 152–171, 152.

43. On this see Urs Bitterli, *Die "Wilden" und die "Zivilisierten". Grundzüge einer Geistes- und Kulturgeschichte der europäisch-überseeischen Begegnung* (Munich, 1976), esp. Part IV. Also V.G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind* (Harmondsworth, 1972), or William Brandon, *New Worlds for Old: Reports from the New World and Their Effect on the Development of Social Thought in Europe, 1500–1800* (Athens, OH [etc.], 1986).

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also of perseverance".[44] It is extraordinarily difficult to determine how work was thought of in other societies 500 years ago. Reading the reports written by Europeans, one is quickly struck by the impression that most inhabitants of South America, Africa, or Asia were extraordinarily lazy. Indolence was a complaint made repeatedly against them.

The second type of error is that of false generalization. We often tend to assume that observations we have made in a number of cases apply more generally in time and place, without there actually being a solid empirical basis for that assumption. One good example of such a generalization is E.P. Thompson's theory of "task-orientation". Drawing on the English situation, Thompson argued that the task-orientation of pre-industrial workers (peasants, for example) was characterized by three features: their work rhythm was determined by the "observed necessity" of the natural environment; they made no clear distinction between "work" and "life" (i.e. social intercourse); and their attitude to work was, to modern eyes, "wasteful and lacking in urgency".[45] That generalization has been convincingly refuted, however, based on studies of agricultural producers in late Tokugawa Japan. Owing in part to the pressure of a growing population density, peasants were forced to plan their crops in advance, to coordinate a variety of activities over longer periods, and to keep records.[46]

There would seem to be just three approaches, preferably used in combination, to counteract the dangers of projection and false generalization. First, being extremely critical in how one uses the sources. Second, engaging

44. Jean-Pierre Lehmann, "Old and New Japonisme: The Tokugawa Legacy and Modern European Images of Japan", *Modern Asian Studies*, 18 (1984), pp. 757–768, 761. There is a direct link with racism here. The sinologist Walter Demel has demonstrated how, in the sixteenth century, Europeans regarded the Chinese as "white", and in the eighteenth century as "yellow", a change that probably reflected shifts in the international balance of power. See Walter Demel, "Wie die Chinesen gelb wurden. Ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der Rassentheorien", *Historische Zeitschrift*, 255 (1992), pp. 625–666.

45. E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism", *Past and Present*, 38 (1967), pp. 56–97, 60. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, 3 vols (Paris, 1958–1961), II, pp. 52–56, made a similar distinction between the cyclical (seasonally related) time of pre-industrial labour and the linear time of capitalistic accumulation, which in turn provoked fundamental theses concerning "cumulative" and "non-cumulative" processes from Alfred Krovoza, *Produktion und Sozialisation* (Frankfurt am Main, 1976), pp. 67–93.

46. Smith, "Peasant Time and Factory Time". For centuries, a similar decontextualization has tempted European scholars to claim that Muslims were "fatalistic" and unenterprising – the *fatum mahumetanum* about which Leibniz wrote. In doing so, they generally considered just the poor farmers. However, in a study of the Tunisian countryside in the 1950s, Gérard Destanne de Bernis convincingly showed that this "fatalism" was primarily a function not of irrationality nor religion but of an assessment based on experience of the scope to change things. And he added that "Anyone so placed would be fatalistic, at the very least"; Gérard Destanne de Bernis, "Islam et développement économique", *Cahiers de l'Institut de Science Economique Appliquée*, 106 (1960), pp. 105–150, 114ff.; compare Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism*, Brian Pearce (trans.) (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 113.

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in critical self-reflection, acknowledging and addressing one's prejudices as much as possible. And third, by considering the contextual explanation of observations made. One example might suffice here to clarify what I mean. In the past it was often said about the Maoris that they had "never been capable of performing consistent labour in one field for any great length of time". The Maoris were said to have a "volatile temperament", which led them "to work in bursts of energy, but is not conductive to life in a steady and settled occupation". That contrasted with the European, "who is able to concentrate on one task and complete it without needing constant change of surroundings".[47]

The New Zealand anthropologist Raymond Firth has rightly pointed out that such claims are decontextualized value judgements. He does not doubt that, by European standards, the Maoris showed a "lack of steady application and failure to concentrate on work", but, he argues, this so-called limitation was related less to "innate mental endowment" than to "definite social circumstances". To support his claim, Firth adduced a number of arguments. First, the standard of comfort among the Maoris differed from that of the Europeans: "The native does not ask for all our civilized products, he is content with the satisfaction of his needs for food, clothing and shelter, with the addition of a few subsidiary pleasures." And thus the Maori "does not feel impelled to put in extra labour to secure articles for which he has no real desire"; his "erratic habits of labour and his periods of inactivity [...] are the result – in part at least – of this lack of conformity to our scheme of civilized wants".

Second, there was a clear reason for the volatility that characterized their work ("a somewhat haphazard succession of employments, never pausing long with one, unable to concentrate but always seeking change"):

> In a society where there was no great division of labour or specialization of employments, where each man carried on work in a number of fields, there was scope for the principle of variety in occupation to come into play. When the craftsman was tired or bored with his job, he turned to another, and so was able to work with renewed zest. The beneficial effects of a diversion of attention when the interest flags are well known in psychology. By following this principle the Maori revealed, not a sheer inability to do consistent work, but an appreciation of the element of flexibility in his economic system.

By so explaining Maori attitudes to work, Firth made it possible on the one hand to avoid essentialistic projections and on the other to recognize the limits of generalizations,[48] since a number of important hypotheses are implicitly concealed in Firth's explanation, for example that volatile

47. Raymond Firth, *Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori* (London, 1929), pp. 185–186.
48. All the preceding quotations are taken from *ibid.*, pp. 186–189.

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labour patterns are less likely in a society with more complex internal divisions of labour, and that attitudes to labour will change once people become tempted by the appeal of modern consumer society. His analysis also reveals how notions of time can differ so much in different societies. Having grown up, as we have, with concepts of continuous and objective time, we find it difficult to understand other time schemes.[49]

SOME CONCLUDING HYPOTHESES

Mindful of the above, I will conclude by formulating a few extremely tentative ideas regarding attitudes to labour around the world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In doing so, I will be drawing on a very limited number of sources in just a few languages, and applying a degree of deduction. Here, I will briefly characterize four "types" that prevailed at the same time. Naturally, this list is by no means complete; nor does it describe an evolutionary pattern.

The first type are hunter-gatherers. Nowadays, they are limited to the most desolate and inhospitable areas of the world – the Arctic regions, and deserts; nonetheless, most scholars have argued that they need relatively little time to provide themselves with the things they need. A systematic overview in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers* has summarized the results of anthropological research as follows:

> Typically, "immediate return" hunter-gatherers, those with the simplest technology such as the Hadza and !Kung, spend only three or four hours per day occupied with what we could call economic activities. These activities include hunting a large number of animal species and gathering a large variety of plant material. [...] Hunting and gathering is integrated with rituals, socialization, and artistic expression. The idea that earning a living is drudgery whose only purpose is to make it possible for us to live our "real" lives is not present in hunter-gatherer cultures.[50]

49. More extensive reflections can be found in J.T. Fraser, *Of Time, Passion, and Knowledge: Reflections on the Strategy of Existence*, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ, 1975); and Donald J. Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past: Pre-Newtonian Chronologies and the Rhetoric of Relative Time* (Chicago, IL [etc.], 1987). For a historical study of a "non-standard" concept of time see Keletso E. Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843–1900* (London, 1993).

50. John Gowdy, "Hunter-Gatherers and the Mythology of the Market", in Richard B. Lee and Richard Daly (eds), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 391–398, 393. In the more modern literature, immediate-return hunter-gatherers (in contrast to delayed-return hunter-gatherers) are taken to mean those who "go out hunting or gathering and eat the food obtained the same day or casually over the days that follow. Food is neither elaborately processed nor stored. They use relatively simple, portable, utilitarian, easily acquired, replaceable tools and weapons made with real skill but not involving a great deal of labour"; James Woodburn, "Egalitarian Societies", *Man*, New Series, 17 (1982), pp. 431–451, 432.

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Given that, one can understand why Marshall Sahlins termed the society of immediate-return hunter-gatherers "the original affluent society".[51] If his assessment is correct, we can expect hunter-gatherers who lived 400–500 years ago and who had at that time a much more varied living environment to have been less focused on labour than are their contemporaries today.[52]

A second type can be found among sedentary groups without leaders and hierarchies (so-called acephalous societies) with a low population density. One presumes they work more hours a day, especially the women, but the labour process retains its autonomous character. The Iatmul in Papua New Guinea (East Sepik Province) around 1930 had a subsistence economy dominated by women, who supplied approximately 80 per cent of food products. In addition to catching fish daily, they produced fish traps, nets, bags, and baskets, cared for the younger children, and prepared meals. The men were primarily artisans. They built houses, carved canoes and paddles, and made weapons and some of the work tools. Their woodcarvings were highly artistic. Men and women gardened together. Heteronomy was absent:

> Whether a task is to be done or not, where it is to be done, how long it may take, how large the group is to be, and whether particular persons are to take part are matters to be decided by the individuals concerned in accordance with the situation at the moment. No one is entitled to dictate the tempo at which a job is done, or when the work must be finished; every working individual determines this himself. Communal decisions of short-term validity are reached in loose cooperation with other members of the group and in direct relation to technical necessities or personal needs. Work may be interrupted by intervals of relaxation, joking, or ritual, as desired.[53]

It would seem reasonable to suppose that such relations, with their corresponding attitudes to work, existed several centuries earlier under similar conditions.

Pre-capitalist small peasants in relatively densely populated areas are a third type. They generally lived in constant fear of not having enough to

51. Marshall Sahlins, "La première société d'abondance", *Les Temps Modernes*, 268 (1968), pp. 641–680. See also *idem*, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, IL, 1972), ch. 1.

52. There are, however, anthropologists who do not share the optimistic assessment of Sahlins and others. They suspect it is based on too limited a definition of work, since if "we were to define work not only as subsistence activities but more generally as all life-sustaining activities – not only hunting and gathering but also the making and repairing of tools, housekeeping, curing of skins, child care, the migration from one site or waterhole to another, and so on – then the number of hours hunter-gatherers can be said to work each week would increase dramatically"; David Kaplan, "The Darker Side of the 'Original Affluent Society'", *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 563 (2000), pp. 301é324, 313.

53. Milan Stanek, "Social Structure of the Iatmul", in Nancy Lutkehaus *et al.* (eds), *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea* (Bathurst, 1990), pp. 266–273, 266.

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eat – especially if they were required to pay a tribute to a landowner or lord. They developed what James C. Scott has termed a "subsistence ethic":

> This ethic [...] was a consequence of living so close to the margin. A bad crop would not only mean short rations; the price of eating might be the humiliation of an onerous dependence or the sale of some land or livestock which reduced the odds of achieving an adequate subsistence the following year. The peasant family's problem, put starkly, was to produce enough rice to feed the household, buy a few necessities such as salt and cloth, and meet the irreducible claims of outsiders. The amount of rice a family could produce was partly in the hands of fate, but the local tradition of seed varieties, planting techniques, and timing was designed over centuries of trial and error to produce the most stable and reliable yield possible under the circumstances. These were the *technical arrangements* evolved by the peasantry to iron out the "ripples that might drown a man." Many *social arrangements* served the same purpose. Patterns of reciprocity, forced generosity, communal land, and work-sharing helped to even out the inevitable troughs in a family's resources which might otherwise have thrown them below subsistence.[54]

Based on the principle of safety first, such a subsistence ethic is generally associated with considerable labour input.

> Because labor is often the only factor of production the peasant possesses in relative abundance, he [sic] may have to move into labor-absorbing activities with extremely low returns until subsistence demands are met. This may mean switching crops or techniques of cultivation (for example, switching from broadcasting to transplanting rice) or filling the slack agricultural season with petty crafts, trades, or marketing which return very little but are virtually the only outlets for surplus labor.[55]

The subsistence ethic thus implies a work ethic that is related to the ecological, demographic, and economic relationships in which such farmers live and work.

Finally, I would include commodified labour relations under capitalism, including chattel slavery, share-cropping, and wage labour.[56] All those forms of labour share the same characteristic, namely that they create abstract value. Because output is intended for the market, labour processes are not directly focused on the needs of producers, but on those of

54. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 1976), pp. 2–3. Chayanov had already noted that the overriding principle for such peasants is "To select crops and forms of exploiting them which will give the highest and most stable payment for labor"; A.V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, Daniel Thorner *et al.* (eds) (Homewood, IL, 1966), p. 134.

55. Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, pp. 13–14.

56. For descriptions of the concepts "commodification" and "capitalism" see Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden, 2008), chs 2 and 16.

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consumers, who may or may not be anonymous. In that sense, all capitalist labour is alienated.[57] At the same time, I suspect though that Max Weber's "spirit of capitalism" has remained a marginal phenomenon.[58] In practice, alienated attitudes to work can vary considerably, from shirking to excessive zealousness, from deference to recalcitrance – often in combinations, too. The exploration of all these disparate attitudes and the contexts within which they emerged is a fascinating challenge for further research.

57. See, for example, István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 5th edn (London, 2005).
58. Weber describes this "spirit" as follows: "In fact, the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudaemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life"; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (trans.) (New York, 1958), p. 53.

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