

# REVIEW ESSAY

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## THE HISTORICAL MEANINGS OF WORK

The historical meanings of work. Ed. by Patrick Joyce. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London, New York 1987. vi, 320 pp. £ 27,50.

'What is work? and what is not work? are questions that perplex the wisest of men.'

*Bhagavadgita*, 4.

Work has been a major focus of study by labour historians who typically have related it to the economic context of labour processes and the socio-political development of a proletariat in capitalist society. In this book Patrick Joyce and his collaborators seek to broaden this focus and locate the meaning of work in a wider cultural setting. Indeed, in his introduction to these essays Joyce goes even further and suggests that context itself may be a major obstacle to understanding the history of work.

In this volume, one is not searching for the labour process in context, but aiming to dispense with the category of 'context' altogether [. . .] work cannot be understood unless it is seen as inseparable from the discursive fields of which it is an integral part. In short, in considering the meanings of work we are in the area of the meaning of meaning. (p. 12)

Cutting through thickets of abstract theorising, Joyce's central message amounts to this: that other social constructs determine the meaning of work aside from the Marxist inspired context of its role as the place where working class action was made or not made. Four things in particular are important in this respect. First, that work must be divorced from its economic context and its meaning sought in a multifaceted cultural construct. Work is not simply work; it cannot be separated from leisure. Second, that an anthropological and linguistic analysis must be applied to understand representations and meanings of work. Thus, skill is not simply an objective property; it is also a linguistic construct and tension between skilled and unskilled is not merely a matter of divergent economic interests, it also contains ritual definitions of self-identity and representations of worth. Third, the meaning of work is socially constructed (one is relieved to be

assured), but is determined by forces such as rhetoric and memory (thus, workers assertions of customary rights) as much as by economic imperatives. And, fourth, that the history of work does not fit into a series of stages of development such as the displacement of the household by the factory, or the progressive destruction of skill.

Fortunately, the essays in the book seldom match the theoretical abstraction of Joyce's introduction but are firmly grounded in more conventional historical discourses. Most use familiar material interpreted in a fresh way and tend to highlight linguistic and anthropological modes of analysis. Taken as a whole they are both valuable and of high quality; they revolve around three dominant themes: gender, languages of work, and the anthropology of work.

Maxine Berg's essay places the discussion of women's work and mechanisation in the industrial revolution firmly in the material economic context of the division of labour. Her argument against the idea of a great transition in women's work is consistent with the now familiar notion of continuity as the dominant theme of industrialisation. Berg shows how female proletarianisation was not simply a function of factory work; the household continued to be an important location of industrial production, accommodating technical change (as in the metal trades). The growing complexity of the division of labour even tended to increase the range of tasks performed by women and in many areas women continued to dominate the production process. But Berg also confirms the findings of Keith Snell and Angela John, amongst others, that there was an increasing tendency for women to be displaced into the lower paid sections of work.<sup>1</sup>

Joan Scott's essay – like that of Robert Gray to be discussed below – is concerned both with gender and language. She traces the changing place of women's labour in the discussion of political economy in France and explains how conceptions of gender roles were framed by this discourse. Before 1860 the focus was on the moral disorder that accompanied women's work in the factory and the solution was found in the reformation of character. After 1860 emphasis was placed on the need to define women's role within a maternal and family context and thus to protect them against work outside the home.

A similar transition had occurred twenty years earlier in Britain, as Robert Gray's discussion of the language of factory reform shows. From the beginning the overriding concern was the impact of factory work on the future roles of women and girls as mothers and wives and the justification

<sup>1</sup> K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor. Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985); Angela John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities. Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford, 1986).

for state protection ultimately came to lie in its function as preserving the sanctity of their domestic place within a patriarchal hierarchy.

But Gray's essay – which is clearly the best in the collection – is more than a discussion about the definition of gender work roles. It is also about the negotiation between different discourses of factory reform. In the 1830s none of the competing languages of factory reform managed to establish a dominance. Working class radicals focussed on the evils of factory work, evangelicals on the problem of working class morality, tory paternalists on the question of whether reform was necessary to re-create paternal norms within the factory, and Benthamites on factory reform as a way of securing higher productivity. The absence of a consensus was reflected in the weak act of 1833 which satisfied no one. By the 1840s, however, the debate came to be formulated as a matter of accommodating social relations between workers and capitalists.

The prime agents in the displacement of this debate from a question of morality to a question of adjusting social relations were the factory inspectors. These neutral experts synthesised the languages of evangelical morality and Benthamite self interest into a rationale for the Acts which unified populist factory owners like Oastler, patrician statesmen like Ashley and the working class leaders of the agitation in the ten hours agitation. Thus, whereas the debate of the 1830s had been conducted in the context of class conflict, that of the 1840s occurred as part of a class conciliationist effort.

Gray's argument – which is both sophisticated in its reasoning and dense in its documentation – is less about work itself and more about the way it interacted with social relations and state policy in the process of class accommodation. In that respect it is a fine example of how the connections between “base” and “superstructure” may be understood to write a new political history. It is a model example of how a focus on ‘language’ may be made relevant to understanding how differences within the power elite (between Oastler and Ashley, for example) were settled and the process by which a “consensus” was created that could encompass working class interests. One of the prime virtues of Gray's approach is that it does not succumb to the temptation to displace class with language as the central category of analysis, but successfully uses it to refine our understanding of how social relations of production and politics combine in a unitary process.

Keith McClelland, Michael Sonnenscher and John Rule also use language to illuminate conceptions of work, but in a much narrower context than Gray. Their essays are concerned to understand different conceptions of work within skilled crafts. Certain themes are common to their essays. First, they all analyse the crafts' own sense of their work and the way this was reflected in their actions. Sonnenscher's fascinating research on the rituals of *compagnonnages* in eighteenth century France demonstrates the

*way these rituals were used to express individual worth. Rule emphasises* how the high degree of skill characteristic of eighteenth century manufacturing underpinned artisan regulation of the labour market – an argument that is familiar from his other work. And McClelland shows how mid-nineteenth century skilled shipbuilders' acceptance of market relations was modified by their sense of the dignity of labour and their insistence on justice and fairness in their treatment by employers.

Second, they tend to emphasise the moral dimensions of workers' perception of their work. McClelland shows how this lay at the basis of the shipbuilders' attitudes to employers and trade unionism. The market determination of wages was regulated by informal action and trade unionism not simply from economic motives but also as moral efforts to control the degrading tendencies of untrammelled market forces. Clearly, this perception was wider than the shipbuilders and may be generalised as a common working class attitude. In his discussion of the "property of skill" John Rule emphasises how defence against the expropriation of skill through diminished apprenticeship regulation was a key component in the development of a broader working class consciousness amongst artisans at the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, worker efforts at regulation at the workplace and the continued existence of less formal apprenticeship rules in the nineteenth century may be seen as perpetuating the importance of this moral defence of skill.

Third, this particular group of essays also addresses the importance of distinctions between groups in the maintenance of conceptions of skill. This is most dramatically illustrated in Sonnenscher's piece which argues that companionage rituals were directed towards deciding who qualified as skilled in trades where the labour market made this quality problematic. But the same concern to distinguish between different kinds of work was present amongst mid-nineteenth century shipbuilders whose regulation of workplace differences extended to the cultural gulf between respectable and non-respectable behaviour in the home and community.

A third aspect of the book as a whole is illustrated by the essays of Richard Whipp and H.F. Moorhouse on the anthropology of work. Whipp critiques Edward Thompson's argument that work discipline shifted linearly in the late eighteenth century from task based to clock based time.<sup>2</sup> He points out how different conceptions of time at work continued within industrial capitalism. The varied industrial structure (as in the pottery industry which is Whipp's area of special knowledge) ensured that irregular works rhythms continued over wide swathes of industry. In addition, workers have demonstrated an ability to impose their own work rhythms even in

<sup>2</sup> E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", *Past and Present*, 38, November 1967.

highly mechanised production, as at certain times in the auto industry. In particular, of course, workers have tended to resist the disruption of established divisions between work and leisure time.

The role that workers' conception of leisure and worktime has played in the politics of workers' movements is not much addressed in this book. Martin Daunton has shown how the 1908 mines regulation act contributed to industrial militancy in north east coal mining by its creation of a third shift for hewers which interfered with established patterns of home and family life. And Gary Cross has traced the important connection between work-time and leisure time that lay behind the reduction of hours movements in Britain and France.<sup>3</sup>

The relation between work and leisure is, however, addressed by Moorhouse in an essay on the hot rodding culture of post war American male youths. The young men who spent their after work hours producing highly specialised and individual automobiles employed many of the talents of craft and organisational skills required by capitalist industry. This sub-culture celebrated the same work ethic of modern America except it was employed in truly creative and autonomous activity. Moorhouse effectively expands the definition of work into leisure and it is not clear what we gain by this. The reality of most people's lives is the rigid distinction between the two and the question for historians is to explain the dimensions of this over time and its implications for working people's lives.

A major virtue of this book is to demonstrate some of the ways the history of work may be integrated into the history of society. Yet we often move far away from work itself into, for example, politics without any clear notion of the connections between the two nor, for that matter, of the impact of politics upon work. And this points to the joint problems of understanding the process of change and the definition of work. Let us take the matter of definition first.

It is undeniably true, as Joyce argues in his Introduction, that work possesses more than just an economic dimension. Yet it is not clear from this book that one can divorce work from economics and still retain a meaningful definition. Indeed, if we follow Moorhouse in transposing work into leisure we lose all means of retaining it as a distinctive category. It is at least the virtue of the economic context to provide a clear definition of work itself and, furthermore, one that is consistent with life as working people actually experience it. We can hardly dissent, however, from the necessity

<sup>3</sup> Martin Daunton, "Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coalfields 1870-1914", *Economic History Review*, second series, xxxiv. 4, November 1981; Gary Cross, *A Quest for Time: The Reduction of Work in Britain and France, 1840-1940* (Berkeley, 1989).

to look at work through lenses other than the economic and technical and to take account of its rhetorical, cultural and ritual manifestations.

Aside from the meaning of what we mean by “work”, however, there is the more serious problem of how we are to conceptualise the role of work in the process of historical change. As several of the essays remind us, conceptions of change rooted in simplistic views of stages of economic growth or one sided notions of class struggle are inadequate. But the eager embrace of linguistic or anthropological models seems to contain the danger that social history will abandon the paradigm of change altogether and the absence of any consideration of change in Joyce’s introduction may reflect this hasty copulation.

Joyce quite properly insists upon work as a social construct (but then isn’t everything we do or perceive so constructed?), but it is not only the meaning of meaning that flows from this perception. Historians must also be interested in change and a fuller view of work cannot avoid an appreciation of the process of change. Yet it is quite astonishing to record that with the partial exception of McClelland none of the essays in this book address, for example, how the meaning of work changed over time. Indeed, a further heretical thought occurs. Perhaps it is not coincidental that attention to the dynamics of change appears only in those essays by Berg and Gray which are concerned with the economic context and the politics of class relations. To that extent the lesson of this book is that linguistic and other categories of analysis should be used to expand rather than displace labour history’s traditional concern with class and power struggles.