

Summary of the main arguments developed in *Worthy Efforts*

Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly

Historiography is always a dialogue between past and present. At the end of the twentieth century, increasing numbers announced the crisis or even the imminent end of the 'work society'. Some commentators viewed this as a threat, while others argued that the crisis was an opportunity, and that we were on the verge of a 'leisure society'. On their quest to find support for either perspective, many authors have looked to the past. They wanted to know whether work was decisive for identity, prestige and self-respect everywhere and for all time, *and* from what point in time, where, and under what conditions the work ethic evolved. In the greater debate about why some nations have been economically successful, while others have remained poor, David Landes and Niall Ferguson attribute immense importance to cultural values, especially about 'the peculiar ethic of hard work and thrift', to explain why 'Western civilization' has managed to dominate the rest of the world. Ferguson has even labelled the Western work ethic as 'one of the six killer apps of western power'.

Whatever their position may be in these (and other) debates, most authors tend to invoke the standard historical account, which figures in a specific tradition with a rigidly circumscribed agenda, especially the quest for what is described as The Rise of the West, the birth of modernity or the origins of capitalism. This account distinguishes clearly between Classical Antiquity, when the elite deprecated work in general and manual work in particular, from subsequent periods, when a new and more favourable view gained ground. It emphasizes the revolutionary role of Christianity in this respect and presents the modern Western work ethic as the outcome of a slow but linear and cumulative process spanning the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times. In *Worthy Efforts* we critically examine this Grand Narrative, in which monasticism, urban expansion, humanism, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment generally figure as major milestones and signposts.

The guideline is the heuristic question: who said what, when and how, in which circumstances, to whom, and why? The book is a systematic search

for contexts in which contemporaries shared views about work and workers visibly or audibly, publicly or privately, intentionally or unintentionally, explicitly or more covertly. They did so in a highly diverse range of texts, images, and practices generated for the most divergent motives and serving a wide variety of purposes. Debates and polemics about work and workers were related to processes of social and cultural change, to maintaining or struggling to bring about political balances of power, to legitimizing or challenging collective positions, to upgrading the status of new groups, to creating distinctions by established groups, to developing and expressing social or professional identities, and so on. Texts and images therefore refer to very different groups and concern very different activities. In no time period was the nature of a worthy effort fixed. It depended on whether the activity concerned was regarded as worthwhile by 'others', who might represent various groups. A pre-emptive definition of work may *not* therefore be assumed. Work may be said to be an activity acknowledged *by others* as a worthy effort, when goods or services are provided that meet needs recognized by these others. Understanding statements and discourses about work and workers properly, moreover, requires a distinction between the activity, the action, and the person or group performing this activity or action: appreciation of the result of an effort does not necessarily mean that the individual making it is appreciated as well. In medieval Europe glorification of agriculture was perfectly compatible with degrading statements about farmers, and the same held true for trade and merchants.

Returning to the standard account, no dichotomy is discernible between Classical Antiquity and the medieval West, as far as the duty to work is concerned. Whether we are listening to Hesiod, Stoics, monks, or Christian theologians, we hear them emphasize time and again, in all possible tones, that *everyone* needs to exert himself (or herself). The opposite of work was therefore *not* leisure but idleness or parasitism. Precisely because the duty to work was a central category, polemics were launched in each period against 'idlers' or 'parasites', who might be at either the top or the bottom of the social hierarchy. The Church of Rome continued to use ideological constructs (such as the tripartite system) and physical metaphors to make it clear that efforts were expected of everybody, and this in a context of interdependence. Protestants in general and especially Calvinists strongly admonished the pious to work hard, use their time wisely, and live frugally, but what they urged was in fact no different from the admonitions of Hesiod or the dictates of many medieval monastic orders.

As for the finality of work, the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages nonetheless coincided with a major change. In ancient Rome various

types of work were explicitly and openly related to identity, virtue, and prestige. In inscriptions and visual images referring to professional activities, merchants and artisans proudly advertised their progression to wealth or their exceptional craftsmanship. The Church of Rome did not develop a positive theology of work and submitted that efforts were worthy only when dedicated to a higher, spiritual purpose. Every effort should be performed in the light of eternity and spiritual salvation and should therefore ideally be an expression of devotion. The ideological dominance of the Church in the Medieval West and its compelling presence in public space withheld laypeople from individually demonstrating economic success, technical ingenuity, or occupational pride.

Pre-industrial Europe was characterized by polyphony, more specifically by the co-existence of different criteria for qualifying activities as worthy efforts. The polyphonic heritage of Antiquity and Christianity constitutes the central theme in the first part of the book, which discusses attitudes to work and workers in ancient Greece (chapter 1), continuity and change in the Roman empire (chapter 2), and Christian ideologies of work (chapter 3). The focus in the second part is on the period 1300-1800 and on 'Western Europe', i.e. the areas west of the river Elbe, where changes occurred that profoundly influenced relations between the different population groups. Power constellations, economic developments, and social changes varied considerably, but traditional elites everywhere sooner or later faced the legal emancipation of the peasantry, the rise of merchants and other *nouveaux riches*, the emergence of urban craft guilds, and growing numbers of wage dependents. The ongoing social mobility, upward as well as downward, led individuals and groups to question time and again the value of all kinds of activities and the status of those performing them. The second part of the book therefore consecutively deals with peasants (chapter 4), merchants (chapter 5), artisans (chapter 6), and wage labourers (chapter 7).

Placing the emphasis on social change does not mean that cultural developments were of secondary importance. It does mean, however, that changes in social positions and sets of relations brought on recurrent debates and polemics about work and workers. Two developments were especially important. First, the rise of social middle groups demanding permanent space to manoeuvre, intending to distinguish themselves and having every interest in basing status on achievement or merit, was a major challenge for established elites. If the newly emerging groups obtained a say in politics or at least some influence in the decision-making process, the ideological struggle intensified. This was reinforced by the fact that in addition to merchants and highly-skilled artisans aiming to raise their status, intellectuals

had similar ambitions. Second, the increase in the number of full-time and part-time wage dependents as a consequence of economic and demographic changes between the eleventh-twelfth centuries and the mid-nineteenth century affected all other groups in different but highly significant ways: old and new elites, ecclesiastical and secular authorities, wealthy farmers and master artisans, intellectuals and those engaging in liberal professions. This gradual but continuous and ultimately massive process distinguished late-medieval and early-modern Europe both from Classical Antiquity and from other parts of the world. It influenced attitudes toward work and workers more deeply than the rise of new religious doctrines, the introduction of new ideas about knowledge/science, or the emergence of new schools of thought. The growing numbers of wage earners ultimately led economic theorists to devise notions of labour as a commodity and more broadly for labour to be perceived as an abstract category.

Meaning, honour, knowledge, and utility were the recurring categories that constituted the substrate for valorizing activities somehow presented as efforts. They were the foundation for upgrading what people did themselves and for discrediting what was done by others, thereby generating positive self-images and negative stereotypes of others. Each category, both individually and in combination with others, could be used and manipulated by different groups in different ways, as no consensus existed as to which category covered what, or as to how the different criteria should be ranked, on the understanding that religious or spiritual objectives carried the most weight until the eighteenth century. Established elites defined their efforts essentially in terms of honourable activities, often presenting this valorization criterion as incompatible with trade. Their views on honour gave rise to a recurring ideological struggle, revolving mainly around transgressions of aristocratic values and virtues. Knowledge was presented as a valorization criterion by groups with vastly different social and cultural positions – scholars, natural philosophers, agronomists, craftsmen-artists, painters, architects, engineers – and was therefore often a subject of disagreement. Utility was a criterion that could be invoked by everybody and against everybody. No single occupational group emphasized the utility of its own activities as much as merchants did. In the Middle Ages they did so for defensive motives, but in the Early Modern Period they argued increasingly that the central element in their activities was of a very special nature and should qualify as evidence of superiority.

Both in Classical Antiquity and during the Ancien Régime, broad segments of the urban middle groups derived their basic identity from their professional activity. In ancient Greece and Rome they visualized this by

conveying their 'discourse' about labour through works of art, tombstones, and epitaphs. That people should regard work as joyous participation in Creation was not a message from eccentric Church Fathers: medieval and early-modern members of the clergy and laypeople alike from vastly different social circles affirmed that the greatest felicity was to devote oneself entirely to a suitable job. Renaissance painters and sculptors regarded their efforts as forms of self-fulfilment, expressed in their works of art. It was common practice for intellectuals to show the world that they worked hard. Humanists and enlightened philosophers emphasized that their work was the source of their happiness. Merchants wished to be remembered not only for their wealth but also as workers who had toiled for it. Religious affiliation made no difference: workaholics were found among Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish merchants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There were also early modern artisans who maintained that they derived greater satisfaction and joy from their professional activities than from other pursuits; some of them revealed through painted portraits that their occupation was an essential part of their personality.

Several economically active groups visualized their professional activities collectively as well. Although there were differences between Roman *collegia* and the guild-based organizations that emerged in many areas west of the Elbe from the twelfth century onward, these did not concern their collective manifestations of occupational pride, which included constructing monumental buildings, organizing massive festivities, and participating in public ceremonies as a group. The associations facilitated establishing a link between occupational pride, based on skill, and the repertoire of valorization criteria. Many master artisans therefore regarded their occupational association as fundamental to their social identity. Their collectively sustained self-images were supported by an extensive iconography in Protestant and Roman Catholic regions alike.

Permanent journeymen with a strong position on the shop floor were no different from master artisans in this respect: their professional activity deeply defined both their individual and their collective identities. Their self-image, however, revolved around freedom, or rather, free labour. They manifested themselves as free workers, i.e. as autonomous, independent, and self-sufficient. 'Property in labour' demonstrations were crucial for them. They had their own interpretations of the concepts of honour and knowledge and used rituals and hierarchical classifications to make clear that their valorization criteria were also demarcation lines that separated them from the labouring poor. They did not define themselves as proletarians. The overwhelming majority of wage dependents had a multiform

subsistence base, making identification with a specific occupation rather exceptional. Their standards of respectability were: willingness to toil by the sweat of their brow and thus to achieve a certain degree of self-sufficiency, i.e. not needing to beg but working to support themselves and their families. This became the daily challenge to ever broader groups of the population in late medieval and early modern Europe, as well as the foundation of their self-image and self-respect.

Rather than drawing systematic comparisons between pre-industrial Europe and other parts of the world, *Worthy Efforts* offers two hypotheses for additional research. First, commitment to hard work was *not* specific to pre-industrial Europe. Religions, philosophies, and cultural traditions in China, Japan, and the Islamic world apparently were embedded in analogous commitments. Everywhere, worthy efforts were expected from every human being, regardless of his or her status. Second, it would seem that there were differences as well. In pre-industrial Europe there were repeated discussions about what were to be regarded as worthy efforts, how various forms of human activity should be valorized, and how they should be ranked. Different views tended to be expressed simultaneously, and participants often applied different criteria, with meanings that moreover tended to be ambiguous. Definitions and valorization criteria surfaced continuously as subjects of debate and polemic, and this polyphony appears to have been distinctive for Europe. The explanation we believe lies in a *different* social dynamic in Europe: more than in other parts of the world the rise of social middle groups in various historical periods compromised or challenged the established order in one way or another, and from the late Middle Ages onward the process of proletarianization deeply influenced the attitudes of the elites and the social middle groups to work and workers.

About the authors

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Attitudes to work and workers in classical Greece and Greece and Rome

Reflections on Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, Worthy efforts: attitudes towards work and workers in pre-industrial Europe (Leiden and Boston: Brill), 2012, 664 p.

Koenraad Verboven

Ancient historians like to refer to medieval and early modern phenomena, but they rarely pursue their comparisons. Finley's contrast between ancient consumer cities and medieval producer cities (to quote only one famous example), was little more than a copy-paste from Max Weber's.¹ Medievalists and modernists, however, are no better. Surveys of European economic history rarely start before the Carolingian era. Ancient Greeks and Romans enter the scene mostly only to provide a contrast: how Roman occupational *collegia* were burial clubs rather than guilds; how slaves provided the bulk of the labour force instead of wage-workers. It seems that stereotypes frame the debate wherever classicists and medievalists/modernists meet.

Lis and Soly's 'Worthy Efforts' shows how unfortunate this is and how much both sides can learn from each other. As an ancient historian I welcome their achievement and the opportunity to discuss it. 'Worthy Efforts' comes at an opportune moment. Ancient economic history has profoundly changed since the early nineties. New tools, techniques and models in archaeology provide a continuous stream of data. New approaches have enriched our conceptual tool-boxes and offered new explanatory frameworks.² The role of culture and ideology, however, (although always looming in the background) has until now received only limited attention.³ In this respect 'Worthy Efforts' provides a valuable contribution to the debate among ancient economic historians.

The authors challenge the popular black and white notion that work was considered degrading in Greco-Roman culture, but was a recognized value in Christianity. Surprisingly for classicists, Lis and Soly argue that classical attitudes to work(ers) were generally more positive than medieval Christian ones. Greeks and Romans held a multiplicity of views on the value(s) of work. The negative statements found in Plato, Aristotle or Cicero gained