

## Position Paper

### Work: Ethics, Norms, Valuations, and Ideologies. Global Perspectives, 1500-1650

The Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations endeavours to establish a quantitative overview of labour relations worldwide between 1500 and 2000. However, statistics for the earlier cross-sections 1500 and 1650 are for the main part based on rough estimates. A more qualitative approach to norms and valuations of labour in these periods is important for interpreting and understanding the collected statistical data and estimations. Worldwide coverage is the ultimate goal, but our initial approach will focus on the following regions in a polycentric world interlinked by trade in commodities, and in some cases also by trade in human labour:

- Europe, with its religious traditions of Roman and Orthodox Catholicism, Lutheran and Calvinist Protestantism, and Jewish thought on labour, all reconsidered in the period of early enlightenment;
- the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic World, with Islamic law, Koran exegeses, and sayings attributed to Mohammed (Hadith);
- Africa, with emphasis on Sub-Saharan West Africa;
- Central and South America, with indigenous and colonial work ethics;
- Mughal India, with special focus on the caste system and the conflict between Hindu and Islamic ethics;
- China, Japan, and Korea with Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist social thought.

In the history of norms and perceptions, one hundred and fifty years may seem a short moment, and our project often faces the question as to why a period was chosen for its inception in which acute change and expansionist activity can be found in the Western European hemisphere, while other regions may appear more static or passive. Different time frames may be more meaningful for other world regions. Nevertheless, being based in Western Europe, we consider as legitimate to start “digging where we stand”, in full awareness that different cognitive maps are centred on other parts of the world and their periods of rise to economic prosperity. Considering these differing time frames must, indeed, form an integral part of this globally comparative exercise.

This approach means that we also have to come to terms with the pioneering research of Max Weber on the religious foundations of economies worldwide and, vice versa, on the

economic background of the religious and ethical systems of Protestantism, Confucianism and Daoism, Hinduism, and Islam. We will take into account appreciative views on Weber as well as critiques of what is now considered as Weber's Eurocentrism.<sup>1</sup>

For this project, we suggest that the participants address the following seven layers of investigation.

## 1. Texts and Terminology

In a first step, texts should be identified which contain prescriptive or descriptive valuations of work, in concentrated or dispersed form. These may be canonical formulations that by far antedate the time span of 1500 to 1650. For the period under consideration, they were perceived in specific interpretations, such as the Lutheran and Calvinist view of the Bible, or contemporary exegeses of the Koran. We may also turn to exemplary or influential philosophical or scientific writings of the time, for instance John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) with his value theory of labour, or Song Yingxing's encyclopaedic overview of agricultural and craft techniques, *Tiangong kaiwu* ("The exploitation of the works of nature", 1637), a text showing a relatively rare appreciation of technical knowledge for a Confucian scholar, aimed for the use of scholar-administrators, or the socio-economic chapters of the late fourteenth century *Muqaddimah* by Ibn Khaldun. Moreover, we will consider legal texts such as the Talmud, and the judgments of the Sheich-ül-Islam Ebu's-Su'ud (c. 1490-1574), the highest judicial authority under the Ottoman emperor Süleyman the Magnificent. On the other hand, we will have to account for the relative silence on issues over work and justifications of unfree labour in the otherwise highly explicit Chinese law codes of the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the case that no religious, philosophical, administrative or juridical texts are available, we may turn to fiction, representational art and folklore traditions, and, last not least, to observations by outsiders in the form of travellers' descriptions.

In the terminology of these texts, the expressions used for "work" and "worker" will offer insights to the contemporary comprehension of these terms. We may find significant change over time, for instance in medieval Europe, when the Latin term *labor* designated not primarily "work", but the work yield of predominantly agricultural labour; *laboratores* were those who could increase such yields<sup>2</sup>. When *labor* or the equivalents in German, *Arbeit*, or in French, *travail*, pertain to work, the connotation is most often one of "pain" or "toil."<sup>3</sup> French

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<sup>1</sup> Farris 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Le Goff 1987, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Conze 1972, pp. 154-155; Jacob 1994, pp. 20-27.

linguists have argued that only in the seventeenth century more positive connotations were linked to work (*travail*). Can we find similar transitions elsewhere? For the Islamic Middle Ages, which should be conceived as lasting well into the seventeenth century<sup>4</sup>, Shatzmiller claims that the meaning for the term *amal* changed from “process of craft production” to “theological speculation.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in the Jewish context, *aboda* designates “work” as well as “religious worship”.<sup>6</sup>

It would be most desirable if not only valuations formulated by elites, but also self-perceptions of the workers could be brought into focus. Admittedly, this is not an easy task, but work ethics of subaltern workers can also be studied indirectly, by observation of work conflicts and corporate or guild regulations: Which conditions seemed unacceptable to the workers, and led to strikes and stoppages, and which behavior was intolerable for employers?

## 2. To Work or Not to Work?

It has been argued that traditionally the ruling and leisured classes held in contempt those who had to work to make a living, and that privileged life was unconstrained by the necessity or the duty to work.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, this refers to physical or dependent administrative and mental labour as “work” in a quite different way than that which is used in our project: “any human effort adding use value to goods and services”.<sup>8</sup> What was the valuation of work/labour as against non-labour in the world regions mentioned above, and who exactly were the “non-workers”?

To name just one example, in all cultures under consideration, contemplative life constituted one counterpart to “work”. For instance, in medieval Europe and the Islamic world, the views extended between monastic and mystic (Sufi) emphasis on contemplation and rejection of work on the one side, and a high appreciation of gainful economic activity on the other. Sometimes these two tendencies merged: In the fourteenth century, the Sufi movement attained a new role of spiritual leadership for artisans, labourers and other groups of the same social status, and some Christian orders emphasized the necessity for monks to combine work and worship. Likewise, in East Asian Buddhism, the *Vinaya* school devised elaborate regulations for the behaviour of monks and on principle forbade any other ways of subsistence than begging; others, especially the Chan/Zen schools, emphasized the usefulness

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<sup>4</sup> Cahen 1979-80.

<sup>5</sup> Shatzmiller 1992, p. 369.

<sup>6</sup> Levinthal 1936, 213.

<sup>7</sup> Applebaum 1992, p. XIII.

<sup>8</sup> van der Linden and Lucassen 2007, citing Tilly and Tilly 1998, p. 5.

of work as a means of regeneration after strenuous meditation practices. Hinduism provided the Brahman caste with the hereditary prerogative for study and contemplation, and as a social system did not allow for mobility in or out of this privileged group.

Other exceptions and exemption from “work” in the contemporary understanding of the term may apply in different socio-cultural contexts. Since the opposition of workers and non-workers could rouse considerable social conflict, we need to identify those who “work” as contrasted with those who cannot, don’t need, or don’t want to do so.

### 3. Work and Workers in the Social Order

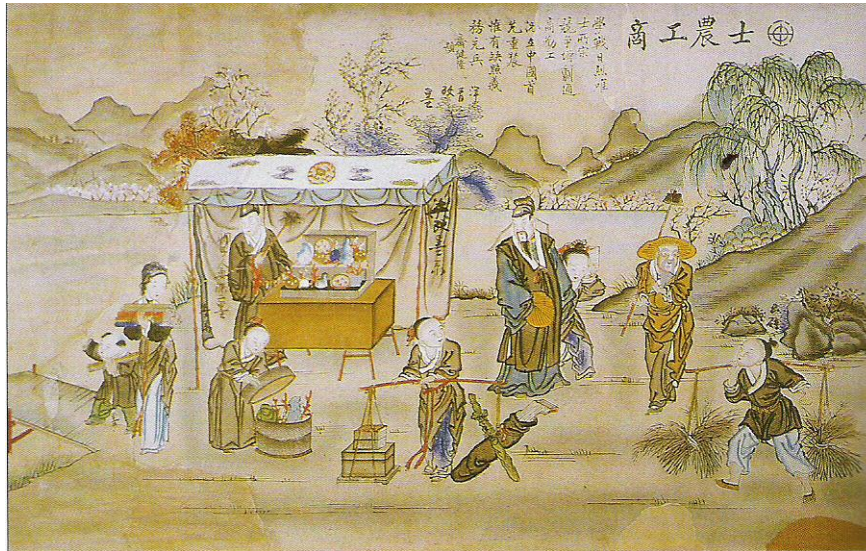
Focusing on those who did work, we will explore their social positions. Setting out from Europe, the medieval tripartite social order of the estates placed the “laboratores”, all who worked in agriculture, manufacture, distribution and other service trades, on the third rung after clergy and nobility.



Woodcut by Johannes Lichtenberg, “Prognosticatio” (Mainz 1492), showing the Three Estates: clergy, nobility, and workers (Tu supplex ora, tu protege, tuque labora “You pray humbly, you protect, and you work”).  
[http://tu-dresden.de/die\\_tu\\_dresden/fakultaeten/philosophische\\_fakultaet/ig/mg/drei\\_staende\\_neu](http://tu-dresden.de/die_tu_dresden/fakultaeten/philosophische_fakultaet/ig/mg/drei_staende_neu)

The period between 1500 and 1650 brought forth Renaissance humanism and protestant reformation. A scientific world view was formulated which stressed the importance of the “technical arts”. The concern for poverty reduction and its conjunction to public work initiatives was addressed by early humanist thinkers, such as the Spanish philosopher Juan Luis Vives in his “De subventionem pauperum” (1526). In the field of political economy, a term first coined by the French thinker Antoyne de Montchrétien (1615), mercantilists started to consider human labour as the source of national wealth and to advise the absolute monarchs to “set the people to work” in order not only to reduce poverty, but also to enhance the national standing against the competing powers in the neighbouring countries. The most important factor that caused the structure of the estates to decline and eventually be overthrown in late-eighteenth century Western Europe was the growing influence and self-esteem of the Third Estate. In Central and Eastern Europe, especially in Russia, the three-tiered social order retained its legitimacy longer as the basic rationale for the system of bound labour in the wave of the “second serfdom”.

Compared to the “Three Estates”, the much older Chinese system of the “Four Occupational Groups” (c. third century BC) did not incite resentment that would have caused political conflict. The four groups were the scholar-officials, farmers, artisans, and merchants; the conspicuous absence of the military in this system has been frequently noted. During the reign of the Manchu Qing dynasty, which ruled China since 1644, the four groups were complemented by the military and social establishment of the “banners”, large units composed of Manchus, and those Mongols and Han Chinese who had surrendered to the Manchus in the course of their pre-1644 conquests. The banners had been established in the early seventeenth century and remained the basic social system of the ruling military-administrative elite and their bondservant retainers.



The Four Occupational Groups. Early twentieth-century illustration, from James A. Flath, *The Cult of Happiness: Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural North China*, Seattle, 2004, ill. 1, after p. 20.

In India, the castes (*jati*) were also grouped into the four large occupational divisions of the *varna*, consisting of the priests and scholars, the warriors, the merchants, landowners, and part of the artisans, and the farmers, artisans, and those in the service and transport trades. Persons who stood below the established caste system and were expected to exert despised, unhealthy or dangerous trades existed in India, but similar phenomena also are known for instance in Japan (the *burakumin*) and China (the “mean people” *jianmin*). Observing whose occupational possibilities were limited by the relevant work ethics, or by written and unwritten law, we can also ask what options the individual had to overcome these restrictions. One case in point is Mughal India. Some scholars stress the egalitarian impact of Islam which caused people to flee the castes and embrace Islam. Others are more sceptical about this possibility and point to the fact that conversion to Islam was not universal, and that the Mughal rulers and their administrators gradually adapted to and incorporated the castes<sup>9</sup>

What was, then, the place of the workers in these extremely divergent societies, and how enduring did their positions prove to be in the mid-term and long run?

#### 4. Ranking of Labour Relations: Free and Unfree Labour

The taxonomy of labour relations applied by this Collaboratory divides labour relations into “reciprocal”, “tributary”, and “commodified”. After estimating the respective percentages in the database, investigation of the relevant work ethics can give clues as to the ways how and reasons why some labour relations had preponderance over others.

<sup>9</sup> Shishir Thadani, “South Asian History: History of the Mughals in the Indian Subcontinent”.

Concerning “commodified labour”, it is still an ongoing debate in labour history whether the transition to full-time “free wage labour” constitutes the dominant line of socio-economic development or whether such an assumption is too much based on European models.<sup>10</sup> In cases where no other information on the degree of freedom in particular occupations is available, formulations of work ethics may yield clues that can be related to our quantitative findings. Did unfree or bound labour always imply low social status? Was free wage labour ranked higher than slave labour or vice versa? Evidence of a relatively high valuation of slavery may be found, for instance, in the African (Western Sudan and Niger-Chad region) pre-colonial *jonya* system, an arrangement that provided that royal slaves or “captives”, *yon*, belonged to certain lineages, but were not transferable and formed part of the ruling class and the political apparatus.<sup>11</sup> The *jonya* system rose in the sixteenth century, but by the eighteenth was replaced by the Muslim slave-owning system and overlapped with colonial slavery. Did this bring about a decline in the status of the slaves? Similar structures apply for Chinese bondservants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who, as Harriet Zurndorfer argues were “socially dead”, but could, in some cases, command their own servants, manage estates, and engage in profitable business.<sup>12</sup>

The most unfree type of labour, chattel slavery, was justified by the European seventeenth-century slave traders on the grounds that bringing the Africans to a country where they could become Christians was doing them the favour of saving their souls. This remained the dominant argumentation in spite of divergent views, such as the defense of Indian rights and condemnation of forced labour and slave trade formulated by the Spanish Dominican Bartolomé De las Casas (1484-1566), and the papal bull *Sublimus Deus* issued by Paul III in 1537, which banned all enslavement of Christians and non-Christians.

It also deserves attention that recent research has pointed out that in the seventeenth century the distinction between slave and “free wage” labour, for instance in domestic Britain and colonial West Indies, may not have been as clear-cut in everyday life as assumed in mainstream Western scholarship.<sup>13</sup> John Eltis moreover stresses the implications of ideology in the seventeenth-century slave trade: The British reluctance to enslave European labour for overseas plantations made them resort to slave trade in Africa, and while the constitutional rights of the individual were expanded domestically, slavery was provided for in the

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<sup>10</sup> van Schendel 2006, pp. 257-8.

<sup>11</sup> Diagne 1992, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Zurndorfer 1989, pp. 199, 204.

<sup>13</sup> Eltis 2003.

colonies.<sup>14</sup>

“Freedom” does not only refer to a person’s free choice of employer and the possibility to give up a workplace without legal sanctions. It also implies the choice of one’s profession rather than the compulsion to inherit it by legal or customary obligation as in the caste system or in the Chinese artisan registration of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Was there a realistic chance to learn and exert a trade different from that of one’s ancestors?

## 5. The Ranking of Occupations

If basic texts on work ethics, but also more scattered evidence like lists of guilds, or registers of urban population, do not contain information about work relations, they may nevertheless yield clues about specific occupations and their particular social status. Generally, in many societies the complete enumeration of inhabitants with their occupations seems to be a rather late invention that was fully developed in the era of the censuses.

We will try to clarify why some occupations were valued higher than others, and which differences apply in the regions under observation. Possible factors for the ranking of occupations are, amongst others, gender, skill (in part a social construction), caste, ethnicity or race, income generated by the occupation, connection with luxury, or with death and decay.

To name just one example, the *Muqaddimah* singles out agriculture, architecture, tailoring, carpentry, and weaving as “necessary” for civilization, and other professions like midwifery, the art of writing, book production, singing, and medicine, which served the needs of the political elite, as “noble because of their object”.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Who may do which work?

As a subsequent step, we may turn to the qualification of the workforce along to the lines of gender, age, and ethnic or religious affiliation. Did restrictions obtain in these respects? For instance, were women expected to do reciprocal labour and remain predominantly within the sphere of their household? This applies for China in the late Ming and early Qing period, but the record may differ for Northwestern Europe, where moreover work in the fields was as a

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<sup>14</sup> Eltis 2003, p. 70, with reference to John Locke. The “Second Treatise on Government” (1690), Chap. IV (“On Slavery”) remains ambiguous on slavery, which affirms that “The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth”, and concedes for slavery only in the case of captives of war (John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Book II, Chap. 4). On the other hand, the “Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina” (1669), part of which has been attributed to Locke, provides for a type of serfdom of “leet-men”, “leet-women” and “negro slaves”.

<sup>15</sup> *Muqaddimah*, p. 318-9.

rule not considered to be situated in the public sphere. If women did work in public, can we observe tensions if they competed with men, as in the tailors' and hat makers' occupations? Did child labour exist, and from which age were children deemed able to work? Were certain religious groups, such as the Jews in Europe, excluded from or confined to particular occupations?

## 7. Incentives and Remuneration

Finally, linking up with a result of recent research at the International Institute of Social History, the collected essays edited by Jan Lucassen in *Wages and Currency: Global Comparisons from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, we will consider the conjunction of the rise of wage labour, monetary remuneration and the more general question of the “just wage” and wage forms.

To sum up, in contributions for the workshop on work ethics, work norms and work valuation between 1500 and 1650, the optional research perspectives are

- ▶ Identification of texts that contain thought on work ethics
- ▶ Changes over time in the appreciation or disdain of work and socio-linguistic perspectives: which terms and concepts express “work” and “worker”?
- ▶ What is the position of work and the worker in society? In particular, what is the perception of wage labour as against other work forms, such as self-employment, independent production for the market or for the community, and service for the state?
- ▶ The discussion of free and unfree labour
- ▶ The ranking of particular occupations
- ▶ The degree of explicitness regarding gender, age, ethnic, and religious aspects
- ▶ Ideas about and implementations of “just” wages and forms of remuneration

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