

## Session 13: Changing Boundaries and Definitions of Work Over Time and Space

### Introduction

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The papers submitted to this session are extremely rich and diversified. They are summarized below. They deal with work in different cultures and periods of history. They are written from different points of view. But authors were asked to relate their findings to a few more general questions and issues. The following introduction is meant to summarize some of the papers' results, supplement them and relate them to some of the more general questions and issues which may give some intellectual cohesion to the session as a whole. Perhaps the discussion during the Oslo meeting can pick up these points.

#### 1. A general concept of work?

Most cultures, epochs and languages have had no need for a general (or abstract) concept which - similar to the modern concepts of work, travail or Arbeit - embraces a large number of physical, intellectual and composite human activities and distinguishes them from other human activities or forms of existence like idleness, warfare or play. The Dogons of Mali, e. g. employed the same concept to indicate cultivating the ground as well as dancing at a religious ceremony. Work and leisure are said to be not clearly distinguished in their language. - To the inhabitants of Athens in the period of Pericles it would not have made sense to use one and the same concept for the manual work of slaves and women in the fields and in the house, the literary work of a writer and the public activities of a politician. For each of these activities they had different words. - In most of medieval Europe, the concepts labor, work, travail and Arbeit had the tendency to mean physical work only. - Even the major German encyclopedia of the mid-eighteenth century (Zedlers Universal-Lexicon) found it difficult to present, in the entry „Arbeit“, a general definition; rather it enumerated examples for work in different spheres of life.

It is not surprising that a general (abstract) concept of work - e. g. work as a continuous activity aimed at producing goods and services; or work as the application of human energy to things adding, converting or maintaining value; or work as the production, management and conversion of the resources necessary to livelihood<sup>1</sup> - has been usually lacking and emerged only slowly. Demand for such a concept arose only when and to the extent that there was a practical need for putting together (under specific viewpoints) certain activities and distinguishing them from other human manifestations. Semantic abstractions of this sort usually correspond and interrelate with processes of differentiation in social structures and practices, not present always and everywhere.

By the same token one can ask which constellations (or discursive situations) produced the occasions, incentives and conditions which led to the - probably gradual - emergence of a general concept of work and, to enlarge the argument a bit, to the social construction of work as a general phenomenon encompassing a broad range of human activities, but distinguishing them from others. From a bird-eye's view, I should like to distinguish, with respect to Europe before 1800, four such constellations: first, the religious and theological contexts of the Christian faith, its interpretation and institutionalization which offered occasion to reflect upon human work *in general*, already in late antiquity and in the medieval period, certainly during the reformation of the sixteenth century. There were, second, the discourses, policies and interventions of governments which fought idleness, indolence, poverty and begging, while propagating and imposing work as a means to enlarge wealth, control vice and enhance power (from the city governments of the late medieval period to the more or less absolutist territorial states in the early modern period); in this context, work was addressed and regulated as a general phenomenon, too. Thirdly, different activities (as well as their results) resembled one another on the same abstract level, in their relation to the emerging capitalist markets which defined their value. „A man's labour“ wrote Thomas Hobbes in 1651, „is a commodity exchangeable for benefit as well any other thing.“ Finally one has to mention the philosophical writings

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<sup>1</sup> I take these examples from Sandra Wallman, Introduction, in: Wallman (ed.), *Social Anthropology of Work*, London 1979, pp. 1, 20; and from Gert Spittler, „Work - anthropological aspects“, in: *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, new ed. (in preparation). Many alternative circumscriptions of an equally broad reach could be given.

of the Enlightenment. For the authors of the Encyclopédie or for Immanuel Kant, travail and Arbeit had a place in the centre of human activities and increasingly defined human nature.

Of course, the different constellations led to different definitions en détail; authors differed, and so did the languages. But by the second half of the eighteenth century - i. e. before industrialization proper really took off - a general concept of work had emerged which more or less resembled the circumscription which Keith Thomas recently suggested after reading numerous historical texts: „Work has an end beyond itself, being designed to produce or achieve something; it involves a degree of obligation or necessity, being a task that others set us or that we set ourselves; and it is arduous, involving effort and persistence beyond the point at which the task ceases to be wholly pleasurable.“<sup>2</sup>

Here are three questions: First, this was a highly condensed sketch of a topic which the paper by Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly treats with much more sophistication and different emphasis. Does it make sense? Second, this sketch is a product of „Begriffsgeschichte“ (history of concepts), a reconstruction of major trends on the basis of very selected writings by very articulate members of the educated elites. Is there any reason and evidence for assuming that such a general idea of work was shared by those who did the work in the countryside and the towns, in the households, on the fields, in the workshops, on building sites and elsewhere, as casual labourers and hands, as skilled workers and artisans, in self-employed positions and in the emerging bureaucracies?<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, did general concepts of work emerge in other cultures outside Europe and the West, before Western influences took hold, at the latest in the colonial period?

## 2. Evaluation of work

Attitudes towards work - towards different types of work - in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome certainly varied, but low, sceptical, even contemptible attitudes dominated, especially on the side of the elite vis-à-vis manual labour, but also vis-à-vis work in commercial contexts, while much of the necessary work and economic activities was performed by slaves, women and other persons with inferior rights. - The semantic roots of the Germanic word *arbeit* are dark and harsh. They associate with the words for toil, pains, hardship, suffering and punishment. - Judaeo-Christian attitudes towards work were deeply ambivalent: work as punishment and divine mandate, as curse and blessing as well. Even in the medieval monastic rules which recommended labour, and in the writings of the Reformation which stressed the religious dignity of work, a subtext remained present according to which the toils and hardships of labour should be seen as repentance for human sinfulness. Aristocratic world views remained strong and influential in the cultures of pre-modern Europe, and from there one looked down on commercial activities, manual work, and the toiling masses. I refer to the findings presented in the much more differentiated report of Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly.

But the same paper mentions, and I would stress this even more, that an upgrading of work took place, at least in the intellectual history of Europe, over the centuries. The ambivalence of Christian attitudes towards work as mentioned above worked both ways. - In the medieval and early modern European towns work, i. e. skilled and specialized, honourable and regulated work of artisans, merchants and others, gained central importance and high esteem. The right to work in one's occupation and the right to participate as burgher in the municipal self-government were closely related - in contrast to the classical polis. Work was an essential element of the emerging *bürgerliche Kultur* which used work as a source of (non-aristocratic, sometimes anti-feudal) legitimation, also for property and wealth. - Again the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought major changes and accelerated the career of the idea of work. In the writings of Smith, Ferguson and Kant - e. g. - one finds an emphatically high valorization of work, both as the major source of economic wealth, as a basic element of civil society and as the essence of human self-realization. Take the Encyclopédie, edited by d'Alembert and Didérot 1751-72. In the entry „travail“ we read: „occupation journaliere à laquelle l'homme est

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Thomas, Introduction, in: Thomas (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Work*, Oxford 1999, pp. XIII-XXIII, XIV. Also see Werner Conze, „Arbeit“, in: Otto Brunner et al. (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 1, Stuttgart 1972, pp. 154-215; Jürgen Kocka, *Arbeit früher, heute, morgen. Zur Neuartigkeit der Gegenwart*, in: Jürgen Kocka and Claus Offe (eds.), *Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit*, Frankfurt 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. Applebaum, *The Concept of Work. Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, Albany, N. Y. 1992, who sees big differences between philosophers and working people, as to the interpretation of work. Case studies both on the discourses and the practices of work in different quarters, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: Steven L. Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp (eds.), *Work in France. Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1986.

condamné par son besoin, & à laquelle il doit en même temps sa santé, sa subsistance, sa sérénité, son bon sens & sa vertu peut-être“. Immanuel Kant devaluated *Muße* (leisure) as „leere Zeit“ (empty time) and raised work to the main meaning of life: „Je mehr wir beschäftigt sind, je mehr fühlen wir, daß wir leben und desto mehr sind wir uns unseres Lebens bewußt. In der *Muße* fühlen wir nicht allein, daß uns das Leben so vorbeistreicht, sondern wir fühlen auch sogar eine Leblosgkeit.“

By 1800 the concept of work, at least on the level of some elite discourses, had left behind part of its heritage rooted in traditions of toiling, hardship and misery (without forgetting it altogether). The advancement of technology certainly played a role. Something like an apotheosis of work, as a creative force and the essence of human identity, had taken place, again before industrialization proper began. As a consequence the right to work could appear as a human right. I believe that the long term consequences have been remarkable. This idealized image of work could serve as an ambitious claim, a foil, against which the harsh, alienated and sometimes monotonous reality of work appeared full of flaws and had to be criticized - a mechanism which found its most powerful expression in the theories of Marx and the labour movements of the nineteenth century. Even in today's public rejection and condemnation of mass unemployment this intellectual tradition may still play a role.

On the other hand, questions need to be raised. How does the elitist discourse of eminent thinkers relate to the practice, the experiences and the mentalities of those who did work in the different milieus of the countryside and the towns? It is likely that in reality labour continued to mean toil and trouble, in most cases. How representative were those ideas, and for whom? Whose work does *Begriffsgeschichte* reconstruct, which work is neglected? Which differentiations are indispensable? Are there parallels in other, non-western, cultures?

### 3. Markets, industrialization, and the rise of the work society

Between the late eighteenth century and today, the dominant concept of work (dominant in the West and, increasingly, in other parts of the world as well) has been radically narrowed. The semantic process of redefinition had its correlate in economic, social, political and cultural processes. It is not before the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a modern concept of work in the sense of market-related work or gainful labour (*Erwerbsarbeit*) became dominant and a work society emerged which frames work in specific roles (employment) and assigns central importance to it, in the life of the single persons as well as in the social processes, political institutions and cultural contexts at large.<sup>4</sup> For analytical purposes I propose to distinguish between three different trends which overlapped and intertwined in reality.

3.1. *Commercialisation, commodification.* In previous centuries only small parts of total work done and only minorities of workers had been regulated by markets. Work had largely been tied into non-market relations: into households, feudal structures (like the manorial system), corporate institutions (like guilds) and different forms of compulsory labour. Most of the papers to this session deal with the complicated transitions from dominantly pre-market and non-market organizations of work to market-related organizations of work, i. e. with processes of commercialization, monetization, the breakthrough of a post-feudal, post-corporate and post-slavery legal framework and the penetration of expanding capitalism into the world of work. This happened in different periods of time, as Richard Biernacki makes clear with respect to the commodification of intellectual work in England and Germany (eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) and Irina Suponitskaja with respect to the abandonment of compulsory labour in the south of the USA and in Czarist Russia (1860s), while similar processes occurred much later in India, Japan and - temporarily - Mali, under the powerful and distorting influence of the West, as the papers by Roy Tirthankar, Toshiko Himeoka and Mahmadou Diawara/I. Dougnon show. It is clear that these processes in which quickly increasing proportions of work (or of its results) became market-regulated commodities, were not tied to industrialization, but usually started in preceding periods of commercialization. These were processes of very different shape, the differences to be explained by previous developments and international dependencies as well as by many other economic, cultural, political and social factors. Particularly the papers on Japan, India and Mali make clear that contractually based wage work and other forms of market-related work (e.g. by self-employed artisans and merchants or writers and intellectuals selling their labour or the results of their work on the market) made its way in curious combinations, embedded into surviving non-market arrangements like cottage industries and

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ralf Dahrendorf, Wenn der Arbeitsgesellschaft die Arbeit ausgeht, in: Joachim Matthes (ed.), *Krise der Arbeitsgesellschaft?* Verhandlungen des 21. Deutschen Soziologentages in Bamberg 1982, Frankfurt 1983, pp. 25-37, esp. 32.

households' economies, guild-type systems and compulsory structures. The commodification of work, the emergence of labour markets, the rise of labour as a commodity took place in a multitude of forms. The market-related labour force grew at the cost of work until then done in households and other non-market arrangements as well as at the cost of unfree labour. Transition was frequently gradual, but mostly dependent on legal changes and other government interventions (as Biernacki shows with respect to the commodification of writing dependent on „copy-right“ regulations and Irina Suponitskaja with respect to the abandonment of slavery and serfdom). These were extended processes with different timing in different regions and different domains. While the dictatorships of the twentieth century, particularly the communist ones, have stopped and partly reversed these processes, such interruptions and reversals have proved to be of temporary character. By and large, the commodification of work has been irresistible and victorious, at least until recently.

3.2. *Distinctions are drawn.* Industrialization proper, intertwined with urbanization, brought a remarkable centralization of Erwerbsarbeit (gainful labour, market-related work, work for an income). Mechanization was only one of the underlying causes. Increasingly Erwerbsarbeit took place in the form of employment, in shops and manufactories, factories and mines, offices and bureaucracies. There were of course many transitory and mixed constellations, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, e. g. cottage industry never died out completely. But the main and powerful trend led to a separation between the workplace (where work for living and income, Erwerbsarbeit, was performed) and the sphere of household and family. Such a spatial separation had previously been the exception. In previous centuries work for a living had mostly been closely interrelated with, and embedded in, other forms of work and other activities. Now it became the rule. In most of Europe the massive separation of workplace and household was a development of the second part of the nineteenth and of the early twentieth century.

The consequences were manifold. Household and family changed, and so did, in the course of time, gender relations. The workplace emerged as a relatively clearly delineated space for continuous and specialized work in the sense of market and income-related labour (Erwerbsarbeit). Work in this sense got its own sphere with its own time and its own rules, increasingly in the form of work for wages under the control of a boss, i. e. in hierarchically and functionally structured units with some regularity and continuity. While wage work as a proportion of gainful labour (Erwerbsarbeit) quickly grew, a decreasing part of gainful labour (Erwerbsarbeit) continued to be performed in self-employed, but market-related positions, and frequently in a combination of both. The distinction between work (of this type) and non-work became a widespread experience, the borderline between both spheres became more sharply drawn. At the same time, other forms of work (e. g. household and family work largely performed by women) became „hidden“, i. e. they were not anymore classified as work proper. Work proper was increasingly defined as gainful labour (Erwerbsarbeit), e. g. in the official statistics. As usual, semantic changes of conceptual differentiation reflected and supported processes of differentiation in the social world. But this process of formalization and differentiation did not take place everywhere, and reversals were possible, as the paper on Mali makes clear.<sup>5</sup>

3.3. *Work as an object of social construction and political regulation.* It was in this era of - first - commercialization and - then - industrialization that work gained in social, cultural and political relevance. In that, the old European tradition of upgrading work as a central element of the *conditio humana* played a role, although the reality of work under capitalism (i. e. gainful labour) strongly differed from what Didérot and Kant may have had in mind when praising work so emphatically. (Marx and others reflected on this contradiction.) Work became more important for the experience and self-definition of individuals, after it had been crystallized in a specific domain, differentiated from but influential on other domains. Competing sources of personal identification and cultural cohesion lost part of their influence, e. g. religion, regional belonging or corporate standing. (The exception was nationalism.) Labour market position became the most important factor in determining life chances, economic and otherwise. The capitalist transformation of work (accelerated by industrialization) led to new tensions and conflicts, especially between labour and capital, which impregnated society and politics at large. Class tensions grew, they were rooted in the capitalist system of labour, and they became a major topic of public concern as well as of political reform. Work became a central pillar of individual self-definition, of social movements and

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jürgen Kocka, *Arbeitsverhältnisse und Arbeiterexistenzen. Grundlagen der Klassenbildung im 19. Jahrhundert*, Bonn 1990, pp. 474-525; Chris and Charles Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism*, Boulder, Col. 1998, pp. 138-150.

of cultural identification (in many ways not to be discussed now).

It was this situation which saw a new wave of legal and administrative regulations of work/labour. Bénédicte Zimmermann's paper discusses this complicated interplay between economic change, social construction and political regulation of work resp. labour, with respect to Germany and France, where it took place in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century. Labour became the basis and workers became the main addressees for the emerging social security systems in some European countries (e. g. Germany). This again enhanced the importance labour had for determining a person's position in life, even in situations of crisis and old age. Labour law developed. Results of collective bargaining processes between increasingly organized actors on the labour markets, intermediated by government intervention, added to the regulation and codification of work (in the sense of gainful labour). It was in this process that Arbeit (work) in the sense of Erwerbsarbeit (gainful labour) got its clearly defined shape. It was only now that a clear distinction between employment and unemployment emerged; unemployment was „invented“, and this was not only a semantic process, but a political and social process as well.<sup>6</sup>

In the early industrializing countries of the West, these processes of codification, formalization and regularization of work (in the form of market-related, occupationally specific, life-long employment, separated from other spheres of life) continued - with interruptions, distortions, and in many variations - throughout most of the twentieth century. They became related to mass production and mass consumption („Fordism“). The welfare state was based on this system, and contributed to its consolidation. Since the 1970s processes of erosion have become visible, and reversals seem to have begun. Much debate on the „future of work“ and the „crisis of work society“ followed. Many people feel that a renewed broadening of the concept of work is on the historical agenda, beyond the narrow definition of work as formalized gainful labour (Erwerbsarbeit) which became dominant over the last two centuries.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that we presently live through the final phase of a dynamic system of work the emergence of which through the last two centuries is discussed in this session.

Here are three of many possible questions which we might want to discuss. 1. Does this distinction between commodification (3.1), differentiation (3.2) and codification (3.3) suffice as basis of an analytical model to grasp the fundamental changes of work/labour at least in some regions of the world, over the last two centuries? - 2. From reading the papers by Tirthankar (on India) and by Diawara/Dougnon on Mali it becomes quite clear that the experience in non-western parts of the world was heavily influenced by western and global developments, but in essential points different, because dependent. How to describe and explain these international and cross-cultural differences? - 3. Which variants of work in which domains did resist those trends towards commodification, differentiation and codification - and why? The processes described were never fully victorious. They never governed reality hundred per cent. Work in a broad sense - as defined towards the end of chapter 1 above - never fully narrowed down to gainful labour (Erwerbsarbeit). In the present situation it may be particularly promising to rediscover those elements in the long tradition of work which became marginalized by the dominant trend, but might deserve reconsideration.

#### 4. Work - gender - cohesion

The fascination which comes from studying the history of work has a lot to do with the fact that, at least in the modern period, work is intensively related to many other spheres of life, society and history. The study of work opens the way to the study of many other fields. The participants to this session were invited to give special attention to two areas related to the history of work.

On the one hand, the relations between work place and family/household should be given special consideration, and, in connection to this, the relation between work and gender. Nearly all the papers touch on these issues, and the paper of Toshiko Himeoka concentrates on them. Can we develop new questions and viewpoints, in a broad comparative way, comparing cultures and periods?

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<sup>6</sup> Besides the contribution of Bénédicte Zimmermann to this session cf. Christian Topalov, *Naissance du chômeur*, Paris 1994; Peter Wagner et al. (eds.), *Arbeit und Nationalstaat. Frankreich und Deutschland in europäischer Perspektive*, Frankfurt 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work. The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*, New York 1995; Ulrich Beck (ed.), *Die Zukunft von Arbeit und Demokratie*, Frankfurt 2000; André Gorz, *L'hiver du présent. Richesse du possible?* Paris 1997.

On the other hand, the relation between work and social cohesion deserves special attention. Concern about social fragmentation as a consequence of observable changes in the structure of work is one of the driving forces behind the present debates about the future of work and the crisis of work society.<sup>8</sup> Which are the historical contexts of this issue? How does it appear if put into a historical perspective? Can one use this present concern to raise new questions with respect to the records of the past? Here are some loosely related observations:

Commitment to qualified work according to corporate rules was certainly a resource which held urban communities in medieval and early modern times together. Over the centuries, occupation specific work experiences were the stuff out of which the cohesion and power of journeymen brotherhoods were made.<sup>9</sup> - The greatest protest and emancipation movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the labour movements, were rooted in the system of labour. They concentrated on representing shared interests resulting from shared working conditions and experiences, and they recruited dependent working people as members. The movements presupposed that their members had basically similar experiences of work, resulting in a shared self-understanding, culture and (class) consciousness. Idealized images of - male - work moulded the demands, culture and self-depiction of the workers' movements, including their iconography. Klaus Tenfelde's contribution to this session deals with such problems, as far as work in large mechanized factories, the roots of solidarity and the limits of resulting cohesion are concerned. Does the decline of the labour movements in the last decades of the twentieth century indicate the declining power of work in bringing people together or just the changing nature of work on the way from industrial to post-industrial situations?<sup>10</sup> - The connection between work and the formation of nations is attenuated and indirect. By 1848-49, the phrase „national work“ appeared. Since the 1850s, world's fairs presented work and its products, distinguished by nations and tied to national aspirations. In 1875 a Prague professor wrote that work „stamps a person with its essence, it forms the nation. Nationality and national work are equivalent terms.“ Bénédicte Zimmermann's paper analyzes how the definition and codification of work helped to strengthen the national formation of late nineteenth and twentieth-century societies. The labour-based structure of social insurance systems and other elements of the twentieth-century welfare states points to the cohesive power of work, in another way.<sup>11</sup> Does this power of work decline nowadays and, if so, how to replace it? - It can be argued, to follow the lead of Adam Smith, that elaborate patterns of division of labour in market economies tend to integrate modern societies, though certainly without guarantee against disruption and fragmentation. However, the argument can be reversed and supported by recent results of transformation endeavours in eastern Europe: Market economies and division of labour presuppose rules and trust in a culture of cohesion („social capital“) in order to function or - at least - to emerge. What can one say about the relation between social capital and work, in a historical perspective? More questions than answers, but this may help to develop a good discussion in Oslo.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, New York 1998; German translation: *Der flexible Mensch. Die Kultur des neuen Kapitalismus*, Berlin 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Reinhold Reith (ed.), *Die Praxis der Arbeit*, Frankfurt 1997; Josef Ehmer and Peter Gutschner, *Befreiung und Verkrümmung durch Arbeit*, in: Richard van Dülmen (ed.), *Erfindung des Menschen. Schöpfungsträume und Körperbilder 1500-2000*, Vienna etc. 1998, pp. 283-303.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jürgen Kocka, *Traditionsbindung und Klassenbildung. Zum sozialhistorischen Ort der frühen deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 241 (1986), pp. 333-376; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, in: Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left. Political Writing 1977-1988*, London 1989, pp. 9-41.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Karl Thomas Richter, *Die Fortschritte der Kultur*, vol. 2, Prague 1875, p. 12ff. (quoted by Conze, „Arbeit“, p. 210); Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die deutsche Arbeit*, Stuttgart/Berlin 1861; Bénédicte Zimmermann et al. (eds.), *Le travail et la nation. Histoire croisée de la France et de l'Allemagne*, Paris 1999; Gerhard A. Ritter, *Sozialversicherung in Deutschland und England. Entstehung und Grundzüge im Vergleich*, Munich 1983.