



# Introduction

## *Work and Ethics in Anthropology*

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Producing this volume has required a lot of work from a lot of people. For the editor, it has meant quite a few hours of tedium, including long stretches at weekends which ate into his normal leisure time but allowed for better concentration than he finds possible in his regular office hours. Along the way there have been moments of satisfaction and even genuine excitement, which I hope readers will recognize and share. The work of a journeyman academic differs from that of, say, a seasonal worker in the construction sector as much as it does from that of an artist or craftsman. Its rhythms and the nature of the product change during the life course. In anthropology, an edited volume is very different from a single-authored monograph. But it has attractions, especially if it can generate sentiments of solidarity with co-authors as well as a kind of identity with the final product. Even if much of the work on this book has been solitary, ties of collegiality to a creative bunch of authors have made the project pleasurable in distinctive ways.

From Monday to Friday, I habitually leave my comfortable home and walk to a separate building to carry out routine tasks. My work ethic can be gauged from the fact that I often arrive early in the morning, when the cleaners are just finishing their early shift. Since neoliberal reforms were introduced by the Max Planck Society, this section of our workforce has not been employed by the organization but by a subcontractor, which pays its staff the prescribed minimum wage. Most co-workers known as “non-scientific staff” (including administrative and secretarial employees) also reach their offices early. Without the help of Anke Meyer, the task of preparing the manuscript of this book to the standard expected by the

publisher would have taken much longer. The secretaries have more flexibility than the cleaning staff, but for most of the time that we have worked together Anke Meyer has been required to clock in and out, so that her fulfillment of the requisite number of working hours each month can be controlled.

As for researchers like myself, so far no one counts the hours we work. Most arrive on the late side. All have well-equipped offices, though some prefer to work from home whenever there is no necessity to come to the institute to participate in a seminar or to use the library. Nowadays, most activities can be undertaken online. In the wake of the Covid-19 epidemic, it is widely anticipated that (as in many other sectors) what Germans call “home office” will become even more popular among academics. It is hard to predict the impact this will have on their academic productivity or work-life balance. Researchers at our Max Planck Institute enjoy a lot of freedom in performing their work. But in comparison with the non-scientific staff, the time budgets of the academics are likely to remain fuzzy. The former find it easier to switch off from the concerns of their employment during evenings and weekends (at least I hope they do). Perhaps Covid-induced working from home will force all of us to rethink our work ethics and the meaning of productivity.

Distinctions between work and leisure are often blurred, more so for some than for others. An explicit concept of leisure is relatively new in human history. Another distinction that interests us is the one the English language draws between work and labor. In the course of the industrial revolution, large sections of the population were drawn into paid employment and subjected to factory discipline for the first time. The new wage-laborers did not necessarily cease performing other kinds of work outside the factory or the mine. Work is the broader term and significant forms of sociality can be expected to develop wherever it is undertaken, even in highly regimented, automated “Taylorist” conditions. Feminist scholars have investigated the unpaid work that takes place in the home and is oriented more to reproduction than to production. Studies of the “informal sector” have demonstrated that, in both developing and in highly industrialized economies, a lot of manual work takes place in conditions utterly unlike the Fordist factory. Standard white-collar office work has always been supplemented by freelancing and consultancies. Most forms of work depend in one way or another on time-consuming investments in social networks. If the expansion of digital technologies accelerates the shift towards working from home, the archetypal household of the industrial age in which the breadwinner(s) were subject to direct external discipline will be consigned to history. With no need to trek out to the fields as in the preindustrial era, and with online delivery services readily available, the digitalized household

has unprecedented control over its rhythms of production and consumption. Economic anthropologists might be tempted to theorize an era in which the economy of the house is again preeminent—were it not for the overwhelming constraints of markets and financialization (see Gudeman 2016).

Worlds of work are changing rapidly. Many humans have too few options for paid employment and are compelled to take jobs under precarious conditions. They might be more than willing to work longer hours in return for a secure contract. The proportion of “contingent workers” has risen sharply in recent decades (Herod 2018: 81–84). Everywhere, many are obliged to work longer and harder than they would wish. Some unions in Europe are campaigning for a general shift to a four-day working week, which they claim will lead to a significant rise in economic productivity as well as diffuse social benefits. The shock occasioned by the pandemic shutdown has drawn attention to the *social* in the most graphic ways: some groups are much more vulnerable than others, and societies fall apart without their “key workers.” What can the concept of work-life balance mean when work is so deeply embedded into one’s existence? The activity that is arduous and alienating for some can be pleasurable and a source of identity for others; and even for the same individual in different phases of the life course. Should every human activity be considered as work, at least potentially? Can the concept of work be extended to other forms of life, or even to spirits and inanimate objects? These are just a few of the questions that anthropologists have raised in connection with work, and they cannot all be pursued in this book. Our particular focus is on the ethical dimension: on “work ethics” in the popular sense, but also on the tension between work as a key aspect of social organization and its subjective experience by individuals—by what scholars have come to call the “ethical self.” We are especially interested in the relationship between work and freedom, and how this is changing under the impact of new technologies and neoliberal political economy. In this Introduction, I set the scene by examining contested keywords and reviewing how work has been studied in earlier generations, especially by anthropologists. I will suggest that it is no accident that questions of freedom, both personal and social, have come to the fore at our moment in history.

## Definitions, Semantic Fields

Work is conventionally defined as activity to secure the livelihood and reproduction of the human group. Usually formulated as purposeful activity to satisfy needs (including the need for money), for the economist it

generally entails costs, such as physical and/or mental discomfort and giving up leisure time. In an elegant introduction to a rich collection of case studies, Sandra Wallman (1979) rejected every form of reductionism, from the biological and ecological to the economic and technological. Each of these factors is significant, and they must be pursued together. She begins with energy:

Work is the application of human energy to things; which application converts, maintains, or adds value to the worker, the thing worked on, and the system in which the work is performed. (Wallman 1979: 4)

Note the use here of “value”, rather than a more prosaic “utility.” A few pages later, she explains why, for an understanding of work, moral criteria are as important as the material:

[W]ork is the performance of necessary tasks, and the production of necessary values – moral as well as economic. The task[s] of meeting obligations, securing identity, status and structure, are as fundamental to livelihood as bread and shelter. On this basis, work may be defined as the production, management or conversion of the resources necessary to livelihood. (Ibid.: 7)

Philosophers have reflected on work for millennia (thereby performing philosophical work). The authors of Wallman’s volume are more concerned with the empirical social scientific analysis of work. This did not begin in a systematic way until after the combined impact of the industrial revolution and the European Enlightenment. The dominant academic discipline was a new one called sociology. Its practitioners investigated new processes of work, more concentrated in factories than ever before, and their consequences for social structure and organization. It was assumed that the patterns found in the economically most advanced countries would eventually be replicated elsewhere. From Dickensian sweatshops to Fordist mass production, many parts of the globalized economy of the twenty-first century do indeed exhibit affinities to precedents set in the North Atlantic region. The old heartlands of the working classes have changed greatly, but even here most citizens are still obliged to sell their labor-power in order to secure their livelihood. An industrial proletariat has expanded enormously in the Global South, albeit in precarious forms that Marx and Engels failed to anticipate.

Anthropologists have also played a role in the modern academic division of work on work. By exploring various forms of preindustrial work they established its universality: no society is free of work. The male hunter who pursues forest prey in encounters animated and enabled by spirits is working. Typically, the gathering activities of the females of the band

provide a more reliable source of food. In terms of effort and drudgery, gathering is closer than hunting to the painstaking forms of work that dominate in agrarian and industrial societies. Herders work too, sometimes in more isolated ways than hunters, but with similarly rich cosmologies that shape their economic action. The rhythms of preindustrial work tend to follow the seasons. Early ethnographers were interested in whether or not “savages” and “primitive tribesmen” worked efficiently, for example by minimizing the effort they invested in their gardens. It was soon realized that they did not, at least not according to the European criteria. More was going on. The social significance of work could not be reduced to calorific efficiency or the models of an industrial engineer. Work was universal, but understood in a social context it was endlessly diverse (Spittler 2008).

In the course of globalization, anthropologists’ efforts to study work have tended to converge with those of sociologists. Both have been influenced by feminist theory, and nowadays give appropriate recognition to unpaid housework and the work of care—emotional as well as material. Sociologists have joined anthropologists in using qualitative ethnographic methods to give insight into worlds of work, such as the informal (or black or grey) economy, that are not captured in official economic statistics. Anthropologists have been reluctant to adopt the quantitative methods still favored by most sociologists, but the results of their fieldwork on factory floors and on contemporary digital platforms are often indistinguishable. Most of the authors contributing to this book have been trained in anthropology. Some of the more remote settings and some of the theories on which they draw are strongly associated with that discipline. But for the most part, in the study of contemporary work the boundary with sociology has become porous if not fully irrelevant.

The English language offers “labor” as an alternative to “work,” whereas German knows only *Arbeit*. I am not the first to wonder what difference this makes: for example, if it had been the Work Party that had frequently formed the government of Great Britain during the last century, or if a “work theory of value” had been a key component of Marxist theory (Firth 1979: 178–79). Labor is more closely associated with waged employment and with an industrial heyday that is receding into history, at least in some parts of the world. Labor is typically thought of a *resource*, one that is transacted in the market as a commodity, albeit a “fictitious” one (see Polanyi 1944). Work, as defined above by Sandra Wallman, is better grasped as an *activity*. In this volume we are mostly concerned with working to make money, though the opening chapters illustrate broader possibilities. Working for money subsumes not only blue-collar employment in capitalist factories and white-collar office work that is similarly disciplined, but also the expert knowledge-work of managers, owners, and consultants. Alongside standard

forms of employment contract, several contributors to this volume are particularly interested in changing forms of self-employment.

Freedom is another word with large semantic fields that have changed considerably in recent centuries—parallel to the transformations of material conditions, though the connections are not always easy to disentangle. Certain philosophers of the Enlightenment proposed freedom or “liberty” as a new moral (political) absolute. In the twentieth century it was coupled with notions such as “open society” to define the core of pluralist liberal democracy, in opposition to the unfreedom of socialism and fascism. But Karl Popper and other proponents of the open society could never explain why this imaginary should be freely embraced by all groups in the pluralist society to which they aspired (see Ignatieff and Roch 2018). The paradox of freedom intensifies when neoliberal economic institutions effectively exclude, atomize and *degrade* large sections of the population (Rakowski 2016). The contributors to this volume explore freedom in ways that open up to usages beyond Western individualism and the version of human rights that has been derived from it since the 1940s (Moyn 2010). Freedom in this anthropological sense is inherently social, as only in specific social conditions can libertarian notions of free individuals take root. In practice, as I will outline below, freedom is always accompanied by constraints and responsibilities.

In addition to defining their etic (analytic) concepts like any other researcher, when anthropologists carry out ethnographic field research they attend to emic (vernacular) concepts. They cannot expect to find words neatly congruent with work and freedom, the key English terms for this volume. The semantic fields of the vernacular concepts may not be stable, just as local meanings of work and freedom have changed in our own societies, reflecting ideological as well as technological trends. We can try as neutrally as possible to identify the local ideas that correspond most closely to the terms we attempt to operationalize in comparative analysis, but the pitfalls are legion. For example, we may define freedom analytically in terms of a concept that prioritizes an individual’s scope to make choices, and then proceed to identify the space for making such choices and the vocabulary used to describe this space in the societies we investigate. But what if the society has a more collective approach as to what constitutes “true freedom”? Similar difficulties arise in the case of work. Some societies may not make a clear distinction between work (effort) and leisure (or play). This does not obviate the fact that at least some members of these societies engage in forms of physical work. Others may perform activities that are not classified as work at all, though the ethnographer notes the indispensability of this toil. The contributors to this book are concerned with local understandings of work—mental as well as manual, individual

as well as collective, tedious and unrewarding as well as pleasurable and emotionally fulfilling. Problems in the precise demarcation of work from other human activities exemplify the difficulties of cross-cultural translation, including the problem of how to theorize (the) economy itself (Hann and Hart 2011).

## Work in Anthropology

From Raymond Firth in the 1920s to Gerd Spittler nearly a century later, it has frequently been lamented that anthropologists have neglected the topic of work (Firth 1929; Spittler 2008). It is not necessary to subscribe to strong theories of economic determination, such as Marxist historical materialism, to recognize the importance of work in shaping human evolution. Yet within the subdiscipline of economic anthropology, topics such as markets, trade, gifts, and consumption have received more attention over the years.<sup>1</sup> Spittler suggests various possible reasons for the neglect. Work often involves long periods of tedious, repetitive, and strenuous effort. Ethnographers are usually short of time and likely to prefer participation in other activities where the dividends appear greater, such as political assemblies or rituals performed on special occasions. The significance of waged employment in shaping the personal and collective identities of so many human beings in recent generations has perhaps encouraged anthropologists to focus their studies of precapitalist societies on what makes them *different*, and thereby to overlook work altogether. Spittler suggests that the attraction of more exotic themes has impoverished studies of work in modern conditions as well. The discipline would be better equipped to investigate industrial and postindustrial forms of work if early ethnographers had paid more attention to its preindustrial forms (Spittler 2008, 2017).

If the picture is not entirely dire, this has a lot to do with contributions from the German-speaking world dating back to the early nineteenth century. Many anthropologists have drawn inspiration from Karl Marx, who in early philosophical writings envisaged a radical dissolution of the very concept of work (in his native language *Arbeit*). Outside capitalism there could be no boundary between work and other activities: “[Marx] imagined labor as it would be, had it not been formulated by capitalism, and saw that it would then be merely an aspect of the total business of living, unseparated from such activities as recreation, consumption, family life: that it would be just part of existence” (Bloch 1983: 91). Bloch confirms this insight with reference to the people with whom he did field research in Madagascar. Rural Malagasy had no word that could be translated as “work” or “labor,” as their daily activities did not differentiate “production

activities” from other activities they undertook. Everything was intertwined and a part of living, thus supporting the Marxist proposition “that the conceptualization of productive activity is totally integrated with other social relations in pre-capitalist societies, and that the sharp boundary that we draw between labor and other activities is absent” (ibid.: 91).

This interpretation (denying the very possibility of a “work-life balance”) is perhaps over-drawn. The young Marx was strongly influenced by the utopian ideas of Charles Fourier. However, his later contributions to political economy suggest that some aspects of the discipline imposed by capitalism would have to be retained in a future communist order. Even if work is conceptualized as a “free” activity submerged in the flows of everyday life, most preindustrial societies have a substantial vocabulary for the more or less specialized activities essential to their subsistence. The tasks fluctuate with the seasons, and impose burdens of coordination as well as physical effort. And even where we do not find much by way of a special vocabulary, the romantic tones of European utopian socialism find scant confirmation in the ethnographic record.

Etic definitions of work must also include activities such as the work of ritual specialists when these are considered to be just as necessary (often even more vital) for successful economic outcomes as manual exertion and dexterity. Ethnographers can probe attitudes towards different kinds of work, using an analytic spectrum ranging from alienation and drudgery to identity and satisfaction. Early ethnographic approaches to work were influenced by philosophical assumptions as well as evolutionist speculation. The economic stages posited by economic historian Karl Bücher found little corroboration in ethnographic work. His concept of the “closed household economy” oriented towards self-sufficiency echoed Aristotle’s concern with the *oikos* in ancient Greece (from which our word for economy derives). It turned out that the autarkic farm or estate was always imperfect; elements of trade and market were seldom if ever completely absent. Nonetheless, work in such societies was overwhelmingly regulated by domestic groups, with age and sex the main axes of differentiation. This applied as much to the yam gardeners of the Trobriand Islands studied by Bronislaw Malinowski (1935) as it did to the peasant households of late imperial Russia, whose economic behavior was investigated by Alexander Chayanov (1986). Both Malinowski and Chayanov studied with Bücher in Leipzig before the First World War.

From the beginning, ethnographers drew attention to the ways in which work was embedded in social organization. Karl Bücher was obsessed with understanding how people could be motivated to participate in the grind of physical work (he was brought up on a farm in Hessen). One vital consideration was the sociality of working together, exemplified by singing



during the activity as well as sharing refreshments and celebrating when the task was completed. According to Bücher's contemporary, American sociologist Thorstein Veblen, an innate sense of "workmanship" motivated humans toward superior technical solutions (Veblen 1899). Like the stages put forward by Bücher, Veblen's evolutionism was soon dismissed. But his demonstrations of how the making and consuming of objects invariably reflect status preoccupations and the aesthetics of a society have stood the test of time.

Work was simultaneously a matter of practical effort and an activity regulated by beliefs about the supernatural and by rituals that supplemented (but did not replace) technical knowledge. This duality was a recurring theme in the first triumphant crop of ethnographic studies of work, in which Malinowski and younger members of his seminar were the pioneers (Malinowski 1935; Firth 1939; Richards 1939). The Trobriand Islanders, studied by Malinowski himself, cared about the appearance of their gardens and sought to raise their personal standing through generous, publicly displayed gifts of yams to their in-laws. The Bemba, investigated by Audrey Richards, did not work as hard, in spite of the threat of hunger; they were matrilineal as well as matrilineal, and their institutions did not enable them to produce a surplus that could be protected from appropriation by other households. Forty years after these pioneering studies of work in non-market settings, Raymond Firth, Malinowski's successor at the London School of Economics, returned to his Polynesian materials to demonstrate the limitations of the "work theory of value." He did not doubt, however, that Marxist approaches to alienation and exploitation could be fruitfully extended to non-capitalist societies. A diagnosis of exploitation could be refuted if it could be shown that "positive surplus labor" was performed on the basis of free choices. While modern plantations certainly had the potential for exploitation, work for chiefs in the traditional non-monetary economy of the island of Tikopia was a different matter altogether (Firth 1979: 198–99; see Rachel Smith, Chapter 1, this volume).

After the Second World War, as the principle of market exchange expanded rapidly all over the world, cash cropping and migrant labor disrupted earlier forms of subsistence-oriented work. Documenting this was a major preoccupation of the field that became known as "peasant studies," to which anthropologists made important contributions. They also studied the impact of capitalist wage-labor in mines and in factories, illuminating culturally specific forms of resistance to new forms of exploitation and managerial power (Nash 1979; Ong 1987). The ethical dimension was captured most effectively through adaptations of the concept of "moral economy" (Scott 1976). Structuralist varieties of Marxism were popular in these decades, and both Marxists and non-Marxists drew attention to the importance

of ideological factors in reproducing hierarchy. Even those who used the concept of a mode of production often neglected the actual processes of work in order to focus on its social organization (e.g., Meillassoux 1981, Donham 1985), or on marketing and price formation (e.g., Cook 1982).

In the North Atlantic world and its offshoots, where Keynesian economic policies ensured stability and new forms of welfare state embeddedness, anthropological contributions remained rare in the postwar decades. Sociologists documented divisions within the working classes (Goldthorpe et al. 1969). Some maintained that, due to a combination of sociological and technological factors, it was time to bid farewell to this class altogether (Gorz 1982).

Meanwhile, most of the Eurasian landmass was dominated by Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialism. In collectivized systems of agriculture, thanks to the so-called private plot, the household continued to function as simultaneously a unit of production as well as consumption. The modernist agenda of Fordist capitalism was emulated under socialism: Lenin was an admirer of Taylorist technological efficiency. Over a century has passed since he proclaimed the necessity of comprehensive electrification to secure the economic development and “enlightenment” of the infant Soviet Union. But that polity collapsed in the early 1990s. From the evidence available, the socialist alternative to capitalist modernity did not make for more attractive workplaces. Retrospectively, there was nostalgia for the cozy social relations of the brigade, in which the rhythms of work were more humane than under the successor enterprises (Dunn 2004; Müller 2007). But piece-rate work in a Hungarian tractor factory in the 1960s was dehumanizing (Haraszti 1977). Monica Heintz, in a study carried out after the collapse of socialism, found that service sector employees were critical of the poor work ethics, both of socialism and of their nation (Heintz 2004; see also Ivan Rajković, Chapter 7, this volume).

## The Era of Neoliberalism

The concept of neoliberalism is as contested as any of the terms introduced above. Many anthropologists are inherently suspicious of periodization. Like historians, they tend to play down the sharpness of the temporal divide between preindustrial and industrial by detecting continuities, for example in terms of values or ethics. The establishment of factories in India did not mean that workers adopted the work ethic of a textbook Fordist assembly-line worker, in which the world of paid work was radically separated from the rest of life (see Mollona, De Neve and Parry 2009). The same can be said of state farm employees and collective farm members

under socialism. Even in Western Europe, where change began earlier and the rupture appears sharper, proto-industrial working from home, skilled and unskilled, had lasting effects on later industrial divisions of labor (Kalb 1997; Narotzky and Smith 2006). Continuities also manifest themselves in phases of deindustrialization, when the household re-assumes prominence as the prime frame for work (Mollona 2009).

Yet for all the continuities in the social organization of work, spreading out around the globe from the North Atlantic region, there is no mistaking the impact of intensified pro-market ideology from the 1970s onwards. Since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, neoliberal constellations have dominated globally and precarity has become a pervasive theme in anthropological research (Procoli 2004). The working classes have expanded numerically, while job security and protective benefits have declined, and activity of an informal or underground (not to say criminal) character has increased. The role of finance has continued to expand, despite the crisis that shook the global economy in 2007–8. The age of neoliberalism is also the age of acute environmental concerns and popular movements to address the causes of climate change, which lie in unsustainable economic growth models. It is an age of looting collective property to facilitate the gains of a few. At the time of writing in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic is accentuating these polarizing trends, strengthening the power of tech giants and plunging almost all states further into debt.

Many anthropologists have struggled with the term “neoliberalism” (Hilgers 2013; Venkatesan et al. 2015). Some, however, have joined other social scientists and historians to investigate this new phase of capitalism from the perspective of a distinctively anthropological political economy. Marxist approaches have been reinvigorated to focus more concretely on the extraction of surplus value in global chains of exploitation. Building on earlier contributions from sociology (Burawoy 1979), anthropologists have investigated how owners and managers secure consent at the workplace and inhibit effective collective action by the exploited class (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Kalb and Mollona 2018). The organization of protest and resistance is vitiated by hegemonic ideas and dynamic patterns of class segmentation that require multiscale relational analysis (Kalb 2020). For example, the affluent worker phenomenon, first diagnosed in the West, takes on new forms in the Global South. While ever more workers experience precarity, some enjoy secure contracts and privileges. Some blue-collar workers enjoy not only higher wages but a range of benefits that differentiate them from co-workers and push them into the middle classes (Hann and Parry 2018; Parry 2020).

Another conspicuous feature of the neoliberal era is the expansion of the service sector. Anthropologists have tended to lag behind their sociologist

colleagues in studying white-collar professionals. The contributions to this volume by Akanksha Awal (Chapter 4) and Anna-Riikka Kauppinen (Chapter 5) indicate the pleasure and fulfillment that well-educated young persons find in new forms of work that are rich in sociality. Such rewards are not so prominent in the financial center investigated by Magdalena Dąbkowska (Chapter 11); and they may be missing altogether in work that is organized through digital platforms. The break-up of firms due to the encroachments of the gig economy highlights the dilemmas facing capital. How far can digital technologies permit work tasks to be redistributed around the shrinking planet such that those who want more work can find it without needing to cross borders? We know from economic and social science theory (and also from common sense in everyday life) that the principles of market and contract are never sufficient in practice to secure the maximization of private profit, let alone the public good. These problems are addressed in several chapters of this volume, especially that of Ilana Gershon and Melissa Cefkin (Chapter 9).

I have suggested already that some trends in the neoliberal era appear to be enabling households to return to preindustrial patterns of the house economy. For some workers in “home office”, such as the ghostwriters discussed by Deborah Jones (Chapter 12), productive activities take place primarily in front of the laptop. But for others, such as the Chinese Uber-type drivers investigated by Gonçalo Santos and his co-authors Yichen Rao, Jack L. Xing, and Jun Zhang (Chapter 6), the appearance of control over one’s labor is part of a wider neoliberal fantasy—that digital technologies can assure a market-based optimization that is transparent and fair to all participants.

## Work and Freedom

The notion of fairness brings us back to ethical dimensions. These have always been central for the philosophers. In the social science literature, including anthropology, ethical justifications have usually been treated as an aspect of social organization. Adapting Karl Polanyi’s (1944) metaphor, we might say that this dimension was “embedded.” Often, especially in the revival of Marxist approaches, it is represented in terms of ideology, hegemony, or mystification (Narotzky and Smith 2006).

Marxist theory itself has ancient roots. Raymond Firth (1979) notes the similarities between Marxist value theory and medieval notions of just price. Marx admired Adam Smith’s conceptualization of abstract labor, and adapted it in his later work. But in his philosophical manuscripts of the early 1840s (and later in the *Grundrisse*, 1857–58), he feared that the

division of work, applauded by Smith, posed a threat to the freedom of the human being in terms of self-realization. For his notions of freedom and work, Marx looked to German philosophy and French engineers respectively (here I am following the exposition of Spittler 2008). In merging them, he was inspired particularly by Fourier. The focus shifted in Marx's later work: away from romantic notions that portrayed work as the satisfying activity of an artist, and toward an emphasis on the exploitation of work-power (*Arbeitskraft*) in processes of factory production. Truly free work was the only possible basis for the communist society of the future. In later writings, Marx stressed the social character of this self-realization, without offering much guidance as to how it could be operationalized. The "childishly naive" ideas of Fourier would not suffice (Spittler 2008: 58).

The incoherent formulations of the later Marx on value (critiqued by Firth) and the codification of an overly determinist historical materialism by Friedrich Engels do not invalidate the lasting significance of Marx's earlier contributions. In the 1920s, just as Malinowski was setting new standards for ethnographic research, a Hegelian version of Marxism that celebrated man's self-realization through work was advanced by Georg Lukács ([1923] 1971). This strand was later taken up by Karl Polanyi, a friend of the philosopher from their student days in Budapest. Even before the publication of Marx's philosophical manuscripts in 1932, Polanyi was developing similar themes in Vienna. Polanyi rejected the determinism of Marxism-Leninism. In an essay written in 1927, he laid out his own Hegelian-Marxist vision of freedom, rooted in anthropocentric notions of emancipation through work, by insisting on the primacy of the social and *responsibility* (Polanyi 2018). Polanyi's later theorizing of the embeddedness of economic phenomena in society gave rise to a "substantivist" school in economic anthropology in the second half of the twentieth century, in opposition to the "formalists" who maintained that the paradigms of mainstream (neoclassical) economics had universal validity (see Hann and Hart 2011).

From the pure formalist point of view, every decision (whether or not to work legally, whether or not to send one's children to work, etc.) is subject to calculations of utility maximization. Alongside the English utilitarians, such approaches had their strongest roots in the Austrian School of economics, generally acknowledged as the most influential forerunners of neoliberalism. Their most distinguished exponent is Friedrich August Hayek (1960), an interlocutor of both Polanyi and Karl Popper in the interwar decades. Hayek believed that liberty was the basis of civilizational progress and that this liberty could only be assured by private property and market competition. In this volume, his libertarian values turn up most conspicuously among the venture capitalists studied by Johannes Lenhard (Chapter 10).

In Hayek's lifetime (he died in 1992), reviving laissez-faire capitalism meant strengthening capitalist corporations against states. The firm was taken for granted. Its central role in capitalist economic organization had been reappraised by scholars who emphasized how, beyond the compelling logic of market competition, the trust established within the firm reduced "transaction costs" and thus facilitated coordination (Coase 1937). This "institutionalist" theory was still predicated on notions of efficiency and profit-maximization. It was attractive to some economic anthropologists, who adopted the institutionalist language to explain patterns of work and trade in preindustrial conditions, and even their evolutionary emergence (Acheson 1994). In recent decades, however, digital technologies have undermined the theories of Coase by calling the boundaries of firms into question. In particular, platforms have vastly extended the scope for task-individualization, as Gershon and Cefkin show in their chapter. The anthropologist asks: if trust was a crucial lubricant of efficient performance in Fordist days, for management and blue-collar workers alike, what happens to human social life in a world of entrepreneurial selves? What does "work ethic" come to mean for those whose personhood is defined in this way? Can we imagine a society in which working becomes a facet of human life that is *not* valued as the prime basis for entitlements, but instead gives way to vistas of free time as imagined by utopian socialists from Fourier to Gorz?

In the modern social sciences, it is above all the tradition of Max Weber that approaches social action in terms of meanings. His study of the links between the economic ethic of Protestantism and the "spirit of capitalism" is particularly pertinent (Weber [1904–5/1920] 2011). It forms the baseline for Sylvia Terpe's investigation (Chapter 8) of the self-employed in a postsocialist German city, in which she demonstrates that a very positive identification with work can conflict with a profit-maximizing approach to the business. Neoliberal subjectivities that have emerged more gradually elsewhere appear in sharper relief among populations in which entrepreneurialism was previously suppressed by socialist planning; so too does social critique of the new "entrepreneurial self" (see also Makovicky 2014).

Most scholarly invocation of the ethical self in recent anthropological writings has little or no connection with work, or with other activities that would conventionally be classified as economic. The bias in anthropology's recent "ethical turn" is toward the religious component of the relationship that intrigued Weber, and (in our more secular age) toward multiple cultural elements of personhood. One major source of inspiration is Michel Foucault's focus on the techniques of an individualized self (Foucault 1997; Laidlaw 2014). It is assumed that, however great the cultural variation, the individual always has scope to craft personhood and thus express freedom.

Critics question such notions of individualized personhood and stress the need to re-embed individuals in social organization. In the context of neoliberalism, they ask whether ubiquitous discourses of aspiration and entrepreneurship do in fact lead persons to see themselves as bundles of assets and to internalize new dispositions of agency (Hilgers 2013; Parry 2018).

The Foucauldian approach to these questions runs against the grain of the social sciences. Attention is focused not on structural constraints, not on unequal power relations and the ideologies that support them, but on free individuals. For most social scientists, this is an illusion, an ideological construct. A “free” wage-laborer differs from an indentured worker, a serf, or a slave, but he or she is not truly free; not when entering ostensibly free labor contracts, nor when engaging in other work tasks, nor in any other existential moment. Their employers are not free either, though the power they dispose of is likely to be vastly greater. Karl Polanyi builds on the work of Marx, Weber and Durkheim by applying a communitarian notion of responsibility across the board: not just to one’s family or some narrower community but to Society with a capital letter, perhaps even to humanity. This is not to cast Foucault as an apologist for economic neoliberalism (see Rajković’s chapter in this volume). But just as Polanyi’s notion of freedom was a reaction to the grave threats of “disembedded” market economy and fascism in the interwar decades, Foucault’s reception in the neoliberal era is best assessed in the context of the “embedded liberalism” (Ruggie 1982) on which the capitalist world embarked after the Second World War.

The point is elaborated by Rajković with respect to socialist Yugoslavia, where large bureaucratic enterprises nourished corruption and resentments. More generally, the Keynesian compromises that stabilized the world economy between the 1940s and the 1970s left many citizens disappointed, even frustrated. Their individual freedoms were curtailed by high taxation, recurrent strike action, affirmative action programs, and the perception of excessive bureaucratization. Neoliberal ideology fell on fertile terrain. Precisely because its individualism was so brazen, it needed ethical support. With a lag of some decades, the Foucauldian perspective on self-realization and “freedom from” discipline and constraint met this need. Anthropology was not immune, and these currents eventually resonated productively in economic anthropology (Browne and Milgram 2009).

At this point it would seem that we have two schools unable to communicate with each other. In the one camp are those anthropologists who see themselves as social scientists and engage primarily with sociologists—for example, in pursuing Marxist approaches to work and labor relations. In the other camp are those who find the social science approaches ethically dehumanizing and so opt instead for more cultural approaches and engagement with moral philosophers. But these apparently irreconcilable currents

can be brought together. In this book we attempt such a cross-fertilization. We insist on the social (relational, political) determinants of the distribution and performance of work tasks, but we are no less interested in the subjective experience of a work ethic, and how work contributes to the ethical self in a larger sense. Foucauldian influence is strong in the chapters of Olivia Angé, Akanksha Awal, and Anna-Riikka Kauppinnen (Chapters 3, 4, and 5 respectively). Polanyian insights are pursued most explicitly by Katherine Miller (Chapter 2) and Sylvia Terpe (Chapter 8). The contributions of Gonçalo Santos et al. (Chapter 6) and Ivan Rajković (Chapter 7) suggest how Polanyian and Foucauldian approaches can fruitfully be combined to grasp the life courses of individuals and the historical dialectic of a population, respectively.

## A Hungarian Case

To conclude this brief discussion of self-realization through work in the age of neoliberalism, let me shift the register to the concrete realities of ethnography. Most of my field research in recent years has taken place in provincial Hungary, which happens to be the homeland of both Karl Polanyi and Georg Lukacs. One of the most powerful planks in the ideology of the Fidesz Party, in power since 2010, has been to create a “work-based society” (Hann 2018; Szombati forthcoming). After twenty years of post-socialist turmoil, Fidesz promised stability on a firm ethical foundation, consisting of the spiritual values of Christian civilization in tandem with the values of work. The strength of the latter in Hungary’s preindustrial rural society was richly documented by ethnographers in the twentieth century. The emphasis on work, especially manual work, persisted throughout the decades of rapid industrialization under socialism. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has drawn upon these traditions. Having introduced huge cuts in social benefits (especially for the unemployed), his government boosted the rate of employment by means of a massive workfare scheme. Western social scientists tend to condemn such schemes as punitive neoliberalism, yet workfare has been received positively by large sections of the Hungarian population. It was only to be expected that those who held more or less secure jobs favored restricting state support to those who had made themselves morally eligible by virtue of their work. It was more surprising that many of those now forced to get up early to perform tedious manual tasks to provide for their households (Roma prominent among them) also welcomed the new policy. This work puts more money in their pockets than the state benefits they had received previously. Moreover, public work is seldom solitary, and so new forms of camaraderie develop. Few Hungarians



would endorse universal income schemes of the kind increasingly touted elsewhere in recent years. They are rejected for the same ethical reasons that lead them to approve of workfare.

Karl Polanyi would be appalled by the xenophobic intolerance of Viktor Orbán. But he would understand and sympathize with the appeal to work as the supreme ethical basis of value and freedom in society (not to be confused with naive utopian celebration of communal or collective work). Polanyi teaches that the populist politics of our age have their roots in the application of market models to both the economic organization of society (nowadays world society) and the realization of the self. The dissident East European intellectuals who rejected socialism before 1990 thought they could replace it with a liberal utopia consisting of free individuals and their associations in an open society. They reckoned without neoliberal political economy. The outcomes have been devastating, economically and ethically. In the third decade of postsocialism, Viktor Orbán has led a paradoxical “countermovement” to market domination that is profoundly illiberal but has strong ethical roots in Hungarian society.<sup>2</sup>

## The Chapters

Most of the following chapters are based on fieldwork; those of Rachel Smith and Ivan Rajković also draw on historical data. In Chapter 1, Smith starts out from the Maussian notion of “prestation,” famous in anthropology due to its prominence in *The Gift* (Mauss [1923–24] 2016), but replete with ambivalences. To begin with, the concept disguised coercive French colonial practices in an era when new forms of labor commodification mingled with unfree forms of plantation work. In independent Vanuatu, collective work for the benefit of the community contrasts with the contractual basis on which many individuals spend much of the year working in New Zealand agribusiness. These migrants show a reluctance to engage in collective tasks when back in their villages, where the rhythms of work and perceptions of time have remained quite different. Smith shows that, even in the colonial era, it was possible to avoid this work by means of a monetary payment. The equivalent fee today is not high, but the pressure to pay it is resented by returnees. They are prepared to give generously only in contexts where the act of giving, in this case through work, retains its voluntary character.

In Chapter 2, Katherine Miller explores work in the Hunza Valley (northern Pakistan). Long after the demise of a feudal regime that is remembered as harsh and exploitative, collective work in recent decades has been systematically fostered by development initiatives that link volunteering to

work with Islamic ideals of service and love, and ultimately to the cosmos. Outside such communal activities, various forms of mutual aid are practiced with kin, neighbors and others. The constellations reflect the social structure of the community and they evoke a range of emotions. Miller found physical pleasure and satisfaction to be pervasive in carrying out agricultural tasks yet to be transformed by mechanization. Emotional and bodily experiences through the performance of work constitute a form of ethical reflexivity, which leads Miller to reject the individualist and intellectual bias in Foucault's "techniques of the self" in favor of a Polanyian emphasis on the social.

Other kinds of work are investigated against a different religious background by Olivia Angé in Chapter 3. Indigenous Kolla in the Argentinian Andes combine devotion to the Christian God and his pantheon with more specifically Latin American ideas about the flow of vital force and spirit. In annual fairs to celebrate Saint Anne, admired for her industry, believers craft a wide range of familiar objects in miniature in order to demonstrate both their aesthetics and their dexterity. They thereby impress other participants and please the saint they strive to emulate. Much has changed in recent decades: the social structure of the town has been transformed, miniatures are no longer bartered, some are produced quite crudely, and some stallholders at the fair sell industrial goods. Yet according to Angé, the cosmology has remained largely intact. The intensive work necessary to produce pleasing miniatures reflects both utilitarian considerations (such as minimizing effort, and going home with a profit) and ethicized notions of what it takes to lead a successful human life. Angé concludes that those who craft and transact these Andean objects challenge the Aristotelian distinction between doing and making. Their work is a technique that is transformative of the self, in the Foucauldian sense.

Finding pleasure through work is also important for the young middle-class Indian women discussed by Akanksha Awal in Chapter 4. Although parents would prefer their daughters to obtain government jobs that pay quite well and offer long-term security, these jobs have become scarce. In any case, the women themselves disdain the emotional work that is required by the entrenched hierarchies of government schools. Irrespective of social background (caste or class), they prefer the "affective practices" of call-center work, where they can experience conviviality with their co-workers, both men and women. Working hours are flexible and the women enjoy considerable autonomy, including the freedom to flirt with clients and managers alike. In these high-turnover jobs, the boundary between work and leisure is fuzzy. Freedom has its limits, notably with regard to sexualization and harassment. It is significant that these women do not expect to continue working to earn money after they marry.

Anna-Riikka Kauppinen (Chapter 5) investigates professional men in a similar “young adult” phase of the life course in Ghana’s capital, Accra. Unlike the call-center workers studied by Awal, these men take their work with the utmost seriousness, and aspire to make it a career. They owe their qualifications to long-term family investment and so experience moral pressure to contribute to supporting their lower-middle-class households. They are also expected to conform to public expectations that educated white-collar workers should be the “drivers” of national development. This imaginary dates back to an ideology implanted in the era of colonial struggle, though Nkrumah’s socialist rejection of private accumulation ran counter to the norms of local societies. Despite these pervasive collectivist discourses (and the prominence of social obligations in much Africanist ethnography), Kauppinen finds that the young professionals with whom she worked hold very different values. The jobs they do are badly paid, if compared to blue-collar employees. What money they earn is more likely to be spent selfishly (e.g., on the purchase of a car) than in supporting their families. Nonetheless, with the help of notions of self-realization (Foucault) and authorship (Jane Guyer), Kauppinen shows that their dedication to excellent work is sincere and deserving of respect. Personhood has changed, as it has in India, permitting more room for friendship and contracting the traditional bonds of kinship. According to Kauppinen, the concern with professional excellence is not so much a reflection of generic neoliberalism, but rather a key component of contemporary Ghanaian “middle classes in the making.”

Gonçalo Santos and his co-authors (Chapter 6) explore how pressures to increase working hours affect different segments of the workforce in contemporary urban China. Working twelve-hour days, six days a week, is a prerequisite for success and “ownership” among IT developers, the majority of whom consider the sacrifice to be justified: this hard work is good for their companies, good for their country, and good for themselves. Taxi drivers, by contrast, have low status and it has become increasingly difficult to make a decent living due to competition from Didi (the Chinese version of Uber). Didi drivers enjoy more autonomy but they end up working extremely long hours for dwindling rewards. There is variation among the drivers, as there is in the IT sector. For some, “financial freedom” is the motivation for signing up at Didi. This would appear to suggest that they value personal freedom more highly than the social model of freedom outlined by Karl Polanyi. But closer inspection leads the authors to identify a dialectic: greater financial freedom is not an end in itself, but rather a means to achieve the more complete forms of social freedom that workers in both occupational communities crave.

The contrasts between traditional taxi firms and e-hailing drivers are picked up by Ivan Rajković in his opening discussion in Chapter 7. The body

of the chapter illuminates the history of socialist Yugoslavia by training a sharp light on the Zastava car plant in Kragujevac, Serbia. Karl Polanyi proposed the concept of “countermovement” to capture how workers resisted the domination of the market by carving out new forms of self-protection (and thereby *social* forms of freedom). However, the system of self-management institutionalized in federal Yugoslavia gave rise to a different dialectic. Blue-collar workers (for the most part migrants whose families had previously known only agricultural work) were initially celebrated as the heroic builders of a socialist civilization. Before long, however, the proliferation of managers and a lack of market discipline led to problems. Work remained the moral basis of value, but under self-management it became impossible to discern who was really working and who was loafing. In this context, the countermovement ended up taking the form of more liberal, individualist notions of personhood. In the absence of an effective collective work ethic, collective demands for wage increases were perceived as excessive. Eventually, following the break-up of the country, the combined economic and ethical difficulties became insuperable; neoliberal privatization and takeover by foreign capital were by and large welcomed by the workforce.

In Chapter 8, sociologist Sylvia Terpe takes her inspiration from Max Weber’s celebrated account of how the work ethic associated with Protestantism gave rise to an unprecedented *Wirtschaftsethik* (economic ethic). In this transformation, steady-state householding gives way to “acquisition” and the maximization of profits. Terpe amends Weber’s account by noting that the dynamic of mature capitalism is sustained by the creation of new needs (or wants), rather than by slavish adherence to a work ethic. In her empirical materials, stemming from a study of the owners of small businesses in the postsocialist city of Halle, she finds patterns not anticipated by either Martin Luther or Weber. One businessman continues to work hard and identify strongly with his craft, while rejecting the logic of mass production. He has trimmed his workforce such that his economic ethic is nowadays closer to householding than profit maximization. In the second case discussed by Terpe, work does not involve handicraft skills but consists in an exciting buzz as money is made through launching new companies. For this entrepreneur, work merges with his leisure time, which (when he is not enjoying foreign holidays) he spends with customers and potential business partners. Terpe shows that both individuals have a social ethic inasmuch as they feel responsibility for their family and workforce. The one who is driven by profits practices a form of *soziales Engagement* by supporting a private school, the aim of which is to produce entrepreneurs like himself. Both are unsympathetic to state support for those who do not work hard enough to *deserve* public support. According to Terpe, they thus fall well short of Karl Polanyi’s notion of “true freedom.”

Ilana Gershon and Melissa Cefkin (Chapter 9) investigate the impact of the platform economy on the distribution of work and the nature of working relations. At first sight, if the worker is free to select the task, then hierarchies melt away and a neoliberal utopia is brought within reach. The reality is quite different, not least due to the role played by the same digital technologies in evaluation and the ensuing “reputational effects.” The tacit knowledge of an experienced worker cannot be adequately captured in open calls. The authors highlight a deeper contradiction of neoliberalism: the intensification of a market model *inside* firms as well as between them undermines the evolved coordination of cumulative institutions that economists of neoliberal disposition had previously theorized with the concept of transaction costs.

Johannes Lenhard (Chapter 10) has worked in Europe and North America with venture capitalists, most of whom focus their work on start-ups seeking to implement platform technologies of the kind discussed by Gershon and Cefkin. Without ever losing sight of the financial bottom line, namely the “fiduciary duty” to maximize profits for investors, the men and women who decide in which companies to place the funds they control do so primarily on the basis of gut feelings and ideological affinities. The investors perform the mission statements of their firms, which articulate what Lenhard identifies as a “soaring” libertarianism. This worldview is congenial to entrepreneurs whose aim is to reshape entire economic landscapes, and for whom any form of state regulation is anathema. Lenhard pinpoints the paradox whereby embracing notions of “creative destruction” (in the spirit of Schumpeter) camouflages the imperative to achieve quasi-monopolistic power in order to meet the investors’ bottom line.

In Chapter 11, Magdalena Dąbkowska investigates cosmopolitan young professionals who carry out less glamorous forms of financial work for an international bank that established a new center in Berlin in the wake of the international crisis of 2007–8. Jobs of relatively low complexity (compared to work at the major hubs) depend on efficient teamwork, and there is little scope for creativity. Yet Dąbkowska finds that the entrepreneurial self is resistant to the deskilling of process-driven work. The bank runs formal schemes to promote original thinking, but those who stray too far outside mainstream expectations are likely to experience disappointment and to diagnose hypocrisy among their managers. Some individuals strive to attain greater freedom, but it is hard (perhaps impossible) to reconcile professional ambition with collegiality and trust.

That anthropologists should develop an interest in the work of ghost-writers would probably have surprised the pioneers of the study of work in non-monetized societies a century ago. However, writing more or less creatively for a client can be seen as a continuation of a tradition that dates

back millennia, to when scribes commoditized their expertise in societies in which literacy was still highly restricted. In Chapter 12, Deborah Jones reviews the many kinds of projects undertaken by contemporary US ghostwriters. She focuses on two individuals, one of whom has successfully established her own brand and bylines, while the other struggles in anonymous precarity. Even when their authorship is entirely invisible, this work is satisfying and meaningful; it might even generate forms of freedom. Apart from exchanges with clients, limited forms of sociality with other writers are made possible by the internet. But, for the most part, ghostwriting exemplifies the digitally-enabled “return to the household” that will also impact dramatically on academic work in the twenty-first century.

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## Notes

1. The situation improved towards the end of the twentieth century. A Society for the Study of Work has existed within the American Anthropological Association since 1980. It publishes the *Anthropology of Work Review*. From 1984, June Nash edited a lively series titled *Anthropology of Work* for the State University of New York Press, but this was discontinued in the new century.
2. This is not the place to delve deeper into the tensions and paradoxes of Orbán's Hungary. The labor market has improved in recent years thanks to investments by transnational capital, but also to the rise of a national bourgeoisie supported by transfers from the EU and endemic cronyism. Wage levels have remained low. Trade unions (which struggle to make an impact) allege new forms of exploitation and even a modern form of slavery. See Hann 2018, 2019; Scheiring 2020; Hann and Scheiring forthcoming.

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