Nineteenth-Century Business, Labour, Temperance, & Trade PERIODICALS

The Story of 'Work' 1. Introduction

What is Work?

The crisis of work is much discussed at the moment. But what does the word mean? Isn't it obvious? Well, no. Like all words, it has a history, a series of layers that contribute in varying degrees to what we think those terms mean. These layers can be contradictory and that can cause a great deal of misunderstanding. The story of work I begin on this page stems from one such case.

My story of what work has meant over the centuries was actually inspired by a comment from a member of the public on an image on this site concerning slavery. The commentator thought the image was racist and should be removed from a site which was supposedly about work. The image actually came from an **anti-slavery** piece in the *British Workman*, though the commentator thought that a site about the nature of 'work' with an image of black slaves on it was morally wrong in itself.

There seemed to be two points here:

1. should we forget about the terrible histories of racism?
2. to what extent can slaves be regarded as 'working'?

In answer to the first, I believe that we forget our histories – even the morally reprehensible ones – at our peril. That is one of the lessons of George Orwell's *1984* where history is rewritten to align with whatever political necessity is demanded. We don't need to celebrate it – indeed, there is much to condemn – but we do need to remember it. History may indeed be traumatic in the technical (Freudian) sense of being so awful we prefer to bury it and keep it buried. History may make us angry or fearful, but that anger or fear don't make it go away.

There is always a price to pay for forgetting: to paraphrase the title of an excellent collection of essays edited by Michael O'Loughlin in 2014, there is an "Ethics of Remembering" and there are consequences of forgetting. The BLT19 site is dedicated to remembering, to uncovering the buried cultural strata that inform our thinking about work, and how the media disseminated and debated those cultural ideas. We cannot, in this reasoning, delete things we should rather not see or be reminded of.

Second – and this is what *The Story of Work* is really concerned with – 'work' does not always mean 'working for a wage' or that we are automatically 'free' to sell the labour of our bodies. The idea that effort should be paid for in a defined and codified way is, for a historian like me, quite new: selling your labour in a free market is an idea that has only been around since the eighteenth century, and really only became dominant in the nineteenth. It's an idea that is still in progress of development and still very much debated (is caring for one's children 'work'? should there be a universal basic income regardless of 'work'?).

As we know from the standard textbook on the sociology of work:

[t]he meanings of work do not inhere within the practices of participants but are created, challenged, altered and sustained through contending discourses: if particular forms of activity are represented through our discourses as valued or valueless then the activities themselves take on such characteristics for those appropriating such a discourse

Keith Grint and Darren Nixon, The Sociology of Work: an Introduction, 4th edition (London: Polity Press, 2015), 7-8.

Acceptance of this radical instability of definition (which stems from what Linguistics calls a "pragmatic" view of what meaning is and language does) is very different from the many attempts to fix the meaning of "work" such as even the wonderfully learned Lucasson adopts (see the bibliography below). Quoting and endorsing the work of the famous American sociologist Charles Tilly, Lucasson writes that "Work includes any human effort adding value to goods and services…" (p.2). But who has the right to say what that "added value" is? Are what David Graeber called 'bullshit jobs' not work because the workers paid to do them are alienated from them? To their managers these jobs might well "add value," even if only to the prestige of the manager.

Rather than nail work to a fixed definition which floats free of its context, we need to open ourselves to the many meanings of work and the values we ourselves add to the term. That is the axiom which energises this *Story of Work*. Different societies attribute different meanings to the word and use to for different purposes. What those meanings and purposes are is what this story is about.

BLT19 as a whole is primarily concerned to contribute to the many recent attempts to denaturalise what we think we know about work, whether that knowledge is explored in fiction (like Olga Ravns's lyrical and brutal novel *The Employees* of 2020, or the 2022 series on AppleTV+ Severance) or non-fiction (such as by David Graeber, Gavin Mueller – see the Bibliography below – and, even more recently, by Alison Moulds, Agnes Arnold-Foster and their colleagues).

The quasi-serial story that I offer here is a brief and perhaps idiosyncratic history of how 'work' has been defined and debated from the time of the ancient Greeks onwards so as to enable us to realise what a complex and malleable term 'work' actually is. As this first post shows, work *starts* with slavery.

I'm not offering a history of work as a set of material practices but a condensed account of how 'work' has been defined, analysed, hierarchised since classical times so as to allow us to read the Victorians – and ourselves – in a wider context. This is more in line with the history of ideas than material history, though it can be difficult and sometimes not helpful to make a distinction between ideas and practices as each is in constant dialogue with the other. As will become clear, the definitions I explore often stem from a utopian impulse: what Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, Thomas More and even Adam Smith were describing were ideal states that they explicitly recognised were different from the messy material realities around them. The account of the changing meanings of 'work' that I offer in the posts are certainly simplifications, but that does not stop them acting as prescriptions that guide,

however imperfectly and indirectly, both real-world practices and discourses down to today.

Two more things I need to say before the story begins.

First is the relevance of a *longue duree* history to understanding the nineteenth century, let alone today. 'Big History' has become fashionable over the last decade or so, it's true – certainly since J. Guldi and D. Armitage's *The History Manifesto* – but it's not just a question of what is fashionable that drives this part of the BLT19 project which otherwise focusses on the nineteenth century.

Those who ask what the relevance of the Greek and Roman philosophers and the Church Fathers to the Victorians forget that the several Victorian education systems that ran concurrently (from public schools to self-education) placed knowledge of classical philosophy and theology as essential to enable successful argument about the nature of reality and history. That goes for Ouida as much as Newman, editors of journals whether high-status or popular, literary or trade as much as Marx or Disraeli. Not all of them would have read the Latin and Greek of Jacques-Paul Migne's monumental 400-volume collection of *Patrologia Latina* (1841-1855, 1865-6) and *Patrologia Graeca* (1857-1866) – advertised in the *Bookseller* in December 1862 – but they certainly knew the stories through widely-disseminated works like Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1870). But I don't only stick to how the Victorians raided the classical world: Simon Goldhill, Norman Vance, Edmund Richardson and many others have thoroughly covered that for us already.

Christianity was even more the bedrock of nineteenth-century Britain than the classics. Max Weber hypothesised its centrality for thinking about work (and acting on that thinking) at the cusp the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries, and we can see why from just one example drawn from Britain 40 years before the publication of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

When in January 1869 the *Bookseller* added up the titles of books published in 1867 and 1868, the category "Religious Books and Pamphlets" topped the list with 849 and 916 respectively. We tend to think of "Victorian literature" as comprising novels and poetry, but the Booksellers records that in those years there were only 410 and 360 novels. Novels were only the third most popular category after children's literature. The other major genres of Victorian literature, "Poetry and Drama," combined were in ninth place (150 titles issued in 1867 and 219 in 1868) – "Politics and Questions of the Day" comprised 143 and 260 titles respectively and gave "Poetry and Drama" a run for their money. Books concerned with the trades and professions (which the *Bookseller* splits up into smaller categories such as 'Law,' 'Medical and Surgical,' 'Trade and Commerce' and so on, and which I aggregate here) total 389 in 1867 and 495 in 1869. The important point here is that religious books – almost all Christian – had the most titles published. The "literary" as we think of it today was decidedly secondary. Clearly, then, we have to take into account the religious, and especially Christian, dimension of Victorian thinking about work, not just because .

The history that I present in the serial that follows tries to specify the ideational compounds and layers of the cultural sea in which swam Victorian writers, volumes and periodicals about work. The deep layers may start with the Greeks but, as we come up through the various currents, the story covers English-language texts too. My analysis seeks to identify the elements of what Victorians could say and how they

could say it – or, to change metaphor, the bricks they could recombine and recolour to make new patterns. Without knowing about these elements, we don't understand the Victorians. Just because today few study Latin or Greek, Virgil or Plato or Aquinas, doesn't at all mean they were and are not very influential either directly or indirectly even on us, let alone the Victorians, many of whom did study or at least know about them. It may seem a terribly obviously thig to say, but experience tells me that I have to say it again and again: we cannot measure the knowledge of others by our own. It really is as simple as that.

Second, there are quite a few histories of work already published (see the selective bibliography below) and more are being issued as I write. Some of them are more useful than others. Most are histories of the *practice* of work that are based on definitions and assumptions from today (or at least very recent ones). Many, alas, depend on secondary sources and on translations that, because the translations are interested in being legible rather than literal, do not always represent their source materials accurately enough for a properly rigorous analysis (this starts with Max Weber indeed – see the bibliography below). Sometimes – no, often – these translations and the mistaken conclusions based on them are requoted again and again without checking whether they are accurate. For that reason I have gone back to the originals wherever possible, especially when it comes to the Latin and Greek. The translations in what follow are all mine and are more concerned with bringing out the logic of the originals than with elegance – so be warned: expect clunkiness!

The BLT19 site as a whole (most obviously some of the image galleries like these on women, children, animals and men in the *British Workman* or the blogs and creative pages) is concerned with keeping the debate about what counts as work very much alive. This serial is another contribution to that debate from an academic angle.

I hope you will feel free to engage in dialogue with, and in correction and guidance of, these posts as the technology now allows us, and as my interested reader already has done. Please don't hesitate to post comments here or on each post or, of course, email me.

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1. Work, Slavery, Stasis and the Ancient Greeks
2. Work and the Romans: the glory of (some kinds of) work and the pragmatism of *poiesis*
3. Work and the Early Christians: Free Slavery, the New Testament and Augustine
4. Work and the Early Christians: Time Discipline and the Rule of St Benedict
5. Work and High Medieval Christianity: Thomas of Aquinas
6. Work and the secular Middle Ages: Guilds, Dante, Florence, Famine and Plague
7. Work and Luther
8. Work and Thomas More's Utopia – the continuing question of slavery
9. Work and the Calvinism of Richard Baxter: the Protestant Work Ethic?
10. Work, Hobbes and Locke
11. Work , Adam Smith and the 'free market'
12. Work and the Nineteenth Century
13. Work, Marx, Engels and the embrace of work
14. Work and William Morris's Utopia
15. Work and BLT19

A very selective annotated bibliography of general histories of the concept of work (in chronological order)

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. The Revised 1920 edition*. Translated and Introduced by Stephen Kahlberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011 [orig. 1904-5]).

Hugely influential, and deservedly so, even if still controversial. Tracing Weber's sources is not always easy though – he seems to have used German translations of English texts which makes checking his claims against the originals tricky.

Adriano Tilgher, *Storia del concetto di lavoro nella civiltà occidentale (homo faber)* (Bologna: Massimiliano Boni, 1983 [orig. 1924]).

A fascinating, racy and polemical account by a Marxist written as a political intervention just after Mussolini's fascist coup in Italy. It includes (very brief) discussions of Zoroastrian and Jewish traditions as well as the Greco-Roman-Christian. There is an English translation from the 1960s but it was not available to me when I wrote this serial. The translation was very influential on Applebaum. (q.v.)

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958/ 1998).

There is a dazzling and well-known chapter on the historical differentiation between 'labour' and 'work,' which Arendt defines as dependent on time – the results of labour are ephemeral; those of work longer lasting. Alas, that distinction doesn't quite hold, though I shall argue that time is indeed very important in the changing conceptualisation of work.

Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*, 2 vols. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966, 1970).

Hugely influential, polemical and monumental work by a widely-read critic and historian of art, architecture and technology. Its main purpose was to alert the reader to the violence that technology has been put to, but it is also still valuable as a detailed yet engaging account of the work that changing technologies have done over the centuries and the ideological underpinnings of this work.

Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).

The most comprehensive resource. Later histories happily cite it. It is an extraordinary achievement and deserves to be read still today, but when reading it carefully we realise that it depends on just one or two *secondary* sources for each text and on some problematic translations. This has led to some mistaken conclusions.

Sharon Beder, *Selling the Work Ethic: From Puritan Pulpit to Corporate PR* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

Relies very largely on Applebaum, but the 70 or so pages on the history is a very good read. Most of the text is a discussion of changing working conditions and practices in the late twentieth century.

Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers : Transformation of the Social Question* (London : Transaction Publishers, 2003).

Influential account in a sociological post-Foucauldian tradition very different from the Anglo-American linear narrative of Applebaum. It focusses on the changing relations of work and welfare from the middle ages onwards, concerned to show how the idea that work makes one deserving of social assistance came about in Europe. Essential reading for all who think about the very Victorian (but still very current) question of the 'deserving' v. the 'undeserving' poor.

Andrea Komlosy, *Work: the last 1,000 Years*. Translated by Jacob K. Watson with Loren Balhorn (London: Verso 2018 [orig. 2014]).

Offers a condensed version of the conventional history recognisable from Applebaum, though depending on German sources. What makes this volume of unusual interest is its engagement with non-European materials, including a fascinating chapter on Chinese conceptions of 'work.' We need a lot more more of this kind of study (cf. Suzman) and it's a pity my expertise cannot offer it here. My focus on linguistic construction in what follows is, however, partly inspired by Komlosy's philological emphasis.

David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: a Theory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2018).

Controversial and very readable volume that makes important points. Even if its methodology is questionable, it achieves its aim of making us think. Not much on the history of the concept of work, but certainly worth reading to help us understand current forms of alienation.

Dominique Méda and Patricia Vendramin, *Reinventing Work in Europe: Value, Generations and Labour* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

Polemically claims 'work' as a concept did not exist before eighteenth-century as they accept only modern definitions whereby 'work' means only 'wage labour' and its variants (exactly what BLT19 and this serial Story of Work argues against). The primary concern of the volume is the present, however, so it is understandable that the historical section is very cursory indeed. It is much better on post-Marxian twentieth-century thinking and the points it makes about today interesting and important.

James Suzman, *Work: A History of How We Spend Our Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

A wonderfully thought-provoking book by an anthropologist that contrasts the history of our thinking about work with that of the hunter-gatherer San peoples with whom Suzman lived and whom he studied. Of course, the Victorians didn't know what Suzman tells us, but he puts their and our thinking in a new light.

Amelia Horgan, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)

While history is not the focus of this book, it is certainly historically aware (from the nineteenth century onwards). It is a very readable and interesting polemic about how current work arrangements are, to quote its conclusions "not… a viable means for self-expression, but an affront to freedom" (p. 161). How such a statement can be made and what its roots are comprise the questions this serial addresses, and though I address it in a different way from this book, I remain very sympathetic to its answers.

Jan Lucassen, *The Story of Work. A New History of Humankind* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2021).

An epic account by a very experienced and knowledgeable academic, this is 500-page book very much in the Big History tradition, and very welcome for its properly global coverage. Its broad vision (it starts c. 700,000 years ago and really does seek to cover the whole world) comes at some cost to depth, though: crucially, it's clear that it relies on secondary sources and translations. It nonetheless remains a remarkable study. It will no doubt supersede Applebaum as the go-to reference text, though its approach – historical practice rather than history of ideas – is very different.

Gavin Mueller, *Breaking Things at Work. The Luddites are Right about Why You Hate Your Job* (London: Verso, 2021).

Polemical and entertaining, a post-Graeber (and post-Mumford) text that is less history than a position statement about alienation and technology, but nonetheless worth reading. There is some history (obviously of the late eighteenth-century textile workers who rightly feared that machines would take their jobs) but most of the text concerns today's fears about AI and automation.