

Zitierhinweis

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The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind

Reviewer: Professor Deborah Simonton, University of Southern Denmark

‘We work because we have to, but also because we like it: from hunting-gathering more than 700,000 years ago to the present era of zoom meetings, humans have always worked to make the world around them serve their needs.’ This blurb thus captures the essence of Jan Lucassen’s *The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind*. This is a very big book that tackles important questions underpinning the practice and perceptions of human work, one which traverses an astonishing *longue durée*. Beginning with prehistory, and relying on archaeological research, he takes us from 700,000 years ago to the period spanned by the historical record, concluding with a chapter on ‘Outlook’. He also manages an astounding geographic panorama covering China, India, Africa, the Americas, and Europe.

Fundamentally he argues that work has always had meaning for humans and is and has been a source of pleasure, particularly when it is done collaboratively and with a sense of justice and fairness in operation. Work always has been central to individuals’ identities. As he travels through space and time, he embraces issues of migration, slavery, division of labour, collective action, collaboration and dissent, monetization of labour, caste systems, and the place of leisure. Thus, he aims at producing a grand narrative that grapples with and responds to some vast questions.

It comprises an introduction followed by seven numbered chapters, broken down by large spans of time, which progressively shorten as he nears the present. While the first three cover prehistory to 500BCE, the final four bring us to the present. In addition—and necessary reading—is a preface, a ‘Note on Histories, methods and theories of work’, and the closing chapter on ‘Outlook’. These frame the text and make important points about what he is trying to do, how and why. They also set the book in his ‘voice’ indicating how the book is also a personal journey, which draws on much of his earlier work on migration and labour. Lucassen says, ‘My sense is that we need to do justice to the experiences of as many working people as possible, then as now, irrespective of cultural, ethnic or social background because only such an approach can unite us in fellow feeling. Recognizing all the good and all the harm that has and can come from work is crucial in order to make changes to enhance and protect workers’ lives for the future in our shrinking world.’ (pp. xi–xii). He sets out his personal view and motivation: that he has ‘become increasingly vexed by this view of conventional working people as either exploited victims or as uninventive and unimaginative dullards’ (p. x). He argues that work, while necessary, also fulfils us and gives us satisfaction—it determines our lives and our social contacts.

In thinking and writing about history, historians often set out to resolve questions and uncover answers. This is commonly the basis of our research and frequently means we go to the sources to discover new insights, information, and understandings. Research is our lifeblood. However, it is necessary from time to time to step back and ask the questions: ‘why does this matter and what does it tell us?’ Frequently, this is on the smaller scale, focused on research sources or particular questions. But there is always a place for the grand narrative—or at least a broader narrative that looks at the *longue durée* or a wider geographic whole, a grander piece that attempts to put disparate narratives into something like a synthetic account. This book is very much in this tradition and reflects Braudelian influences. And, instead of homogenising the account, he rightly emphasises that work is not a constant, it was and is continuously changing; there is unlimited variation in workplace organisation and dynamics and there is no one story of work. He traces aspects of division of labour, growing social inequalities, the impact of monetization and remuneration of work and illustrates that none of these processes travels on a predictable continuum. He eschews stages while tracing ebbs and flows of labour relations across the millennia, charting free and unfree labour as he goes. His breadth of reading and understanding is central to the book. It is ambitious and frequently astute. The difficulties of capturing these various trajectories should not be underestimated

and achieving some kind of balance in itself poses a particular conundrum. The book is also filled with numerous details and forays into anecdote that enliven it.

The scale and breadth also pose problems of selection and coverage. Whilst he is consistent in retaining the geographic coverage, especially with focuses on India and China, less so on some other regions like Africa, this sometimes appears patchy as regions move in and out of the story, making trajectories hard to follow. The book is full of copious details, and these too sometimes obscure the key themes and challenge the reader to follow his thinking. Though he uses repetition to remind the reader of where he is going, nevertheless, sometimes arguments and perceptions are obfuscated. While many anecdotes are interesting, they don't necessarily push the story forward. Also, the book sometimes sits between two stools: it is intended as a story of work, but also it claims to be a new history of humankind. This dual agenda leads to some of the problems of focus and argument. Some pruning and a sharper focus on his main theme—which I take to be work and labour relations—would create a clearer, more legible and coherent text. Especially the first three chapters, which do cover a large lump of human history, would benefit from bringing work and labour relations into closer focus rather than the extensive discussion of migration and populating the globe. Certainly, a broad brush to clarify key movements is useful, but the emphasis on mobility detracts from the issues of labour relations.

Lucassen's key interest, as quoted above, is in labour relations in the widest sense, not in the narrow one of industrial relations, and to deal with men, women and children, and with issues of free and forced labour. He eschews Eurocentric ideas about work, many deriving from the industrial revolution and predated by guild and workshop ideologies. His fundamental argument is that these are not and should not be seen as a norm, and his detailed studies of other times, other geographies, and other cultures successfully challenges this normative mindset. He also challenges the resultant notion that Europe was superior in the ways work was organised and managed. He argues that across the globe and time, labour relations developed in much the same way as guild and caste systems were overtaken by paid work and a flexible labour market. Yet he notes the divergence of these patterns when European forces prompted and imposed new forms of labour inside and outside of Europe and it colonised much, if not all, of the rest of the world. While there are specific points that can be unpicked and nuanced, his overall summary certainly provides labour studies much food for thought. Monetization as a factor creating labour markets and promoting free labour is significant. He argues that it is fundamental to creating free labour and a labour market, and payment is the best way of getting motivated labour. Furthermore, it is the fairest way of accomplishing work. He also examines the limitations on the idea of a free labour market. When the economy is dominated by giant global firms and where these may dominate communities, does the worker really have a choice? Is it a free market? And, in some cases, modern trends are reminiscent of the 'truck system' where vouchers and discounts are part of the workers' remuneration.

Important also is his sustained discussion of free and unfree labour, as well as mixed systems like serfdom. Firstly, it is an important aspect of his goal to decentre Europe and, in this case, also the American use of slavery as the dominant form. In some ways this running discussion is one of the most important features of the book as it explores the cultural variants of slavery and the multiplicity of unfree forms of labour across the whole span of time and geography of the story. It is noticeable that race is largely unmentioned, however. It is a reminder that unfree labour is not necessarily about race, although some discussion would have been warranted. The sustained consideration of paid and unpaid labour as forms of work gives rise to new arguments and important insights—though feminist historians have pointed out for years that leisure and leisure time has different meanings for men and for women. Holidays, festivals and so on rarely free women from household work while their role in preparing for holidays and picnics creates more work.

In some ways his desire to decentre the male factory worker is a straw man, a fact he surely recognises as he effectively explores new forms of work, the importance of service industries, and the simple fact that factories never were the main form of work anyway. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that he tends to refer regularly to workers, a term associated with industrial labour, and one which is normally seen as referring to men. Obviously, it does not always, nor do 'labourer', 'waged labour', artisans, agriculturalists always mean men. But this is a missed opportunity. Terminology and language are tricky, a point he notes at the beginning. But many of the allegedly neutral terms commonly refer to men so men are workers while women are working women (see p. 172 for example). This is important, as is the fact that he commonly refers to 'his work' and 'him'. He says he intends to deal also with women and children, but they play an overtly very small part in his story. Indeed, he does have a couple of pages here and there, but does not grasp the nettle of gender as an analytical tool, one that is fundamental to the history of humankind, and especially to labour relations. And much of the discussion of women elides all women with the wife and mother. With very few exceptions women are described in terms of children and domestic labour. Household becomes encompassing, as does household work, in his narratives of women. This is certainly a true reflection to some extent, but such a focus also obscures the differences in lifecycle stages, and the persistence of singletons, never-married women, and widows, who are demographically significant. In the prehistoric period we know that younger women were also hunters, but his version slides past this, couching women in household and agricultural labour, apparently assuming they cannot leave the homestead. Shifts in their work and their roles are more pronounced at the end of the story, but women's work is not necessarily submerged in family economics in earlier periods either. Indeed, this is true of many men, especially those operating as waged labour, or even self-employed. But the point about gender is more than simply providing a narrative that describes men and women's work. The gendered character of workplace relations both lateral and hierarchical are important, as are the power relations embedded in them. It is noticeable that with his copious bibliography there is little engagement with the analyses and discussion of notable historians who have opened vast new windows on the project of gender and the workplace. Many of these are from the low countries and his own institution, in fact. And gender is not just about women. Key examples are the way masculinity is embedded in guild and workshop traditions, in entrepreneurship and family business, and in the rise and growth of white-collar (white-bloused) work and the professions. But the question remains whether his concern with labour relations and division of labour penetrates the power relations presented by a study of gender. In an odd sort of way, the people seem to be missing from the story—in a sense it does not engage with them.

Disconcerting is his constant reference to England when it appears he means Britain, a term used rarely. This is most obvious when discussing the 'English Industrial Revolution.' Certainly, a case can be made for the importance of English innovation, etc., but the terminology undervalues Scottish contributions intellectually, technologically, economically, and indeed geographically. It may be simply a careless use of the term England to cover all of Britain, but this is an error we would not expect from a scholar of his reputation. It is magnified by the index placing Scotland under England as though it is a subset. Scotland is not and never was part of England and this does a disservice to our understanding of history generally and the industrial revolution specifically. Wales suffers the same fate, though somehow Ireland has escaped.

Obviously, such a sweeping overview of history will overlook or downplay particular issues that a given reader would like to see centred. For example, what difference does geography make. Stronger discussion of skill and expertise would also be welcome. In the final analysis not only is this 'a' story of work but it is 'his' story of work. It is successful on a number of levels, such as the exploration of free and unfree labour, decentring the European story, and providing a story that covers an astonishingly *longue durée*. While this also leads to

misgivings, it will stimulate discussion and provide much food for thought. It also asks labour historians, writ broadly, to think about their own assumptions and approaches to the stories of work.