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Worldview and the Meaning of Work

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The concept of "work" clearly demonstrates the relationship between a concept's definition and interpretation, on the one hand, and the non-scientific convictions surrounding it, on the other. Work is not only a concept constituting one of the central anthropological categories, it is also an activity crucial for the survival of humankind. Because it is a central philosophical concept, it is not surprising that philosophers as well as sociopolitical scientists are far from agreement in their analysis and treatment of the subject. Obviously, their conclusions depend upon their philosophical or political stance in the often controversial debates on the meaning of work for the development of the individual and society. When we move from the writings of philosophers to broadly held attitudes toward work in a society, we find the same range of diversity. Strongly differing views and attitudes toward work can be found in various cultures and throughout history.

In this paper, I hope to illustrate some of this range of diversity in thought on the subject of work. I will not only offer theoretical and historical analyses to make my points, but will also use a selection of findings from an international research project in which I have been participating. In this project, eight countries carried out a cross-national comparative study on the "meaning of working." In each country, identical questions were put to two samples: one representative national sample (N=1000) and nine strictly defined target groups (for each target group N=90). The participating countries were Belgium, Britain, West Germany, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, the U.S.A., and Yugoslavia. The project was carried out between 1978 and 1984. Actual data gathering was done between 1980 and 1982.¹

Definitions of Work

Let us first define our subject. In analyzing the “meaning of working,” we can distinguish three types of approach: (1) a semantic/conceptual approach, analyzing the meaning of the word itself, (2) an empirical approach, analyzing the meaning working has for individuals today, and (3) an historic/societal approach, analyzing various evaluations of work in different cultures and at different times. We will briefly describe the three approaches.

A Semantic/Conceptual Approach

In seeking a semantic definition of work, we run up against a confusing variety. The Oxford English Dictionary devotes some nine pages to a definition of work. The American College Dictionary gives forty-six definitions of work (as both a noun and a verb). The International Dictionary of the Social Sciences, on the other hand, doesn’t discuss the subject at all.

According to narrow definitions, work consists of paid activities in an industrially organized context. But some argue that this definition is arbitrary and excessively restrictive.² Other definitions emphasize elements of work such as the fact that it is done under coercion, that it requires physical or psychological exertion, that it takes place in certain places or at certain times, that it involves doing things for somebody else, and so forth.

None of these elements can be considered a complete definition of work. Another criterion often introduced is that of social usefulness: work is “any activity which produces something of value for other people,”³ or any activity that produces “means for the satisfaction of needs which are accepted by society.”⁴

Hannah Arendt⁵ introduced the well-known distinction between work and labor, the latter denoting the often painful efforts of our body necessitated by its needs, the former referring to the work of our hands which fabricates “the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice.” Labor produces items for immediate consumption; work produces items of longer duration and is itself a source of satisfaction. Arendt’s thesis is that, whereas the use of machines and equipment tend progressively to eliminate labor, yet a high degree of specialization and division of work seem to replace work with another form of labor. Although Arendt’s distinction is elegant and useful for her purposes, it is not very useful in defining the

exact nature of work. For instance, by her definition, growing cherry trees in order to enjoy the flowers may be considered work, whereas doing the same thing in order to consume the cherries is labor.

The broadest definition of work is that it is “the opposite of rest.”⁶ But this definition is not very useful either. It is difficult to define “rest” without a proper definition of work—which brings us back to where we started. For the purpose of this paper we need to choose some definition of work even if we run the risk of being more or less arbitrary. I submit that there are at least two crucial elements to work. The first embodies the original and enduring goal of working: namely, engaging in activities to acquire goods and services necessary for survival. In this sense, work is goal-directed in character, oriented toward the satisfaction of needs. In modern industrial countries, the satisfaction of needs does not take place in a direct way, but indirectly through the provision of products and services which are valued by society. In turn, society provides for the satisfaction of the individual’s needs, either by barter or through payment. It is important for this first element, therefore, that the goods or services produced are valuable and useful for society. This is the instrumental side of work.

The second crucial element to work is that it is a primary and fundamental human function. In working, we create culture, which provides the means to liberate us from nature. This is referred to in the Christian tradition as the continuation of the creative work of God. In working, we develop, enrich, and recognize ourselves. Working is a central existential human category which opens an avenue to self-realization. By contrast, if we do not work, then both physical and psychological functions tend to atrophy (a principle that applies to animals as well as humans).

It is clear that we are dealing with a definition of work broader than “having a job” or, more strictly, “having a paid job.” Of course, there is often an overlap between working and employment, but this is not always the case. The English word “unemployment” is therefore a better label for the phenomenon it describes than the Dutch word *werk(e)loos* or the German word *Arbeitslos*.

Our definition of work includes both types of work, “agoral” (in the market) and “extra-agoral” (outside the market).⁷

Finally, in our attitude toward work, we note a paradox on the one hand, we dream of being liberated from the burden of working and from its exertion and pain; on the other hand, if in fact we are prevented from working (through unemployment, retirement, or illness), we do not experience it as liberation but as a painful shock. In short, working

has not only positive associations as a fundamental creative human category, but also negative associations of pain, exhaustion, and punishment for sin. This dual nature must be noted in any definition of work.⁸ Work satisfies the need for self-realization, but often exacts high costs in terms of physical or psychological stress and exhaustion. In Arendt's terms, both "work" and "labor" have to be recognized as essential elements in what we consider work.

Empirical Analysis

Instead of seeking to define work in a conceptual, *apriori* manner, we can also seek an empirical description of what people in fact mean by the word. We can ask individual respondents when they consider an activity to be work. Such an empirical tabulation and analysis was done in the MOW study mentioned earlier. Through an analysis of the literature, fourteen concepts that have been used to define work were identified. The question itself was formulated as follows:

Not everyone means the same thing when they talk about working. When do you consider an activity as working? Choose statements from the list below which best define when an activity is "working."

This question was put to all eight national samples. The results are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Work definition. The following characteristics were ranked according to how closely they define an activity as work, 1 being most definitive of work and 14 least definitive. (Combined data from all national samples.)

A. you do it in a working place	7
B. someone tells you what to do	13
C. it is physically strenuous	11
D. it belongs to your task	2
E. you do it to contribute to society	4
F. by doing it, you get the feeling of belonging	6
G. it is mentally strenuous	9
H. you do it at a certain time (e.g., from 8 to 5 o'clock)	8
I. it adds value to something	3
J. it is not pleasant	14
K. you get money for doing it	1
L. you have to account for it	5
M. you have to do it	11
N. others profit by it	9

We see from Table 1 that the role of money is most frequently chosen as the item for defining work. Chosen next is, "it belongs to one's task." Third is, "it adds value to something," and fourth is, "you do it to contribute to society."

In order to gain a deeper insight into different conceptions of work, and also to facilitate comparisons between countries and groups of workers, a cluster analysis was carried out on the 14 definitions in an attempt to reduce them to a small set of categorized definitions. In this way, four clusters were identified. These were:

- (1) The *concrete* cluster, encompassing various tangible and practical aspects associated with work. This cluster includes: earning money (K), having to do it (M), performance at a job site (A), performance at certain times (H), and unpleasantness (J).
- (2) The *social* cluster, encompassing characteristics through which one gains a sense of belonging and relating to society. This cluster includes: contribution to society (E), gaining a feeling of belonging (F), and benefitting others (N).
- (3) The *duty* cluster, encompassing characteristics that impart a sense of obligation. This cluster includes: task relatedness (D) and accountability (L).
- (4) The *burden* cluster, encompassing characteristics of stress and exertion. This cluster includes: physically and mentally strenuous (C, G).

As we analyzed the data from the eight national samples, we found that age and gender were not strongly related to any specific cluster. Neither did other "meaning-of-work" variables as measured in our study (such as work centrality, societal norms about working, or preferred goal characteristics). Two factors, however, did turn out to be relevant. The first was education—the higher the educational level, the lower the percentage of respondents who subscribed to the *social* cluster and the higher the percentage who subscribed to the *duty* cluster. The second relevant factor was country. In Table 2, the distribution of work definition clusters for the eight countries is shown.

Table 2. Distributions of work definition clusters for countries, listed by percentage of responses. (Data from national samples.)

Country	N	Work definition cluster			
		Concrete	Social	Duty	Burden
Belgium	450	29	32	25	14
Germany	1278	45	13	27	15
Israel	973	36	35	18	11
Japan	3226	42	5	45	8
Netherlands	996	23	27	37	13
United States	998	29	29	25	17
Yugoslavia*	541	15	25	53	7

*data from target group

As can be seen, nearly half of the Japanese and German respondents selected the *concrete* cluster of work definitions, whereas less than a quarter of the Yugoslavian and Dutch respondents did. Furthermore, about half the Japanese and Yugoslavian respondents chose the *duty* cluster, in contrast to a much smaller proportion of the Belgian, German, Israeli, and American respondents. The *social* cluster was chosen with about equal frequency in all countries except Germany and Japan.

Japan and Yugoslavia both showed a significantly lower emphasis on the *burden* cluster.

In conclusion, the way work is conceived seems to be primarily a function of (country-specific) cultural and educational factors. It is much less a function of age, sex, or workgroup category.

Historical, Social Definition

A third perspective from which working can be viewed is its historic and social context. In primitive societies the question of working is basically the question of living. There is a direct connection between working and the satisfaction of basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. Working is a basic condition for survival and the question of the meaning of working is similar to that of the meaning of life.

This has changed dramatically over the course of time. At present there is tremendous variation between cultures both in their attitudes toward work and in the value they place on working. A cross-cultural semantic analysis of the concept of work carried out by Osgood⁹ shows this diversity clearly. In some cultures work is valued highly and considered a virtue. In other cultures work is related to evil and kept to a minimum.

For example, the Hunza in Kashmir value work highly. They work from early in the morning until the moment they go to bed. Their language does not even include words for concepts like leisure and holidays. In contrast, an extremely negative attitude toward work is held by the upper classes in Korea, who prefer begging or even dying to working. The length of their fingernails indicates the level of aristocracy.¹⁰

The content of work is likewise defined differently in different cultures, depending on the ecological environment. Activities such as agriculture, hunting, trade, waging war, and administration are in some cultures categorized as work, in others as leisure.

Historical analysis yields the same diversity. In ancient Greek and Roman culture, working was held in great disdain, at least in the upper classes. This was especially true for household work and handicrafts; it was somewhat less true for agriculture (especially in Roman culture, which was based on agriculture). The free citizen should abstain from working and devote himself to philosophy, politics, and war. Work should be done by slaves—“animated working tools” as Aristotle described them. In working, one is bound by matter, which debilitates the desirable freedom of the mind.

In the Jewish tradition, lowly work was likewise assigned to slaves (Israelites themselves could never be slaves—Leviticus 25:39,40). Work was seen in part as punishment for sin (Genesis 3:17-19), although the Talmud also contained an elaborate system of rules and prescriptions designed to guarantee principles of social justice and human rights, and to ensure that those who worked would share the fruits of their labor with people in poverty and distress.

Early Christian thinkers and the Church fathers, following traditional exegesis of the Genesis story, accepted the notion of work being in part punishment for sin, but they also emphasized that we have an obligation to work hard. Augustine, for example, based this positive view of work on the letter of Paul to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 3:10): “If anyone will not work, let him not eat.” Thomas Aquinas likewise defended a positive view of work, teaching that it is the obli-

gation of human beings to perfect the world God created and so to continue the divine work of creation. Moreover, work enables the worker to look after his needy fellow creatures. Nevertheless, Aquinas maintained that work provides fruits only for the present life, and therefore is subordinate to the final goal of mankind, which is to be found in the life hereafter.

The Roman Catholic Church has emphasized the moral value of working up through the present day. In the various encyclicals devoted to this subject (*Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo* (1931), and *Laborem Exercens* (1981)), the notion of human dominance over nature is linked to the “subjective” meaning of work, that is, to the individual’s self-realization through work in the social context of his family and his societal, cultural ethos. In the latest encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, it is again emphasized that work is an obligation, something ordained by the Creator.

The positive evaluation of work based upon Christian values was further developed during the Reformation. An acknowledgment of its character as punishment for sin remained, but a positive obligation to work was also emphasized: in working, human beings act as servants of God, continuing the work of creation. Reformation thought emphasized that work is a vocation for everyone; there is no difference in value between handwork and brainwork. All citizens were obliged to contribute to bringing prosperity to society through their work. There was another element in Reformation thought: the fruits of working—a good harvest, large production, profits—were seen as signs of God’s blessing and, as such, given religious sanction. There was a difference of opinion between Luther and Calvin on the evaluation of “trade” in this respect. Luther considered trading a worldly activity and could not really see it as an expression of God’s calling. According to Calvin, however, life in its totality falls under God’s plan of salvation. This includes all professional and vocational activities. In any case, the Protestant attitude leads to a psychological disposition toward continual and restless labor. Although Protestant theology did not stress a relation between hard work and assurance of salvation as such, Protestants certainly showed, as Weber emphasized, an inner compulsion to demonstrate their election through their labor.¹¹

It is common in many innovative religious or social movements for the second generation to exaggerate certain tendencies. This can be seen in the case of the Reformation. The Pietists and the Puritans picked up the Reformers’ positive evaluation of work but, with their highly ascetic life style, they tended to overestimated the meaning and

importance of working. In the early 20th century Max Weber developed his famous thesis that the foundations of modern capitalism were laid during the Reformation by its stress on the obligation to do hard and disciplined work, by a religiously sanctioned approval of profit and production, and by a Puritan thriftiness that approved of saving and investment by disapproving of spending and enjoyment.¹² It is this Puritan and Pietistic interpretation of work, with its overemphasis on the obligation to work and its ascetic view of stewardship, more than the original ideas of the Reformers themselves that is responsible for the rise of capitalism.¹³ In any case, in the outworking of the Reformation the Protestant work ethic was born. During what Toffler calls “the second wave”¹⁴—the change from an agricultural to an industrialized society, with the division of production and consumption as its most important characteristic—this ethic was both reinforced and exploited.

Parallel to the Reformation was the Renaissance, eventually leading to the Enlightenment. The *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) stripped the work ethic of its religious connotations. Work—especially creative work—came to be seen as a source of satisfaction in itself. It was therefore not only an acceptable goal but also an ambition. The Christian sense of obligation was replaced by an ethic of utility. What is good became what is most useful, i.e., what increases productivity and maximizes output. In this we see one of the constituent elements of modern liberalism.

A high esteem for work continues to be evident in contemporary Western societies, as demonstrated by the many extra hours and overtime people often devote to their work, by what is called the “workaholic” syndrome, and by the emotional reaction to unemployment and retirement. Maneschijn suggests in a provocative article¹⁵ that the modern attitude toward work does not originate from the Reformation after all, nor even from the Puritan interpretation (where the emphasis remained on the products of work, and the fact that these enabled the worker to further societal prosperity and to help his neighbor). Rather, Maneschijn suggests, the modern Western attitude stems from Idealism and Marxism.

Among Idealists, Fichte related work to freedom. Human beings are by nature oriented towards freedom, he said; but they actualize this freedom only through *Tätigkeit* (action, deeds). Fichte considered work as a kind of a conquest of freedom leading to an emancipatory development, which in turn leads to creative liberated work.

Marx¹⁶ placed work in a materialistic context rather than an idealistic one. But he also proclaimed that work is an essential dimension of

human beings. We humanize nature by making the natural environment livable. The capitalistic processes of production and the free market, however, cause the value of work to be reduced to economic values, and this, in turn, to mere exchange values. This reduction alienates the worker from the product he makes, from co-workers, and finally from himself. Only if the means of production are put into the hands of workers themselves can humankind be liberated from self-alienation and again express creativity in daily work.

Modern Attitudes Toward Work

Whatever its source, the attitudes and value systems of the Western worker have been penetrated by a view of the centrality of work. Today, however, other developments in Western society are seriously undermining this high view of work.

First, unemployment threatens to have a bearing upon the societal meaning of working. Unemployment has become one of the major threats to the social welfare system in most industrialized nations. It also has serious consequences for the feelings of well-being among workers who have become its victims or are threatened by its prospects. Particularly since unemployment has become structural rather than incidental in nature, we are getting used to the idea that it will be with us for a considerable time to come. This development will require a number of sorts of societal measures, including shortened working hours, the redistribution of work, an increase in temporary and part-time functions, and the like. More important, it will require us to re-think our ideas on the "obligation" and "entitlement" to work.

Second, the nature of work is itself in rapid transition, and will continue to be. Automatization and robotization will require new conceptualizations of work. Developments such as work at home at irregular times, the blurring of the distinction between working and learning (and even between work and leisure), a different structure of administrative and organizational support systems, earlier retirement, and a stronger emphasis on non-paid work all will erode the traditional notions of work. These developments will have an influence on the meaning and appreciation of work held by both society and the individual worker.

Are these changes in attitude toward work reflected in our empirical data? In the MOW study, one measure of attitudes toward work were questions on work centrality. How central is work to the lives of the respondents from the eight countries chosen for the study? First, re-

spondents were asked to rank five areas of life (leisure, community involvement, work, religious activities, and family) in order of relative importance. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Work Centrality Measure

Assign a total of 100 points to indicate how important the following areas are in your life at the present time.

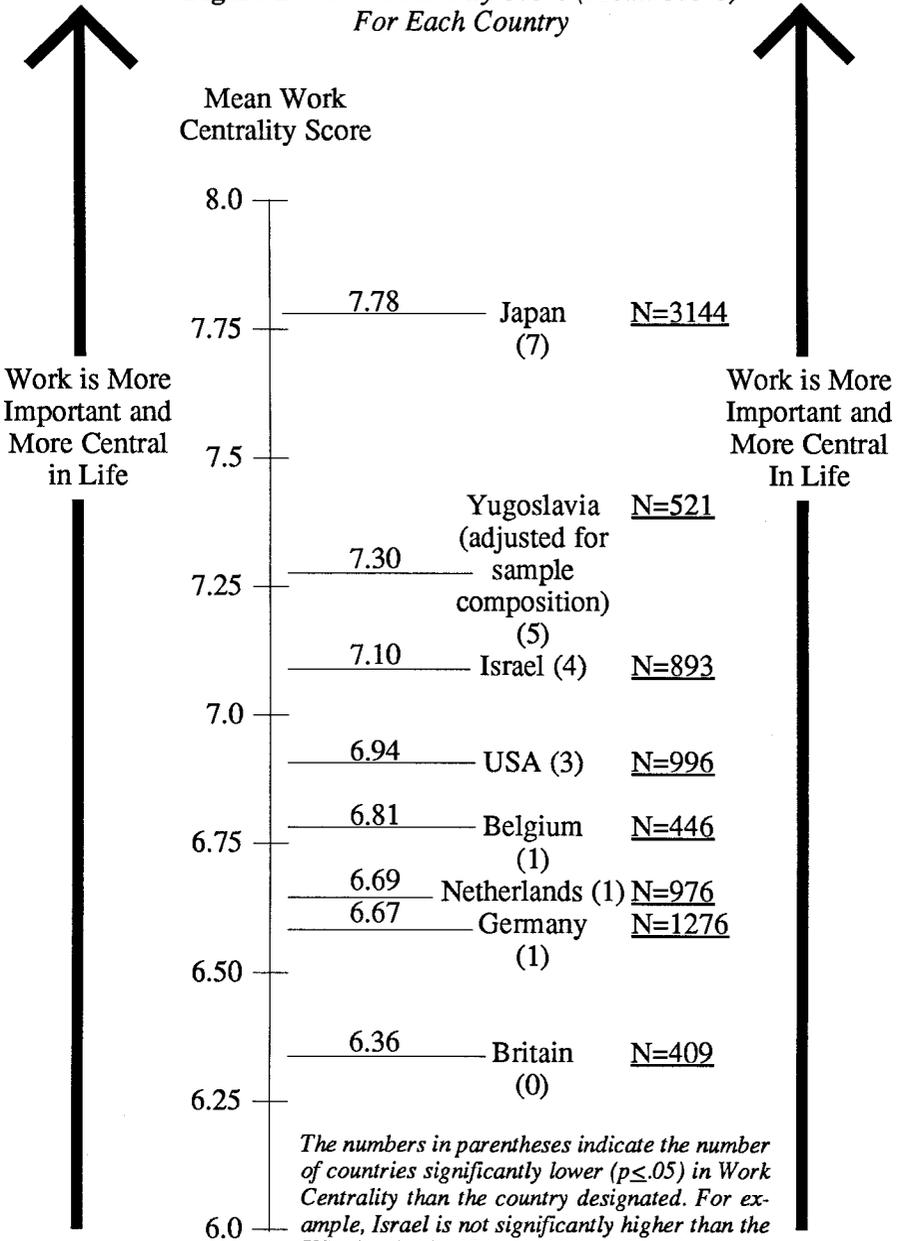
- () A. My leisure (like hobbies, sports, recreation, and contacts with friends)
 - () B. My community (like voluntary organizations, union, and political organizations)
 - () C. My work
 - () D. My religion (like religious activities and beliefs)
 - () E. My family
- (100 total)
-

A second measure consisted of a seven-point answer scale for the question "How important is working in your total life?" The anchor statement at the low end of the scale was, "one of the least important things in my life"; the anchor statement at the highest end of the scale was, "working is one of the most important things in my life." Responses to these two questions were combined to provide a general measure of Work Centrality for the individual.

The mean Work Centrality score for each of the eight countries is shown in Fig. 2. (See following page for Fig.2)

Japan has the highest score and Britain the lowest. Whereas considerable overlap exists between the countries, the Japanese mean is over three-fourths of a standard deviation higher than the British mean. In short, we are dealing not only with statistically significant differences, but with differences that possess relevance as well.

**Figure 2. Work Centrality Score (Mean Score)
For Each Country**



The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of countries significantly lower ($p \leq .05$) in Work Centrality than the country designated. For example, Israel is not significantly higher than the USA but is significantly higher than the lowest scoring four countries.

How does work centrality relate to other personal and background variables? The following relationships were observed:

There is a moderate but consistent positive correlation of work centrality with increasing age.

Males score significantly higher on work centrality than females (the highest differences were found in Japan).

There is a positive correlation of work centrality with status of the work, quality of work, and educational level of the job.

There is a positive correlation of work centrality with the norm orientation "Obligation," which views working primarily as a duty towards society.

There is a positive correlation of work centrality with work goals such as status, self-expression, and service to society, and a negative correlation with goals such as social contacts and financial rewards.

Work centrality is a significant and consistent predictor for involvement in one's work as measured by the average number of hours spent working per week (which in itself varies considerably over countries, ranging from a low of 39.9 hours in Germany to a high of 48.9 hours per week in Japan).

Work centrality predicts significantly and consistently the individual's non-financial commitment to working, as measured by the "lottery question." In this question we asked whether an individual would continue working if "you won a lottery or inherited a large sum of money and could live comfortably for the rest of your life without working." (In total, 81.1 percent of all respondents said they would continue to work even if all financial needs were eliminated).

The consistency of these relationships provide uniform support for the theoretical proposition that Work Centrality is an important indicator of the meaning of work, and has a significant impact on individuals, organizations, and societies. Work centrality is a fundamental concept for the human organism and is nearly universal within industrial societies.

The Work Ethic—Protestant No More

The findings of the MOW study can be summarized by saying that we do find in various cultures a complex of attitudes and values with respect to work similar to what we often refer to as the Protestant work ethic. It includes a high evaluation of work, a conviction that work is

a duty and responsibility toward society, a sense of obligation to work, and an expressive instead of an instrumental attitude toward work. What emerges from our study is the ideal, held throughout the industrialized world, of the devoted, constructive, self-expressive individual who works hard, for long hours, and takes great satisfaction in his or her work.

Is this ideal the product of what Weber called the Protestant work ethic? Perhaps not. If we examine the rank order of countries according to their mean work centrality score, we see that Japan, Israel, and Yugoslavia are at the top, whereas Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain are at the bottom. This suggests that there exists today a negative rather than a positive correlation between a high view of work and a Protestant heritage.

Furthermore, in a study restricted to the Netherlands, no relationship was found between work centrality and either religious upbringing or church membership.¹⁷ These findings suggest that a relationship between work centrality (one of the core elements of the work ethic) and protestantism no longer exists at either the national or the individual level. The Weberian thesis appears no longer to apply to modern cultures.

Moreover, the pattern of the devoted, hard-working, obligation-oriented worker is found especially in full-time, high-quality jobs, performed by older, more highly educated male workers. However, there is today a drop in the number of full-time jobs available. There is also a decline in the quality of jobs (in terms of freedom and autonomy of the worker) because of the introduction of the introduction of user-unfriendly automatization. Presuming that in Western nations these trends continue, the work ethic may continue to lose its saliency.

This decline may be reinforced by the increasing number of female workers entering the labor market. We have seen that the female worker does not meet the Weberian model as much as does the male worker. In addition, it is not easy to say whether the correlation between centrality of working and age can be explained as a developmental phenomenon or as a generational difference. If it is the latter, this implies that the entry of the new generation into the labor market will bring with it a further weakening of the work ethic.

There is one other observation which would fit this conclusion. In the rank order of the countries, there is an almost perfect correlation with the time of industrialization. At the bottom of the list are the countries that took the lead in the industrial revolution; the highest positions are taken by the countries where industrialization is a recent develop-

ment. This may imply that, in the course of time, the youthful elan and excitement of new developments declines, due to either saturation or fatigue. If this proves to be the case, then it implies that, in the course of time, in industrialized countries the centrality and saliency of work as compared to other life values will recede.

My personal evaluation of these trends is that it would not be a bad thing if such recession in the saliency of work does take place in the years to come. Given the problems of a further decrease in the number of paid jobs and, as a consequence, the increase of structural unemployment, a re-evaluation of work values should be welcomed. It may lead to a higher societal appreciation of both informal work and of other values of life.

Footnotes

1. For a full account of this study, see MOW-International-Research Group, "The Meaning of Working," in *Management Under Differing Value Systems: Political, Social, and Economic Perspectives in a Changing World*, ed. F. Dlugos and Weiermaier (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981).
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7. Kuiper, op. cit.
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11. See also Paul Marshall, "Calling, Work and Rest," in *Evangelical Theology in the 1980's*, ed. M. Noll and D. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).
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