

REINVENTING WORK IN EUROPE

Value, Generations and Labour

Dominique Méda and Patricia Vendramin



Dynamics of
Virtual Work



Dynamics of Virtual Work

Series Editors: Ursula Huws, Professor of Labour and Globalization at the University of Hertfordshire, UK Rosalind Gill, Professor of Cultural and Social Analysis at City University, London, UK

Technological change has transformed where people work, when and how. Digitisation of information has altered labour processes out of all recognition whilst telecommunications have enabled jobs to be relocated globally. ICTs have also enabled the creation of entirely new types of 'digital' or 'virtual' labour, both paid and unpaid, shifting the borderline between 'play' and 'work' and creating new types of unpaid labour connected with the consumption and co-creation of goods and services. This affects private life as well as transforming the nature of work and people experience the impacts differently depending on their gender, their age, where they live and what work they do. Aspects of these changes have been studied separately by many different academic experts however up till now a cohesive overarching analytical framework has been lacking. Drawing on a major, high-profile COST Action (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Dynamics of Virtual Work, this series will bring together leading international experts from a wide range of disciplines including political economy, labour sociology, economic geography, communications studies, technology, gender studies, social psychology, organisation studies, industrial relations and development studies to explore the transformation of work and labour in the Internet Age. The series will allow researchers to speak across disciplinary boundaries, national borders, theoretical and political vocabularies, and different languages to understand and make sense of contemporary transformations in work and social life more broadly. The book series will build on and extend this, offering a new, important and intellectually exciting intervention into debates about work and labour, social theory, digital culture, gender, class, globalisation and economic, social and political change.

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Reinventing Work in Europe

Value, Generations and Labour

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Foreword

“The future of work is what we will make it. The challenge is to make it the one we want.” Guy Ryder, Director-General ILO

The Future of Work Is Everywhere: Some of It Is Even Happening Now

The future of work is on everybody’s lips and minds at the moment. People are seeking answers to numerous questions such as:

Will robots carry dirty, dangerous and dull tasks for us? Will they steal our jobs? Does progress in machine intelligence make knowledge redundant?

Does the rise in on-demand platforms signal the end of the wage earnings systems as we know it? Will we all become individual self-employed operators or task workers—the digital version of piece workers of the old days?

Will the sharing economy give us access to more goods and services for less cash? Will it allow us to become slashers, ‘rentiers’ and fulfil ourselves according to our dreams?

Will virtual teams, coproduction with customers, and the development of collaborative tools and platforms make it easier for us to work together despite all our differences?

And will we be able to grow old at work together—four generations in the same workplace in a very different working environment armed with new technologies and in jobs not yet imagined?

These are some of the questions raised by Dominique Méda and Patricia Vendramin in this far-reaching and thought-provoking book. They do not provide us with definitive answers but rather equip us with the analytical tools and empirical research to allow us to reflect and draw our own conclusions. They allow us, from the vantage point of our different capabilities, to participate in the reinvention of work individually and—more importantly—collectively. The material for reflection they give us is prodigious and the conclusions that can be drawn from it are boundless. I look forward already to their next book.

Understanding the Value of Work Is Not a Theoretical Question

The analysis on the meaning of work in Chap. 2 highlights how the three strands of meaning given to work—work as a production factor, work as the essence of mankind, work as a system for redistributing income, rights and protection—are contradictory and need to be reconciled.

Chapter 5 illustrates how individual work orientations combine together and guide choices, behaviours and social relationships at work. By the way, beware of this chapter; I have been found out. What I hear at my annual review is public.

Understanding why people work, how much they put of themselves in their activity tells something important about motivation, engagement and job design.

What happens when in logistics, for example, voice picking techniques guided by an algorithm ignores, in worst cases, or substitutes the skills and know-how of experimented warehouse operators who used to put efforts in putting together a “beautiful wooden pallet”? This is not a theoretical question: finding meaning in one’s work, every work, matters. Technological innovation also needs to integrate this parameter.

If we ignore these meanings of work, as we prepare and discuss the future of work, we are likely to set ourselves on the wrong path.

Failing to Acknowledge the Meaning of Work and Not Meeting People’s Expectations Has Multiple Rippling Effects

The high expectations of work (Chap. 3) are colossal. They are looking for income and security, high-quality interpersonal relationships and opportunities for personal development, fulfilment and self-expression at work. Comparative research to measure, describe and empirically capture these, confirms the complementary importance that individuals seek to each of the three meanings of work.

The “value package” varies according to individual, economic, institutional and cultural variables.

Still, everywhere, paid work is sought for the income it brings and the access to key social rights it provides, the framework it offers for personal fulfilment, growth and development, the importance of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and the social network it gives access to, contributing thus to the definition of our social identity and social status.

We reinvent our work all the time (Chap. 6) in placing the accent on certain tasks, expanding others and reformulating our roles and cooperating with others.

Viewed from a negative perspective, the absence of work through unemployment represents a significant strain on people, with scarring effects for the rest of their life on health, financial resources, professional development and self-efficacy—particularly when prolonged.

In a similar vein, poor quality work can contribute to low well-being and increased morbidity, even mortality in extreme and rare instances.

Understanding the value of work in our societies, the expectations that people place on their work and translating these into employment contracts and their associated sets of rights, requirements and duties, work organisation practices and job design—as well as the human resources policies that answer to these needs—is key to motivating people at work, their well-being, creativity and performance in companies, social cohesion.

Reconciling our expectations of work with that of our co-workers, and the real work can be challenging. It can never be done alone.

Work and Care in Our Societies and in Our Lives

Work is at the heart of our societies and a key ingredient for their cohesion, capacity to integrate and grow. The other strong, central and defining value is family and care. Do we care more for one or the other (Chap. 3 again)? What difference does it make?

Both values influence the design of our welfare and family systems. Both play a strong role in creating time norms in our societies and time use at individual level. Integrating work and care at an individual level can result in gendered life courses and division of labour.

Despite a strong commitment to gender equality and advances in the education of women—now accounting for the majority of graduates in Europe—progress is slow. Inequalities between men and women are still prevalent and take many forms: the gender pay gap, increased use of part-time work for women—and the associated costs in terms of access to training and career progression—the glass ceiling, gender discrimination and subtle differences in working conditions.

Analysis of the composite indicators of paid and unpaid working time provided by the European Working Conditions Survey (the EWCS)—which includes paid work in the main and secondary jobs, commuting time and unpaid work (mainly linked to care of children and other dependants)—shows that, overall, women's working hours are longer than men's.

Women still remain the main providers of care. However, it is men who report the highest level of dissatisfaction with their work—life balance.

Furthermore, synchronisation problems in time use can arise at a structural and individual level.

In addition to care duties, responsibilities and pleasures, we respond as individuals in our family contexts and work circumstances in our local communities to the best of our abilities. Our decisions are guided by circumstances but also our values and their concrete meaning and application (Chap. 5).

Understanding these concerns and managing them in companies is not straightforward. It requires numerous arrangements, invisible and

visible, discussions, negotiations and policies at operational and strategic, individual, team and company level.

Work and care—work and family: this is one of the most acute dilemmas that individuals face and a source of much tension. The ability of individuals to reconcile their different roles as carer, worker and volunteer is a lifelong challenge that needs to be made more visible and supported. The provision of care infrastructures, leave and other agreements that help to navigate between changing needs over the life course is fundamental to enabling more people to work for longer as all European member states have committed to do.

We are “slashers” already. No need to tell us this is a new phenomenon brought to us by digitalisation and “Millenniums”.

We Make Work and Work Makes Us: Towards Sustainable Work Systems?

Paid work is a distinctive activity by which we agree to enter into a subordinate relationship in exchange for remuneration and to perform a social activity together with colleagues on behalf of others.

The execution of work (Chap. 4) impacts on our body and mind and affects our behaviour. Work is productive in terms of health and psychological benefits, financial rewards, social resources and skills. It can engender a sense of security, belonging and achievement.

But work can also be damaging. Poor quality work damages more.

Analysis from the Fifth EWCS on job quality has demonstrated that many jobs are of poor quality, more are of good quality and the rest fare better in some dimensions and worse in other. It's more nuanced than polarisation.

Positive developments have occurred in recent years: less exposure to physical risks factors, an increase in lifelong learning overall and slight progress in gender equality. However, at the same time, work intensification has increased and psychosocial risks are more prevalent, even now found in some occupations that up to now were immune. The proportion of workers engaged in learning organisations that also have better job quality decreased between 2000 and 2010.

Inequalities between work situations and groups of workers are on the increase. Some groups of workers are exposed to many problematic working conditions at the same time.

Research on work, happiness and unhappiness (notably Warr 2007) has identified the following 12 characteristics of the job and working environment that are critical to an individual's happiness: opportunities for personal control, opportunities for skill use, externally generated goals, variety, environmental clarity (information about the future, role clarity), contact with others, availability of money, physical security, valued social position, supportive supervision, career outlook and equity.

It is clear that the challenges in terms of improving job quality and supporting individuals at work are multidimensional: a safe physical environment, a supportive social environment, working time quality and work—life balance, an acceptable level of demands and work intensity, being able to use skills and develop them, having prospects for development, equitable earnings, the possibility to speak and be heard—collectively and individually—a fair and trustworthy organisation, a meaningful work. Inclusive labour markets embedded in social and labour infrastructures: that is what seems to be needed, according to evidence.

Reinventing Work: Let's Do It Together

New situations arise. Boundaries are blurring more, between work and non-work, paid and unpaid work, place and time of work, employment and self-employment. It is getting harder in “new forms of work and employment” to know who is the boss, who are the colleagues, who sets the remuneration, what are the rules of the games, who is responsible for quality of work and employment, how can it be implemented and whom to address in case of conflict. Work is being reinvented but cannot be left like that. We can do a better work.

Digitalisation offers us the possibility to discuss and frame the future of work in the direction that we desire. Many forums at the national and international levels are engaged in these conversations, with a view to building a common vision and charting the path to reach it. The input of tripartite actors in these conversations is key.

The choices that we make and our ability to transform them into collective resources—whether emanating from public policy, collective bargaining or standards and rules—to be used by workers to achieve their goals will impact on the capacity of men and women to attain enhanced well-being and work—life balance over the life course, the success of our companies and the quality of our societies.

Reinventing work. We do it all the time. Let's cherish our work together and care for it. It may not work, it may not pay, but it will be our achievement.

EUROFOUND¹

Agnès Parent-Thirion

¹ The views in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of Eurofound.

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1

Introduction

In his seminal work on *The Division of Labour in Society*, published in 1893, Émile Durkheim considered the social role of the division of labour, answering in the affirmative the question he had posed himself: “Thus we are led to ask whether the division of labour might not play the same role in more extensive groupings—whether, in contemporary societies where it has developed in the way that we know, it might not fulfil the function of integrating the body social and of ensuring its unity.” Labour did indeed fulfil such a role in modern societies, and it was only in certain rare cases that the division of labour took on pathological forms, contributing to the isolation of the individual or to the loosening of the social bond. In fact, “The division of labour, when normal, supposes that the worker, far from remaining bent over his task, does not lose sight of those cooperating with him, but acts upon them and is acted upon by them. He is not therefore a machine who repeats movements the sense of which he does not understand, but he knows they are tending in a certain direction, towards a goal that he

can conceive of more or less distinctly ... He knows that his activity has a meaning.”¹

Seventy years later, in 1963, in the foreword to the third edition of his *Où va le travail humain?*, Georges Friedmann² wrote: “I regret that books in the shops—books of this kind, at least—no longer come with a promotional wrapper; I would have suggested to the publisher that the title ‘Where is Human Labour Going?’ be followed by the answer, ‘It’s going to hell!’” A pithy summation, indeed, of the critical reflection on work he had embarked on in this book and would further develop in *The Anatomy of Work*, a whole chapter of which is devoted to demonstrating the outdatedness of Durkheim’s conception of labour: “Had he lived, in order to maintain the purity of his theory of organic solidarity, he would have been obliged to consider ‘abnormal’ most of the forms taken by labour in modern society, both in industry and in administration, and even more recently in commerce.”³

The 1970s saw considerable critical discussion of work and concern over its loss of meaning. In France one might think of the La Confédération française démocratique du travail’s (CFDT) *Les Dégâts du progrès*,⁴ published in 1977, which notes a serious reduction in the meaningfulness of work, or André Gorz’s *Farewell to the Working Class*,⁵ published in 1980, which saw modern work as essentially heteronomous and argued, along with Friedmann—even if he was but rarely cited—that its place should be minimised as far as possible to make space for autonomous activities. These ideas echoed those that were developed a little earlier in Germany by Claus Offe and Jürgen Habermas, the second of whom would put forward, in 1985, the idea of “the end of work-based society”.

¹Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. Steven Lukes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 50.

²Georges Friedmann, *Où va le travail humain?*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

³Georges Friedmann, *The Anatomy of Work: Labor, Leisure and the Implications of Automation* [1956] (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), p. 75.

⁴CFDT, *Les Dégâts du progrès: les travailleurs face au changement technique* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

⁵André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* [1980] (London: Pluto Press, 1982).

Brought to France in the mid-1990s, notably in *Le Travail, une valeur en voie de disparition*⁶ and by the translation of Jeremy Rifkin's *The End of Work*,⁷ the idea provoked an intense debate that revealed that the time of the critique of work had passed. The great rise of unemployment in Europe had made both it and the critique of economic reason inaudible. Reacting to these two works understood to proclaim the end of work (though the first in fact argued the normative position that work should take up less time and be better distributed, while the second proposed the development of non-work activities and the expansion of the non-profit sector as a basis for social cohesion), a number of authors sought to show how subjectivity was powerfully engaged by work, making it a crucial site for the construction of identity, while others insisted that work remained a central value for individuals and pursued investigations intended to show that this was so.

The present volume is no occasion to return to this debate, already reconsidered in the preface to the recent new paperback edition of *Le Travail, une valeur en voie de disparition*. Its object rather is to retrace the major historical stages in the valorisation of work and to offer a survey of the research available to us today, in France and in Europe, that helps illuminate the meaning individuals attach to work today and generational differences in the relationship to work. It also offers an opportunity to examine why there is so much talk today of suffering and dissatisfaction at work and what might be the causes of the current malaise.

This book has its origins in a European research project conceived and coordinated by Patricia Vendramin, intended to test the often canvassed hypothesis that young people today relate differently to work than do their elders. They have been said to be materialistic, nomadic, lazy, individualistic: characteristics that might account in part for their difficulties in finding and keeping work. A team of researchers from six different European countries was thus assembled, their task to find out whether young people did think differently about work. Had something changed

⁶ Dominique Méda, *Le travail, une valeur en voie de disparition* (Paris: Alto-Aubier, 1995; repub. Champs-Flammarion, 2010).

⁷ Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995).

in younger generations' relationship to work as a function of age or generation? In pursuing the question, we obviously encountered national differences: it was clear, upon examination of the major European investigations of work, that the relationship to work was differently inflected in different countries. And if countries differed, if age, generation, socio-occupational class and gender all had an influence on the relationship to work, were there regularities to be observed, explanations that might be offered? Had there been, as Ronald Inglehart⁸ had suggested, a radical change such that the generations born after 1968 were post-materialist, with a less instrumental relationship to work than their predecessors? What was the impact of rising levels of education on the relationship to work? These were the questions addressed by a team of sociologists, economists and psychologists drawn from six European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Hungary. A note at the end of the book details the research methods employed.

Today, people's expectations of work are enormous, and radically different from what they were when Goldthorpe and his colleagues published *The Affluent Worker* in 1968.⁹ Have the changes that have occurred in the world of work and in conditions of work and employment been conducive to these expectations being met? This is the question that has guided our thinking and writing.

The book begins (Chap. 2) with a look back at the history of work and the meanings attached to it in different times and places. This anthropological survey of work through history is followed by a presentation of the tools and analytical frameworks needed to understand and to measure the meaning of work in contemporary societies. This chapter also introduces the material that serves as the foundation for the rest of the book.

Taking as its basis a number of international surveys, Chap. 3 considers the significance of work for Europeans today and its place in relation to other spheres of meaning. It also examines the kinds of explanation researchers have offered for the changes observed. Examination of the

⁸ Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁹ John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

data brings out a distinctively French paradox, but one that reveals deep contradictions equally affecting workers in other countries of Europe. The French accord great importance to work but at the same time say that “a decrease in the importance of work” in their lives would be a good thing. Consideration of changes in the conditions of work and its forms of organisation allows one to understand this apparent paradox. It is in fact the contradiction between the enormous expectations people have of work—both instrumental and expressive—and incompatible changes in the world of work that is at the heart of the dissatisfaction of many workers, both in France and elsewhere in Europe. A comparison is made with Québec that confirms this understanding of developments.

On the basis of this observation, Chap. 4 turns to look at what employers actually offer and more specifically at the new forms of organisation of work. It analyses what it is in these that comes into conflict with employees’ strong expectations: the vicissitudes of flexibility and the unpredictability of work, the individualisation of the employment relationship and its excessive psychological demands, the definition and recognition of skills. This chapter highlights the tensions between individual expectations and developments in the system of social production, calling into question the significance of the European commitment to “quality employment”. It also suggests the importance of taking a closer look at how these changes and contradictions are experienced by different categories of worker and at how this shapes their relationship to work. It is to this that the two chapters that follow are devoted.

Chapter 5 analyses the relationship between age, socio-economic category and gender and the relationship to work. It adopts a generational perspective based on the sociological hypothesis that it is its embeddedness in a particular context—cultural, economic, historical or political—that shapes a generation and, more specifically, its attitudes towards work. Despite the existence of intragenerational differences, it can be seen that among the younger generation, and among women more generally, experience of a particular context (characterised by persistent unemployment, rising educational standards and the feminisation of employment) is associated with a changed conception of work characterised by a desire to grant equal importance to the different spheres of life, by a reduction in the difference between male and female models of engagement with

work, and by a view of social relationships as more private than collectively shared.

On the basis of these observations, Chap. 6 analyses the reciprocal perceptions of generations which attach partly shared and partly differing meanings to work, and the effect these have on daily work and intergenerational cohesion. Changes in attitudes to work are connected to a wider socio-cultural transformation affecting all European societies, but are also inscribed within a distinctive intergenerational equilibrium that assigns specific places in the labour market to different age cohorts, with different rights and responsibilities.

Work remains, as it has always been, a powerful factor of social integration. It affords places, rights and duties and distributes individuals along a scale of social prestige. Yet over the years the meaning of work has changed. It has become more highly diversified, and it is today invested with high expectations that conflict with organisational developments and the changing nature of the labour market, which are creating a new fragmentation at work. To reinvent work, then, is to take seriously the expectations of Europe's citizens, and more especially those of women and young people.

2

A History of the Value Accorded to Work

The notion of work as an activity through which human beings transform the world in which they live, remaking it in their image and finding in this process one of their most important ways of participating in social life, is a recent and eminently modern idea. Since Antiquity, work has gradually come to occupy a more and more central place in societies, to the extent that it is possible to speak of “work-based societies”. Over recent centuries, new layers of meaning have accreted to the idea of work, expanding individuals’ expectations of it. Work is at one and the same time represented in economic calculation as a “factor of production”, to be utilised as efficiently as possible; seen as an opportunity for individual self-fulfilment; and treated as a basis for the distribution of income, rights and welfare. In those societies where the expressive dimension of work has come to be salient, the different, contradictory meanings attached to work all coexist, generating tensions. There are different approaches that can be taken to try and grasp people’s relationships to work: one can look to the major European surveys, which enable comparison but also have their limits, or engage in in-depth, face-to-face questioning. Either way, understanding relationships to work is a complex matter.

2.1 The Value of Work: A Long Story

Has work always been valorised? Is it true that from earliest Antiquity human beings have worked and considered work to be one of the most important activities in their lives, as is suggested by Georges Friedmann and Pierre Naville in their *Traité de sociologie du Travail*, in which they write that “work deserves to be recognised as a characteristic of the human species. Man is a social animal ... essentially engaged in work”?¹ Such a thesis may be taken in two different ways. It might be taken to mean that humans have always been aware of transforming nature, of adding value to it, and in doing so developing a complex of activities to be radically distinguished from others, or, alternatively, that humans have always sought to meet their needs by making use of nature, but without necessarily radically distinguishing these activities from the rest of life.

If we think of work as the human activity of transforming nature, we are acting as if a specific nineteenth-century understanding already existed in Antiquity, forgetting that it was only later that it became possible to conceive of a “nature” susceptible of transformation by human activity and with this of a humanity capable of remaking it in its own image. Concepts and categories themselves are subject to change, and it is therefore necessary to try and tease out the meanings attached to the word “work” at different times, by analysing the corresponding texts.

We insist, then, on the historicity of the concept of work, following Jean-Pierre Vernant,² Michel Freyssenet³ and Dominique Méda,⁴ for whom our modern concept of work is the product of several layers of meaning successively accumulated through the centuries, as evidenced by many analyses.⁵

¹ Georges Friedmann and Pierre Naville, *Traité de sociologie du travail* (Paris: Armand Colin, vol. I, 1961; vol. II, 1962).

² Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* [1965] (New York: Zone Books, 2006).

³ Michel Freyssenet, “Historicité et centralité du travail”, in Jean Bidet and Pierre-Jean Texier, eds, *La crise du travail* (Paris: PUF, 1995), pp. 227–244; in English, see Freyssenet, “The Emergence, Centrality and End of Work”, *Current Sociology* 47:2 (April 1999), pp. 5–20, which cites and expands upon this.

⁴ Méda, *Le travail, une valeur en voie de disparition*.

⁵ The analyses below drawn in part on Méda, *Le Travail, une valeur en voie de disparition* and Dominique Méda, *Le Travail* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015).

2.1.1 Pre-capitalist Societies

Several anthropological or ethnological studies of life in pre-capitalist societies have shown that it is not possible to accord the same meaning to the term “work” as it is employed (or not) in the different societies under study. In her pioneering article of 1992, Marie-Noëlle Chamoux underlines how important it is, if one wishes to determine whether the concept of work can be used in speaking of pre-economic societies (whether distant in time or place), to avoid proceeding as certain writers do, which is to interpret distant times or places by means of concepts developed much later or elsewhere, analysing tribal societies using ideas forged by eighteenth-century economic thought, which obviously leads one to understand work as a universal category.⁶

To escape this trap, Chamoux argues that we should heed what anthropology tells us about work, revealing work to be “an ethnocentric notion”.⁷ “The notion of work is not universal. Many societies seem to have had no need for it. This being so, it tends to appear to us under the negative figures of absence, fragmentation into several concepts, or non-coincidence with the sense we ourselves accord to it.”⁸

Chamoux offers examples of the absence of the notion of work. It is not to be found among the Maenge of Oceania, on whom she cites the work of Michel Panoff: “There exists no notion of ‘work’ as such, no more than any special word to distinguish ‘productive activities’ from other human behaviours. ... On the other hand, there does exist, very distinctly, a frequently invoked notion of pain or suffering that appears in the context of gardening, among others.”⁹ The same goes for the Achuar of Amazonia,

⁶This article was first published as Marie-Noël Chamoux, “Sociétés avec et sans concept de travail: remarques anthropologiques”, in *Actes du colloque interdisciplinaire “Travail : recherche et prospective”*, 1993, the proceedings of a colloquium organised by PIRTTEM-CNRS and held at the École Normale Supérieure, Lyon, 30 Nov.–2 Dec. 1992 (Lyon: PIRTTEM, 1993) and afterwards as Chamoux, “Sociétés avec et sans concept de travail”, *Sociologie du travail* 36 (1994), p. 57–71. Here we shall use the version published in the proceedings of the colloquium, with the corresponding pagination.

⁷Ibid., p. 28.

⁸Ibid., p. 28.

⁹Michel Panoff, “Energie et vertu: le travail et ses représentations en Nouvelle-Bretagne”, *L’Homme* 17:2/3 (1977), pp. 7–21, at p. 11, quoted in Chamoux, “Sociétés avec et sans concept de travail”, p. 28.

studied by Philippe Descola: “Identical in this with other pre-capitalist societies, the Achuar have no term or notion corresponding to the idea of work in general, that is, to the idea of a coherent ensemble of technical operations whose goal is to produce the material means of life. Nor does the language have terms designating work processes in the wider sense.”¹⁰ And Chamoux adds that “Here one must vigorously reject any psychological evolutionism that would see in the absence of any general notion of work the symptom of any supposed ‘mental confusion’ suffered by ‘primitives’ incapable of abstraction and capable only of recognising sensations.”¹¹

To illustrate the fragmentation of the notion, Chamoux recalls that among the Ancient Greeks two words were needed, *ergon* and *ponos*, and that the Romans used no less than three: *opus*, *labor* and *opera* (-ae). And finally, for non-coincidence, she points out that the sense of word can extend far beyond production.

Certain societies have a very broad conception of work, while others designate by this term only non-productive activities. One finds nowhere, combined in the same single concept, the ensemble of ideas and meanings to which our own concept of work refers (difficult effort, the transformation of nature, the creation of value, etc.). More generally, Chamoux relies on the work of Marshall Sahlins, who writes in “Tribal Economics” that work is there not alienated from man, separable from his social being and capable of being the object of an exchange. One works, one produces as a social being, a husband, a father, a brother, a member of a clan or village. Work is not separate from the rest of life: “‘Worker’ is not a status in itself, nor ‘labor’ a true category of tribal economics.”¹²

More than this, it is Sahlins who showed us, in a sense, that primitive humanity did not live under a crushing weight of needs requiring satisfaction: needs were limited, life not a breathless race to satisfy unlimited need. Tribal people work less than us, and less regularly.

Can one then retain “work” as the term to describe the activities engaged in by these peoples? Chamoux concludes her article by posing

¹⁰ Philippe Descola, “Le jardin de Colibri. Procès de travail et catégorisations sexuelles chez les Achuar de l’Equateur”, *L’Homme* 23:1 (1983), pp. 61–89, at p. 63, quoted in Chamoux, “Sociétés avec et sans concept de travail”, p. 28.

¹¹ Chamoux, “Sociétés avec et sans concept de travail”, p. 29.

¹² Marshall David Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 80, quoted in Chamoux, “Sociétés avec et sans concept de travail”, p. 38.

the question in all its amplitude: “There thus arises a series of doubts. Is the economic definition of work not an indigenous concept like any other, a way of cutting up the world employed within the culture, despite the persistent claims for its being a category of reason and as such universal? ... The anthropological approach poses too a question that cannot be avoided, one perhaps more pregnant with practical and theoretical consequences than any other: can one say that work exists when it is neither thought not lived as such?”¹³

2.1.2 Ancient Greece

In this respect, Vernant’s article “Some Psychological Aspects of Work in Ancient Greece”¹⁴ represents a major theoretical contribution, both methodologically and substantively, in many respects laying the ground for the research programme launched by Maurice Godelier in 1980, under the title “Le travail et ses représentations” (Work and Its Representations), whose work would persuade a number of anthropologists and sociologists, in the 1990s, to recommend greater prudence in the use of the term, no longer seeing it as a universal category.

Like Chamoux, but in even severer terms, Vernant stresses the impermissibility of interpreting ancient civilisations through the categories of the present or of attributing to earlier civilisations concepts created or modified only later. “Just as it would not be right to apply the economic categories of modern capitalism to the ancient Greek world, we cannot ascribe the psychological functions of work today to the man of the ancient city. For us, professional tasks, no matter how different they may be in concrete terms, belong to a single type of behaviour: in all of them we see the same type of activity, set in a framework of rules and constraints, whose effects directly concern others and whose object is to produce something with value and utility for the group. This unification of the psychological function of work goes hand in hand with what Karl Marx calls abstract labour. So that the various working activities may

¹³ Chamoux, “Sociétés avec et sans concept de travail”, pp. 37–38.

¹⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Some Psychological Aspects of Work in Ancient Greece”, in Vernant, *Myth and Thought*.