

Hann, Chris (eds.), afterword by Gerd Spittler. 2021. *Work, Society, and the Ethical Self. Chimeras of Freedom in the Neoliberal Era*. London, New York: Berghahn Books. 304 pp. Hb.: \$135.00/£99.00. ISBN: 9781800732254.

Book review by

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Unreflectively referred to as “labour”, work has been an indispensable topic in political and public debates in recent years, with the discourse most likely focusing on ethics and neoliberalism. Post-industrial societies face many challenges, and the health crisis caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 has added new and exacerbated the already existing ones. Recently, the issue of a shorter working week has resurfaced, with all its advantages and disadvantages, not only in theory but already in practice, with pilot projects being introduced in different parts of the modern world. What kind of ethical practices and neoliberal behavior such innovation will entail will be an interesting topic to explore.

Exploring and discussing work under the auspices of one of the modern scientific disciplines is a challenging task. The authors of the 12 chapters of *Work, Society, and the Ethical Self. Chimeras of Freedom in the Neoliberal Era* (edited by social anthropologist and author of several books in the field of economic anthropology Chris Hann) dive deeply into and very thoroughly explore issues of social relations, freedom, ethics, neoliberalism, and work itself, more than any political or public discussion will ever be willing or able to do.

The introduction, written by Chris Hann, is theory-driven and comparative in nature, providing an essential foundation for understanding the emerging field of the anthropology of work. Starting with a basic distinction between work and labour, Hann ex-

plains the key definitions used in the book, outlines the history of anthropological research on work, and compares theories of work and related concepts developed by some prominent social scientists, including Marx, Weber, Foucault, Firth, and Polanyi.

From the perspective of social and economic anthropology, the authors explore the concepts of work and freedom in industrial and post-industrial societies, examining both subjective experiences and collective practices. Theoretically, they move between the notions of individual freedom developed by Foucault and Polanyi's notion of responsible or social freedom, while in one case author draws on Weber's theoretical reflections on work. The contributors' empirical approach to work is mainly based on ethnographic research they have conducted around the world, in urban centers such as Berlin, Delhi, or Accra, as well as in more rural areas such as the South Pacific Republic of Vanuatu, the Argentine Andes, or the Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan. In addition to the geographical diversity, it is, above all, the thematic diversity that makes this book an interesting and valuable example of scholarly work.

The authors of 12 case studies address what Hann calls "local understandings of work" (p. 6), which encompass a relatively broad range of types and forms of work. The distinction between work and other human activities is usually fuzzy, making cross-cultural translation very difficult. Moreover, according to Hann, the theorization of the economy itself becomes a problem. The authors of this book have attempted to overcome these obstacles through the use of mixed methods. However, the most revealing and informative cases use an ethnographic approach combining participation, observation, and interviews. Katherine Miller spent seventeen months in Pakistan's Hunza Valley, where she not only conducted interviews but also observed and worked with farmers to determine that their hard work also gave them physical pleasure and satisfaction. In another field study conducted by Olivia Angé among Kolla Indians in Argentina, the researcher was involved in the work process itself: locals make miniatures of familiar objects to honor Saint Anne, the patron saint of artisans (the image of her miniature holding a spinning wheel is also on the cover of this book). The objects are then sold at the local fair to be admired, make a profit, and please the saint. Another author, Anna-Riika Kaupinen, conducted field research in a previous work setting. She had worked as an intern in a company (TV) in Ghana, which gave her specific insight and allowed contacts and access to respondents in and out of the workplace. This allowed her to explore the high work ethic of young media professionals, which contrasts with the usual expectations and perceptions of work ethic that prevail in contemporary Ghanaian society.

Two other chapters are based on interviews and participant observation. Johannes Lenhard examines libertarian narratives in the work and professional ethics of venture capitalists as actors in a popular business activity. His comparative perspective includes not only interviews with investors but also his observations of interaction at work and participation in meetings in the three developed countries. Gonçalo Santos and his co-authors discuss the personal freedom versus social freedom of workers in urban China by comparing IT developers and cab drivers. Both have long working hours in common, but the authors conclude that the work-life balance between the two occupations is quite different.

Due to the limited length of this review, it is impossible to review all 12 chapters of this book. Therefore, let me conclude by briefly mentioning two other interesting examples of anthropologists' engagement with work. Deborah A. Jones discusses the diversity of written projects and explores the meaning and perception of freedom that emerges from the work of two ghostwriters in the United States. Akanksha Awal's chapter shows how young Indian middle-class women who work in call centers find joy in the work despite the insecurity and obstacles to freedom that the work presents. The remaining five chapters include: a discussion of the meaning of "free" community labour in Vanuatu; a historical account of social forms of freedom initiated by the socialist countermovement in the former Yugoslavia; an examination of labour and ethics among small business owners in Halle, eastern Germany; another case study focused on Germany examines labour processes and relations in a financial services centre; and the final chapter explores the impact of the platform economy on the distribution of labour and labour relations.

Finally, I would like to add that the authors of *Work, Society and Ethical Self* present several thought-provoking topics and approaches that will be of use to informed readers and students alike.