

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern

Herbert Applebaum

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. xiii + 645 pp. \$74.50 (cloth), \$24.50 (paper)

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With this volume, Applebaum makes a hefty contribution to SUNY's Series in the Anthropology of Work (edited by June Nash)—though not one of commensurate intellectual weight. It is his third in the series, his fourth SUNY publication and his sixth book in little more than a decade. His quantitative output is all the more impressive in that it is, in a sense, avocational; he is Director of Commercial Construction at Hartz Mountain Industries. The book is an attempt to extend the anthropological purview onto Western history—starting with pre-Classical Greece, including Republican and Imperial Rome, moving from early Christian Europe through to modern Europe and America—as well as to speculate about the future of work in the West. As such it is his most ambitious project to date. Designed on so monumental a scale, without foundations in historiographical training and set on methodologically slippery slopes, the construction is doomed to a certain vacancy rate.

The author begins with the claim of having avoided the straitjacket of “any philosophical or ideological bent” (p. ix), a claim that will appear naive to any post-positivist reader. Indeed, the cultural underpinnings of his perspective emerge briefly and periodically: for example, the coupling of an allusion to poor motivation as a cause for the failure of the Soviet Union and a warning that the decline of the work ethic (whose meaning shifts a bit across the wide terrain of chapters) may undermine the West's competitive efficiency (pp. 463-464). The perspective can be also read in omission. Though he attempts to describe women's work roles in pre-modern societies, Applebaum says virtually nothing about more recent, non-market (especially domestic) work, and his own definition of work is sufficiently broad to warrant more discussion (see p. x). Or, one might notice that his dozen pages on Marx (as lengthy as his treatment of Benjamin Franklin) decontextualizes the alienating role of technology by ignoring the social relations of production, though elsewhere he notes that technology can only be understood in sociocultural terms.

The claim to objectivity, moreover, confuses values and theory. The book's purported “anthropological perspective” amounts to little more than a framework of organizing themes elaborated from substantivist models of non-market society (see p. 9). Though one might excuse Applebaum for ignoring the sterile debate involving this model, it is more difficult to understand why he makes no effort to review, apply or develop subsequent attempts at transcending it. Indeed, in his 37-page bibliography, I identified only 16 anthropological works—the most recent of which, discounting three of his own five, was published in 1982. And of the latter, Wolf (1982) is not cited in the text.

His perspective leads to a description not only of how abstract work was conceived by the literati, but also of specific work roles and statuses. Unfortunately, the latter

agenda is not systematically applied. In the first five chapters of Part Three ("Work in the Modern World"), this agenda gives way to an idealist one that belies the author's own goals. The chapters comprise only a history of intellectual thought, as if the great thinkers were simply representative of their cultural milieu. Applebaum knows better; early and repeatedly he admits the methodological limitation which he most fully embraces here: the cultural conceptions of the non-literate and relatively powerless are largely lost to history. For contemporary times, when at least some ethnographic materials attempt to give voice to workers, there is silence. Applebaum excuses this perversity of presentation by claiming that intellectuals were men of influence. Hegemony be what it may, the effort remains flawed. A methodologically creative ethnohistorian might do better. But by failing to interpret intellectuals in a sociopolitical framework he even robs them of a capacity to refract a broader picture. Should Locke be understood as an apologist of the bourgeois revolution? Was Marx not a critic of industrial capitalists? Indeed, when Applebaum notices inconsistencies among intellectuals, he recognizes them as inevitable signs of complexity but overlooks their potential for keying systemic contradictions.

Theory is neither constructed nor theories deconstructed; historical "facts" are reconstructed—at least for pre-modern periods—from hints in primary sources (e.g., the Homeric myths) and extensive presentations of secondary analyses. The framework of thought in numerous learned tomes is outlined in a plain and readable manner. Descriptively, it is a full house, with rooms of interesting furniture.

These furnishings include a review of sociological and economic analyses of the social impact of current technological change. Though somewhat repetitious (a problem that is more forgivable in earlier chapters that cover interrelated substantive topics), being largely organized by author and publication rather than by theme, it is a rich, if not conclusive, literature that anthropologists of work will find useful. If no general theory of social change is ultimately brought to bear—the work sometimes hints at materialist conditions and more often at ideographic ones—the author does at least resist the temptation to make predictions of change, acknowledging the social structural constraints that limit possibilities as well as the technological innovations that offer potential.

Applebaum will probably be better remembered for helping to reinstate industrial ethnography (see 1981) and for facilitating the development of the Society for the Anthropology of Work (as founder of the *Anthropology of Work Review*) than for this overly ambitious enterprise. But this one, too, may stimulate further efforts.

References Cited

- Applebaum, Herbert
 1981 Royal Blue. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Wolf, Eric
 1982 Europe and the People Without History. Berkeley: University of California Press.