

BOOK REVIEW

The Value of Work since the 18th Century. Custom, Conflict, Measurement and Theory. Ed. by Massimo Asta and Pedro Ramos Pinto. Bloomsbury Academic, London [etc.] 2023. xii, 348 pp. £85.00. (Paper: £28.99; E-book: £26.09.)

This volume represents an ambitious and complex project, involving fifteen authors. It draws on studies spanning Europe, the United States, Africa, China, and India, reaching temporally from the eighteenth century to the present, and brought together under the EU Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The term “value” in the title is a slippery one. The book is about remuneration; it deliberately sets out to tackle the issue that wages were not just about market conditions and labour availability, and that value was also embedded in the relationship between workers and employers. It challenges neoclassical views that product markets determine prices and quantities exchanged, and that labour markets determine wage rates and employment levels, eschewing a simple supply and demand narrative. It says less, however, about the meaning wages had for workers and the emotions they invoked, though there are glimpses of these. Ideas such as personal worth, property of skill, and self-identity through work do not figure highly here. Instead, the authors shift the terms of debate from neoclassicism back to a notion of value more aligned with the eighteenth-century question of the value of labour, which they argue is “coming back into fashion”. Moreover, they argue that the wage “as remuneration for the value of a worker’s labour cannot be taken merely as fact and must be understood as a product of complex and changing social relations” (p. 2). Looking beyond supply and demand and market forces, the authors engage with and analyse how wages were “perceived, theorised and contested over and regulated”, and what part “agency, institutions, theory, culture and power relations” played in configuring wage relations (p. 4). In fact, they scrutinize the political economy of wages as the value of work. They argue that “what is valuable in labour, how social norms organise it and determine wages, are becoming key issues for the humanities and social sciences. In short, the question of the value of labour as it emerged in the eighteenth century is coming back into fashion” (p. 2). The authors view the eighteenth century as a watershed where work became embedded in an industrializing modernity in which waged labour became more important. Concomitantly, ideas about wages shaped other aspects of social life, including poverty and unemployment.

Wages have been significant to understanding economic labour history and have long exercised historians looking for ways to make sense of them. With newer statistical and computerized systems and using a wide variety of sources from local accounts to governmental reports, a variety of complex and state-of-the-art quantitative approaches have been generated to enable estimation of long-term wage series and standards of living. The chapters do not intend to critique the methods and

approaches of quantitative data runs such as these, and the authors recognize and cite the importance of long series of wage rates, and how historians want and need these. They are also aware of the pitfalls and difficulties in constructing such series. *The Value of Work* asserts that solely quantitative research on wages has an analytically and methodologically narrowing effect and may not always be based on reliable sources. Wages are not neutral, of course. Gender, place, control, age, supervision, and structural factors played a part. As Craig Muldrew notes,

Looking at earnings from the bottom up, so to speak, is to adopt a different perspective – that of negotiation between the worker and the employer involving a multitude of factors such as skill, labour supply, and demand for the work to be done, credit character, and of course, gender, age, status and local custom (p. 56).

Wages also often do not reflect other aspects of earning, including perks, like room and board, or vails for servants, and are difficult to construct when comparing day labour, piecework, and actual waged or salaried labour. The authors of most data runs try to compensate for this and for the lacunae in the available data.

The book's intention is to move beyond data to create a framework based on two clusters of ideas: custom and conflict (Part One) and measurement and theory (Part Two). But throughout the volume, the concept of custom dominates. The authors position custom as repeated behaviours, beliefs, and acts, and clarify that custom is not just another word for tradition, arguing that it persists and is deeply embedded in all labour markets. It does not fade away with “modern” industrial labour changes; indeed, they reject the notion of Western modernity that shapes much of the literature on industrial capitalism. While workers around the world might share similar experiences, national, regional, and historical traditions created a multiplicity of workplaces and labour relations. The Western paradigm of agricultural, preindustrial, protoindustrial, industrial, post-industrial/white-blouse work simply does not describe labour experiences in the non-Western world – and not always in the West either. Systems such as slavery and forced labour, interventions by political ideologies, like Maoism, Nazism, Stalinism, colonialization, etc., also reshaped the character of labour; these issues could be developed further.

Custom, like value, is a slippery term, and here it reflects a return to an earlier generation of scholars, especially Eric Hobsbawm, whose influence is felt throughout the book, as well as E.P. Thompson. Hobsbawm's 1960 essay “Customs, Wages, and Work-Load in Nineteenth-Century Industry”,¹ is influential in this study. His claim that “custom” determined wages and workload in the eighteenth century shapes many of the discussions in this volume. Hobsbawm argued, “it was only in the mid-nineteenth century that skilled workers and employers adjusted to the use of incentives and price mechanisms in a market system to gauge, measure and agree the wage rate for their work. Before this, wages were set by custom, and were not a ‘market calculation’”.² While it is useful as an investigative idea and helps to draw the collection together

¹E.J. Hobsbawm, “Custom, Wages, and Work-Load in Nineteenth-Century Industry”, in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1960), pp. 113–139.

²E.J. Hobsbawm, “Custom, Wages and Work-Load”, in *idem*, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964), pp. 344–370, 344.

to create a sense of a holistic whole, the term also risks smoothing over differences and subtleties of argument. It implies a timelessness and a continuing practice; yet, custom was not always fixed or consensual, hence the conflict. It was subject to disruption and undermining by technologies, colonialism, and migratory practices, locally or internationally across the time period of this volume, as well as government interventions deliberately undercutting customs. As the editors note:

Custom has a degree of inertia, and is usually subject to slow mutation. A relatively long time, often a few decades, appears necessary to make new customs socially binding, at least within a single generation of workers [...] Nevertheless [...] customs may undergo phases of relatively rapid destabilization, and processes of innovation induced by technological change, the re-organization of work, but also by politics and ideology (p. 14).

There is much food for thought in this volume, and the construction of ways of framing work and value is important. Returning to the moral economy and the uses of custom with fresh eyes is welcome. Similarly, it is good to see worker agency, the significance of gender, race, and inequality reflected in what might have been an arcane text about labour economics. The persuasive argument and critical evaluations of assumptions underpinning classical and neoclassical economics are also welcome. Individual chapters provide detail and structure to the debate, often with new and interesting material and case studies. The global reach of the volume is refreshing as it attempts to reveal and understand the complexity of wage relations. It is, in some ways, a dense book that requires time and effort on the reader's part to grasp its realities, but it is a tremendous piece of work that should inspire further research, debate, and certainly some contradiction. It speaks to economists, economic historians, but also to those with a more socially oriented approach to labour relations.

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