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London, Verso, 2018, 265 pp., hb, ISBN  
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ROSETTI

**Review of Andrea Komlosy, *Work. The Last 1000 Years*, translated by Jakob K. Watson with Loren Balhorn, London, Verso, 2018, 265 pp., hb, ISBN 978-1-78663-410-8**

*Valentin Cojano*

Economics has been constantly challenged by different sciences as if in a perpetual search for epistemological guidance. Natural rather than fellow, social sciences seem to have had a more effective transformative impact if assessed in terms of methodological design of articles published in the dominant academic journals (or Nobel Prize-honoured career highlights) of the discipline.

It is the credo of this journal that social research – including the efforts of sociologists, historians, anthropologists, political scientists and political economists among others – ultimately provides the kind of orientation that the economic science needs in order to diminish its internal controversies when it comes to received epistemology. With this review, we have an excellent opportunity to shed further light on this matter. By depth of societal analysis and breadth of historical reflection, Komlosy's *Work* has imposed itself as a perfect choice for learning how economics may deal with values, facts, and rigors of systematic research in order to arrive at a realistic description.

The book engages primarily with social history in an attempt to trace people's representations of 'work' as an ambivalent concept, perceived now and then, with contempt or admiration, burden, or joy. In concert with other disciplines, economics informs us about the themes of study traversing the field of *work*, among which, household economy, profit-making business, war and foreign trade financing, occupational diversification, merchant guilds, or technology and productivity. However, it is economics that seems to incite the author, a Professor at the Faculty

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of History and Cultural Sciences at the University of Vienna, Austria, in construing the main argument of the book by calling into question the narrow representation, in which, *work* as a factor of production, a dominant conception 'only after 1900' (p. 3), has been reduced to gainful employment. As she comments on the book's recursive theme, the historical approach 'does not reveal a linear development from reciprocal to commodified labour, but different combinations, varying across time and space ... a history of combining paid and unpaid, formal and informal, free and unfree work by individuals and within families, households, companies, and commodity chains.' [1]

There are two reasons for placing commodified labour, which is labour power that is sold on the labour market, at the centre of the critique of mainstream *work* narrative. First, it embodies the Eurocentric, universalist mind-set that has guided much of the present scholarly discourse in social thought with fallacious results. Under the intellectual influence of liberals, conservatives, and socialists alike, the author argues that the original, constructive conflict between overcoming work (as burden) and praising it (as salvation) has morphed into a monolithic vision of *work* as the epitome of status and income, of one's 'identity' (p. 16) in a 'work-centred society'. The exclusion of non-value-adding labour from 'the history of work almost entirely' (p. 16) means that large segments of labour relations which appear essential during people's life-course – e.g. care and housework, voluntary work for the community, personal training and education – cannot contribute to an integrative social view. Second, once the overstated role of paid and voluntary labour is debunked, we discover the social universe showing us the historical patterns of various labour relations – paid and unpaid, free and unfree, voluntary and forced – awaiting to be explored through the unidisciplinary approach in social sciences. The book is an example of social study with ramifications into various loci of scholarship: sociology, first, with minutia of social diversification and the corresponding attitudes towards individual labouring tasks as influenced by culture, religion, and power; history, by means of a cross-sectional view of sequential patterns and developmental trends that brought about 'combinations of forms of work' (p. 22); linguistics, through a pedagogical-style chapter and elaborate multilingual lexicon 'decoding concepts of work in cultural environment' (p. 38) as a 'tool in exploring social relations' (p. 227), a rather unexpected yet fertile contribution, reminiscent of Vico's searches for the origin of human thoughts; anthropology also contributing to the large social canvas, with illustrations of joy or toil, described in vivid detail (and within multicultural contexts).

The succession of arguments, as hitherto introduced, consumes the first half of the book, and may be indicative of just another commendable contribution to social history. The other half, however, announces a novel contribution, within the framework of 'historical social sciences', a term coined by highly cited author in the *Work*, Immanuel Wallerstein, to impart his concept of unidisciplinarity on 'the belief that in social sciences at least, there exists today no sufficient intellectual reason to distinguish the separate disciplines at all, and that instead all work should be considered part of a single discipline, sometimes called the historical social sciences.' [2] The author embraces this view, albeit implicitly, by laying out a model of historical thinking in social sciences in over 100 pages dedicated to six historical cross-sections to which a brief and left to be further explored synoptic of *Long Durée* perspective has been appended.

As distinctive for historical social sciences, the investigation starts with a critical (as opposed to chronological) approach to the terminal boundary of the events, in a system of thought for which overlapping time periods represent a crucial analytical tool. [3] Accordingly, in Komlosy's *Work*, the historical episodes are sequenced in a *TimeSpace* matrix, developing within both temporal (from distant past to the 1250-1500-1700-1800-1900-today time scale) and geographical (local, interregional, and large-scale) frameworks. Each frame produces singular combinations of work forms, in which, 'labour relations and the potential for adding value to each area depend on a region's position within the global commodity chain.' (p. 120) Central Europe is selected as the region of reference, an option that allows the author to reveal the pattern of interregional divisions of labour in even more acute accents besides the recurring parallel between Western Europe, America (Northern and Latin), and Asia.

The new analytical perspective does not necessarily bring to light novel information; instead, it helps create knowledge better suited to absorb structures of life as they evolve, and hence, prefigure realistic themes of study. It helps us confront distant past as composed of historical instances of human affairs rather than mere chronicles archived in the books of historians. The archives of 1250s and 1800s, for example, surely differ in their representation of local and global economy. By 1250, when the European town took shape (p. 95), the world resembled a multi-centric world economy of 'the Euro-Asian world-system', in which 'Europa stood on the periphery' (p. 96). The urban area was an 'innovation' in Europe (p. 107), but a tradition in West Asia (pp. 96, 104), more exactly 'from Constantinople across the Black Sea to Egypt and Persia' and China (p. 96). The largest cities of Europe could

count between 80,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, while Baghdad had been a city of one million, Cairo and Delhi between 200,000 and 600,000 by 1250 (p. 98). By 1800, the Asian regions had started losing their leading position in the global production, while Central Europe's economies placed themselves even further from value-added occupations within commodity chains.

Despite the distinct historical canvas, more familiar or less familiar evolutionary processes showed up on a regular basis. Of the familiar ones, organised tourism, as an example of the emergence of trade, makes for a picturesque inclusion. Religious or material grievance seemed to fade away when tourist packages were offered by professional agents in Venice, for example, to pilgrims to Palestine as 'a basic, two-week group trip with accommodation in the pilgrims' hospice, indulgences, knighthood at the Holy Sepulchre (for nobles), viewings, relics and souvenirs...or an extended tour that went from Jerusalem through Mount Sinai to Cairo' (p. 112). But these events were usually neglected in the linear expositions of labour relations that stand out poignantly against the grain. The typical development of labour relations in the contexts of specialized marketplaces, inter-regional trade, or specializations could not stop or reverse the divergent trend of division of labour between urban space and rural surroundings, advanced and poor areas, metropole and colony, also visible in today's post-industrial economy (pp. 197, 205). This is the reason why the community of social scholars, as represented by the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations 1500-2000, initiated by the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, distinguishes between four major categories of work – non-working population, reciprocal, tributary, and commodified, with their specific subcategories (p. 220).

The frame of forced specialization adds persuasively new historical strands of reflection to the benefit of current economic thought. One parallel takes on today's commodity chains, 'in which "global buyers" face off against local producers', and the exploits of British East India Company, which forced Indian producers 'into less lucrative sectors of semi-finished goods' by means of various trade and financial arrangements (p. 150). Another episode brings up the 'steep iron tariffs' implemented by Great Britain in 1803, which, along with better technology, enabled England to outcompete Russia, the European leader in iron production by 1780 (p. 153). Great Britain again, the hegemonic economic power of the 1800s, joined the Ottoman, as well as French and Austrian armies, in order to defeat Egypt during the Oriental crisis of 1840, and thus put an end to 'the short-lived success of the establishment of an Egyptian domestic textile industry' (p. 155). It is a lesson

in historical thinking that helps us critique the myths of-economic discourse with a view of revealing 'coexisting alternatives, countertendencies...at each historical juncture' (p. 17), inside or beyond markets.

The reader will find in *Work* not only a persuasive critique of the 'economistic corset' (p. 18), in which 'the reciprocal, the immediate and the gratuitous were pushed out of the economic sphere' (p. 21). It has also ensured a thoughtful reference for a social science of global humans (p. 21), a treat in genuine, innovative, and inspirational scholarship of unidisciplinarity. *Work* is a compelling lesson on the power of historical reasoning able to remove the myopic perspective in economics from its the dominant approach pedestal.

## Endnotes

[1] 'Andrea Komlosy on her book *Work: The Last 1,000 Years*', *Rorotoko*, 19 March 2018.

[2] Wallerstein, Immanuel (2004), *World-systems analysis: an introduction*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 98.

[3] Cojanu, Valentin (2012), 'Book review. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011', *Theory & Society* 41, 421–424.

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