

Money, Work and Leisure

By Carol Schwyzer, © MoneyMuseum

"Chi non lavora non fa l'amore": the hit with which the Italian singer Adriano Celentano won the San Remo Festival in 1970 still rings as clearly in my ears as if it had only yesterday climbed to the top of the hit parades. That a woman refuses to make love to a man if he does not work and bring home the money can, on the one hand, be regarded as a half joking and half serious reminder by the wife who may have to cook for a few "bambini."

In a deeper sense, however, the broad hint leads to exciting subjects: What is the connection between work and money? And what is the field of tension between leisure time and work? That one has to work in our world to earn money, and that one needs money to be able to live a decent life is a truism, a matter of fact that tempts us to draw up the equations "more work = more money" and "more money = a better life." But that these equations are not always right is shown when the MoneyMuseum takes a closer look at the subjects of "money, work and leisure."

Work is upgraded: from toil to life's purpose

If you want to get down to the essence of a matter the meaning of a word often helps you to get quite close to your aim. So what can the etymology of work tell us?

In ancient Greek, work is called ponos, and this is related to the French peine and the German Pein, which means "toil," "torment" and "suffering." The German word "Arbeit" probably originates from Indo-Germanic orbho, which means "orphaned," "a child condemned to hard physical labour." The English labour and the Italian lavoro come from Latin labor, which means "effort," "exertion," "strain," "aches." It is thus not surprising that French travail and Spanish trabajo are connected with Latin tripulare (torment, harass).

What etymology shows – namely that work is strenuous – is also revealed in the Bible. In the story of the creation work is sent to man as a curse: as a punishment for the Fall, man has to earn his bread "in the sweat of his face." Not until the Middle Ages did the term lose its pejorative connotation as effort, torment and misery and then meant simply "purposeful occupation." Today things have gone so far that work has become the principal means of identifying ourselves, as the Swiss author Urs Widmer remarks: "We are all defined to such an extent by the work we do every day that we can hardly imagine any other definition of ourselves. I am what I do for my work."

Leisure is degraded: from the sense of life to a vice

Etymologically the German for leisure "Musse" is part of the word-group "müssen/messen" (must/measure) and originally means "inactivity," "free time," "an opportunity to do something." Unlike work the word "Musse" underwent a rapid descent in the course of time. Isn't there a popular saying: "The devil finds work for idle hands?"

But in antiquity leisure was a celebrated star. For the ancient Greeks life was not yet divided up into work and free time, but into leisure and non-leisure. For the Greeks, for example Aristotle, leisure had a lot to do with education and development of the personality. Because this is the noblest task of man, in their division of time the Greeks assumed that leisure was the most important part and called what we today describe as work "non-leisure." In the philosophy of

antiquity the contemplative life had absolute priority over active life. Only in contemplation, a state of inner calm, could man become one with nature and the cosmos and thus reach a situation that recognises eternal truths. Non-leisure, i.e. work, was considered to be something that stood in the way of good real life.

Work was part of the realm of necessity, and only in the desired realm of leisure could man find his fulfilment. The inferior manual activities, on the other hand, had a bad reputation. They were said to ruin the character and dull the mind. That is why they were left as far as possible to slaves, women or foreigners.

It was unfortunate for those who did not belong to the elite and were not able to engage anyone for the necessary chores. A proven means of escaping the strictures of economic necessities was at that time to limit one's own material needs. For example, the famous philosopher Diogenes set his contemporaries a living example of a free life in asceticism by living in a barrel with hardly any clothes or food.

That independence was highly regarded in antiquity is, however, also shown by the fact that the free farmer enjoyed a higher status in society than, for example, the manual worker. While the farmer depended only on the goodwill of the gods and of the weather, the manual labourers relied on their customers. To enter service for money was seen as voluntary slavery. For that reason the wage earners were publicly regarded as being below slaves, who, after all, were forced to work. So leisure was the privilege of an elite, who, however, in return made great intellectual and artistic achievements and developments possible.

“Ora et labora”: the slogan of the Middle Ages

The fall of the Roman Empire and the economic catastrophe that accompanied it led to the idle upper class losing its basis of life. The period of antiquity which affirmed life on earth was followed by a period directed towards life beyond, in which people regarded their lives as an earthly vale of tears and work as the just punishment for man's sins. Indeed, in monastic life work was the form of atonement par excellence. After all, Saint Benedict of Nursia places prayer before work in his famous motto "Ora et labora" (pray and work).

With the upturn in trade and economic activity in the Middle Ages, in the towns a hierarchical and strictly regulated body of artisans began to take shape in the form of guilds in which the basis was laid for an identification with work. Thus in the 12th century it became customary to derive surnames from the name of a trade, for example "Miller" or "Smith." The regulations of the guilds lay down both wages and prices for their work and thus ensured the artisans an adequate income and a relaxed working pace.

Quite generally, the working rhythm of pre-industrial times cannot be compared to what we today call "work." Working hours and rhythm were determined entirely by nature. In summer there is intense work to be done in the fields, and the winter is a less strenuous time. Moreover, the medieval calendar was full of feast days; in England at that time every third day is said to have been a holiday. In addition, wealth in the Middle Ages – in the sense of primitive Christianity – tended to be looked down upon and be seen as an expression of a sinful worldliness.

From Luther to Benjamin Franklin: work made a triumphant advance

The turning point came with the Protestant Martin Luther and first took place in the language.

Luther translates the activities called "work" completely free of any value judgement as "vocation." By doing so he now fundamentally changed the understanding of work. An activity which up to then was morally as neutral as eating or drinking became a calling, a holy duty imposed on man by God. Indeed, for Luther man was born for work like the bird for flying. Seen in this light the ideal of life in antiquity and also the Middle Ages, idleness, became the work of the devil. The housemaid, who washed her dishes and scrubbed floors, knew that her work pleased God. Or as Luther puts it: "Idleness is a sin against the command of God, who ordered work here." Whereas in the Middle Ages the monk's asceticism had been the highest form of purification, from now on performing one's duty was appreciated – even in worldly activities – as religious content. For the position of work on the scale of values this had incisive consequences. Work was now no longer compulsory, it ennobled.

The Puritans: "We live in order to work"

The Puritans of the 17th and 18th centuries went even further in this direction. For them economic success was regarded as a sign of being chosen by God. Paradoxically, however, it was also part of Puritan morals that the wealth acquired must not be enjoyed. But economic endeavour became an end in itself of life on earth. "One works," according to the writer Richard Baxter, "not only to live, but one lives for the sake of work."

The politician and inventor Benjamin Franklin put his finger on the Puritans' belief in unconditional ambitious diligence with his famous sentence "Time is money." And backed it up like this: "(...) anyone who could earn 10 shillings a day by his work and goes for a walk or lazes around in his room for half of the day, must not, even if he only spends 6 pence for his pleasure, reckon this amount only, because he has additionally spent or, rather, thrown away 5 shillings. If one wastes time worth 5 shillings, one might just as well have thrown these 5 shillings into the sea." Yes, Benjamin Franklin's words that time is money have pursued us right up to the work mania and ceaseless activity of the present day.

The Enlightenment then gave work an additional significance, namely that it – apart from money – was also progress, reason, social happiness and the happiness of the individual. Marx and Engels, for example, criticised the idle life of the aristocracy, and in the revolutions of 1848 the right to work was demanded together with human rights.

The high estimation and upgrading of work turns it into revolutionary dynamite. If the chances of the individual in society were no longer dependent on his high or low birth, but when achievement and work advance mankind, the system that prevailed earlier was broken down. Only now did it become possible for a commoner from Corsica like Napoleon Bonaparte to become the emperor of France through intelligence and vigour or, later, an actor like Ronald Reagan the American president. And that a poor orphan like Charles Spencer Chaplin could work his way up to become a famous and financially successful film star, who was finally knighted, would also have been unthinkable at an earlier time.

The curse of industrialisation

As industrialisation progressed work became increasingly brutal. Those who had drifted away from the countryside because they had become landless on account of the population explosion had no choice but to work in the factories under the factory owners' inhumane conditions. Due to the spread of electric light now work could be carried on round the clock. And because everyone could now measure time as a result of the spread of clocks an objective and continuous machine time replaced the subjective feeling for time. Detached from the rhythm of nature, work now acquired a new and restless quality. Work became a period of time of defined duration for which money was paid. For many people working 16 hours a day was their daily routine. It was then that the division of human time into work and free time also took place. Work was seen as a means of improving the working classes. It became the sole remedy, a means of self-realisation, the only standard. But it was generally understood that work was only an activity for which you were remunerated.

So this resulted in people being defined purely by their gainful employment and the money that it gave them. This evaluation had consequences: an acquisitive urge became man's most important driving force. Anyone who lost his job lost his identity. The higher ranks, for example, succumbed to workaholism, because it was only work that seemed to make life worth living. And women also shifted away from hearth and home into the world of work.

What a difference to the times when the Berne aristocrat Madame de Meuron used to ask the young men who were introduced to her, "Are you somebody or do you receive a wage?"

The courage for leisure

Just as inexorably as work was upgraded, so persistently did repeated revolts occur against overvaluing work. In 1883, for example, Karl Marx's son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, of all persons, published a work entitled "Recht auf Faulheit" (The Right to Idleness), in which he denounces mankind's addiction to work as a mental aberration. He quotes Christ, who says in the Sermon on the Mount: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

Nor do the great heroes of fiction like Goethe's "Werther" or Thomas Mann's "Hans Castorp" work. For Eichendorff's "Taugenichts" (Good-for-nothing) life and also happiness begin on the day when his father calls him a lazy idler and throws him out of the house. In the novel real life takes place outside work. The poetic dimension of life, the many opportunities for development, the intensity of feelings are not part of everyday life.

In 1968 the hippie movement criticised post-war society's achievement-orientated way of thinking and countered it with a zest for life, leisure and flower people – antitypes that still live on today in the alternative movements.

Around the turn of the millennium another shift in thinking took place with regard to the achievement-orientated society. But now work as well as earning money was meant to be fun. Being busy all day long was – as in the 19th century – again a status symbol.

And then there are such books as "Die Kunst weniger zu arbeiten" (The Art of Working Less, Axel Braig and Ulrich Renz), works such as "Mehr Mut zur Musse" (More Courage for Leisure, Klaus

Bartels) or internet pages like www.otium-ev.de, where we find, for example, ten arguments in praise of idleness and against the addiction to work, leisure meaning not only idleness and doing nothing but above all creative and charitable activities.

Work becoming scarcer

But what happens when work runs out? When technology and progress eliminate jobs? According to economic researchers and futurologists work will become increasingly scarce. In Germany, for example, labour productivity has increased 17fold in the last 120 years. Indeed, it is in the reduction of work that precisely the success of our economic system is expressed, and its inner logic aims at producing as much as possible with as little work as possible through technical progress. Thus many unexpectedly find they have more time, which could make their life more pleasant. But because they are so fixated on work they have no idea what to do with the newly acquired leisure-time. The German philosopher Hannah Arendt foresaw and described this situation as early as 1958 in her book "Vita activa." She remarks that in only a few years' time the factories will be empty and that humanity will be freed from the yoke of work.

But the fulfilment of the age-old dream of an easy life free of work, which used to be a matter of course for the few members of the ruling class, unfortunately comes at a time when the glorification of work has since the 17th century changed society into a working society in which the individual can only be identified in terms of his work. Thus Arendt writes: "The fulfilment of the age-old dream, as in the fulfilment of fairy-tale wishes, meets with a constellation in which the dreamed-of blessing has the effect of a curse. For it is a working society that has to be liberated from the fetters of work, and this society is hardly aware from hearsay of the higher and useful activities for the sake of which this liberation would be worthwhile (...). What awaits us is the prospect of a working society which has run out of work, i.e. the only activity that it still know how to perform. What could be more fateful?"

Less work, more life: the art of achieving the right balance

Again and again we meet people who are successful in their profession and then drop out. There is the entrepreneur and director who works non-stop and, with a full appointments book, is continuously on the go, but who, having so much work, has lost his enthusiasm for what he is doing. He realises that he no longer has any time to live, no time for walks with his wife or for the first steps of his second child. He increasingly has the feeling that something is wrong, that he is missing out on real life. So he chucks in the whole business, shuts up shop and stays at home expecting to experience the great happiness of freedom. That, however, does not materialise. At first the entrepreneur seems to fall into a hole, he has no idea how to structure his time and faced with so many opportunities cannot tackle anything. He is incapable of enjoying his leisure-time. Only when he manages to find a sensible balance in his everyday life that suits him does he become happy. Now he has a task, i.e. he works – but no longer 24 hours a day and with enough time for unforeseen things that life brings him. He can take his son to football practice, he can test his daughter's vocabulary or go jogging through the woods with his dog. He has time to read and enough time for himself, so he can devote himself to leisure pursuits. He exercises himself in the art of working in such a way that he earns his leisure and still has time and energy to spend his leisure-time meaningfully.

In short, finding the right level, a healthy balance between the time in which you do what is necessary and the time in which you devote yourself to finding the sense of life, is a great challenge in everybody's life.

A tip by the initiator of the MoneyMuseum

Only do what you enjoy – and get paid for doing it. As a human being you are a social creature and live in a community. So interaction with others is the most natural of all occurrences. It is actually essential that there has to be interaction in the human "herd." Now ask yourself what abilities you have and which needs of your fellow men you can fulfil with these abilities. If you do something you like doing and you enjoy you will work better, and if by doing so you do someone else a service, you will even get paid for it. So you are well on the way to a great achievement, namely to harmoniously combine work and leisure.

I, for example, love to think and talk about currencies, currency upheavals, about money being traded. I am tremendously fascinated by what is behind money, how it moves in the world and through history. If I come across people who need advising in this area, I combine something that I do enthusiastically with an activity which helps others and for which they are prepared to pay me. Or take the example of the "Silk King" Andi Stutz of Zürich. In the film "Geld bewegt" (Money Moves) he only refers to the two hours a week in which he is annoyed as work. The quality- and beauty-fanatic regards the rest of his activities as satisfaction for the pleasure he takes in beauty. His working time has, therefore, – with one minor exception – the quality of leisure time. The money that he earns from it gives him satisfaction, because he can invest it as he sees fit – in his own firm, in his Silk Spinner's Restaurant and in enjoying his life.

And as things turn out when you do what is fun: working time and leisure-time coincide almost totally and that means good prospects.

Sources

Hannah Arendt: "Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben," Piper 2001

Axel Braig, Ulrich Benz: "Die Kunst, weniger zu arbeiten," Argon Verlag GmbH, Berlin 2001

Paul Lafargue: "Das Recht auf Faulheit," Berlin 1991 or under www.wildcat-www.de/material/m003lafa.htm

Urs Widmer: "Das Geld, die Arbeit, die Angst und das Glück," Diogenes 2002

Numerous articles on the subject can also be found under www.otium-ev.de