

the book: Does Weber describe the reform of a socialist system, the transformation of China into a state capitalist system, or the early days of the development of a new socioeconomic system? *How China Escaped Shock Therapy* adds a new depth to this debate and opens a field of research for years to come.

Notes:

- 1 B. Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth*, Cambridge, MA 2007; J. Fewsmith, *Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Economic Debate*, Armonk, NY 1994.
- 2 E. F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, Cambridge, MA 2011.
- 3 J. Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China*, Cambridge, MA 2017; F. Wemheuer (ed.), *Machterhalt durch Wirtschaftsreformen. Chinas Einfluss auf die sozialistische Welt* (Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung), Berlin 2020.

Jan Lucassen: *The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, 544 pp.

Reviewed by
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Jan Lucassen – in *The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind* – offers us an exciting history of humanity, with human work as its central point. The intention is to place work as the central place – that is to say, its *vital protoform* – of both history and humanization of humans themselves, in a truly global, multinational, and transchronological perspective. But all knowledge, as Professor Gaston Bachelard once said, is the answer to a question. In this case, the author asks us point-blank: “what does the historical record suggest about what needs to be done — in order for us to better control our collective future” (p. 423).

In an attempt to answer this, Lucassen – who was the director of the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) and one of the founding exponents, together with Marcel van der Linden, of the *Global Labour History*[1] – systematizes his exposition throughout history (with abundant concrete examples and case studies from around the whole world) of forms of work and production. He argues that, contrary to prevailing theories in the field (Adam Smith, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and even authors such as Alexander Chayanov

or Karl Polanyi), there is no drift towards forms of work that can divide history along the lines of social production modes (primitivism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, etc. or, eventually, socialism). Even if we cannot develop this much more, we are all indebted, in this particular subject, to the historical or theoretical work of Leon Trotsky (the idea of “uneven and combined”); Daniel Bensaïd (the project of the “discordance of times”); and, more recently, Neil Davidson, with all his potent contribution to the deteleologization of modern, contemporary history: there is a whole line of critical thought that openly rocks the core of historical stagetism.

Then, in that direction, what is observed is that the forms of work appear, without others disappearing. Market economies functioned for a millennium in Western Europe and ancient India between 500 BC and 500 AD to then die out for a millennium. and forced labour was used on a mass scale in the twentieth century in Nazi Germany, in Joseph Stalin’s Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in Japan, or partially in China. These examples demonstrate that not only are there no irreversible patterns in the forms of work throughout history, but they also are, according to the author, unpredictable. It would not be unfeasible to establish standards, but, in his opinion, it would be too early to do so if we consider that the history of modern humanity represents less than 98 per cent of the life span of all the humankind around the globe.

For Lucassen, attempts to establish such standards failed for a lack of empirical support and proper treatment. Here the author situates himself in his fixed critique of Marx, explicitly moving away from con-

cepts such as class struggle, capital, or even modernity (Introduction, p. xv).

The book begins with a summary – quite clear, synthetic, and even didactic – of the history, theories, and methodologies of work, and then it is divided into chronological-thematic chapters: “Humans at Work” (700,000–12,000), “Farming and the Division of Labour” (10000–5000), “Emerging Labour Relations” (5000–500), “Working for the Market” (500–1500), “Globalization of Labour Relations” (1500–1800), “Converging Labour Relations” (1800 to now), and finally “The Changing Significance of Work” (1800 to now). We believe that clarifying the distinction between “labour” and “work” would be helpful – for the English version – in order to expand global comprehension and conceptual rigor. The conclusion summarizes the main thesis and challenges for the future of both work and humankind – as the old bard once inscribed, the lies the rug: What can one expect?

Lucassen’s work – admittedly – is influenced by the field of interests of *Global Labour History*; in a simultaneously brilliant and very comprehensive way, draws on an enviable social knowledge of empirical data and advanced methodologies published in the field of the social history of work all over the world in the last two decades (a bibliography of dozens of pages that he handles with unparalleled mastery). The book further brings us this history of work, looking at five inhabited continents and the forms of unpaid work, domestic work, reciprocal work, convict labour, forced labour, and so on. On the other hand, the conclusions are largely influenced by the general taxonomy developed through the research programme

of the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations (IISH) – where, with the project Historical International Classification of Occupations (HISCO), Lucassen and his colleague researchers seek to make a social history of work in the modern world as an authentic form of “the unity in the diversity”, as old schoolers would name it.

From this database, the author argues (the illustrative table on p. 13 summarizes the entire thread of the argument) that the different historical periods were marked by forms of work much more complex than the most classical history of work predicted: the reciprocal work has always existed until today; independent work has been around since 1000 BC to this day; the tributary redistribution exists from 400 BC to 1500 AD; slavery is on the face of the Earth since 3000 BC until 1900 AD; and modern wage labour would not exactly be new under the Sun, at least until 2,000 years ago.

Lucassen also highlights in his work the role of cooperation in the evolution of human work, laying out with instigating examples the theories of the “competitive man”; monetization and the role it played in defining labour relations; and the trend towards what he considers a worldwide convergence of various forms of work (with European decay and transformation in Asia). As a staunch critic of social inequality from an author who was guided by the firm defence of immigrants’ rights in the public sphere and who seems to approach it from a somewhat Kantian point of view (a “moral imperative” of universal justice), the author uses Thomas Piketty’s data records to reflect on the cause of the lack of reaction of the workers’ movement,

the end of the social pact, and the erosion of modern democracies. The rise of identity politics is also a subject of critical reflection in the piece.

He also does a remarkable job in criticizing the “progressive” perspectives, which defend idleness (*Otium*) as an alternative to work. Although we find a reference missing to some authors in the field that must be mentioned such as Georg Lukács[2], just to cite a canonical illustration, and the “meaning of work” in philosophical terms, Lucassen defends the centrality of work as a vital locus of social recognition and the very meaning of life. With this, he radically opposes the replacement of full employment by focusing on social assistance programmes.

In this founding question, so to say, the recent “rescue” that people like Bellamy Foster[3] and István Mészáros[4] have made of the Marx-Engel concept of the metabolic-social nexus, from the centrality of work to the history of humankind itself, is of vital importance. How a historian with such a wide-open and critical mind, so affectionate and erudite about pre-history, for example – among natural history, paleo-anthropology, and genetic-cultural coevolution – could not mention pivotal works such as Frederick Engels[5] and Jay Gould[6], or say hardly anything about young Marx himself [7], in the “ontological leap” made within the history of humanity? How did “the transition from ape to man” occur? How did the metamorphic conversion, of human-into-Human, take place – and how does it take place? The contributions of paleolithic anthropology through the critical lens of Marxian ontology leads us to recognize the evolutionary historicity of social beings,

highlighting the transition from a merely biological-causal environment to a historical-conscious universe and the central category that differentiates humanity from other animals: *freedom*. This radically historicist-humanist assumption was penned in the most striking manner by Lev Vygotsky: we are born biological candidates to humankind. Paraphrasing the old feminist statement: “one is not born, but rather becomes [...] a human being”. A very thought-provoking, guiding hypothesis is pedagogically presented by this paramount Soviet psychologist – in a little-known text from the beginnings of the 1930s:

Scientific psychology has established as its basic thesis the fact that the modern psychological human-type is a product of two evolutionary lines. On the one hand, this modern type of human being developed in a lengthy process of biological evolution from which the biological species Homo Sapiens has arisen, with all its inherent characteristics from the point of view of body structure, the functions of various organs, and certain types of reflexes and instinctive activity, which have become hereditarily fixed, and which are passed on from generation to generation. But together with the beginning of social and historical human life and the fundamental changes in the conditions to which he had to adapt himself, the very character of the subsequent course of human evolution also changed very radically. [...] the essential factors which directed the process of biological evolution have receded to the background and have either completely fallen away or have become a reduced or sub-dominant part of new and more complex tendencies governing human social development. Indeed, the struggle for existence and natural selection, the two driving forces of biological evolution within the

animal world, lost their decisive importance as soon as we pass on to the historical development of Man. New tendencies, which regulate the course of human history and which cover the entire process, of the material and mental advance of human society, now take their place.[8]

The part played by work is, therefore, quintessential in the humanization of humankind. In addition to the confrontation of theories of work – which the author explicitly assumes, in an intellectually honest way, not to want to do in this book – we also fail to note a more in-depth debate with critical theories, especially Marxist ones, which are, somewhat, simplified here. There are oeuvres that today have brought a non-Eurocentric and/or non-stagetist Marx (like Kevin Anderson) [9], in addition to a whole wide field of critical Marxism that strongly opposes the idea of the “locomotive of history” (like Walter Benjamin)[10], together with an entire debate about the origins of capitalism in contemporary Marxism[11] that argues that the existence of commodity markets, bourgeoisie class, and modern cities does not lead to the capitalist system, per se. This debate is crucial for the matters at stake.

Capitalism would not be a mode of social production waiting to be unchained from feudal social relations, a “market” in itself, but the commodification of the entire way of life. On the other hand, there is no debate on industrial relations that *explicitly* examines the *de iure* taxonomy by *de facto* reality – can one talk about self-employment 3,000 years ago as the same as self-employment today? These are remarks that in no way diminish the greatness of this tome. It is a magnum opus – or

masterpiece – in the old sense that Morris attributed to the craftsmanship of medieval guilds or the arts brotherhoods.[12] The author, finally, dares to make a new history of humanity, let us say, which puts the homonymous *Sapiens*[13] in a position that – shall we say it? – is not at all very flattering. For those who had not read this book, we will leave just one clue of its significance: one of its main theses is that wheat colonized *Sapiens*, and not the other way around. In the very own words that concluded the same alluring article written by Vygotsky:

In this sense, Engels, who had examined the process of evolution from the ape to man, said that it is work which created man. Proceeding from this, one could say that new forms of work will create the new man and that this new man will resemble the old kind of man, “old Adam”, in name only, the same way as, according to Baruch Spinoza’s great assertion, a “dog”, the barking animal, resembles the heavenly constellation named “Dog”.[14]

If the readers who love both domestic animals’ milieux and outer-space settings allow us, the rather friendly pet is, to the epic astral conformation, what the *Sapiens* compiling is to *The Story of Work* oeuvre. Lucassen’s new edition makes it feasible, finally, to aim higher: the author does not compromise popular reach with any erudite depths but combines both. In one single verdict: there is no work without humans, there are no humans without work.

Notes:

- 1 Prolegomena for a Global Labour History, Org. by M. van der Linden and J. Lucassen, Amsterdam 1999.
- 2 G. Lukács, *The Ontology of the Social Being* [1964–1970], London 1978.
- 3 J. Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology*, London 2020.
- 4 I. Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition*, London 1995.
- 5 F. Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* [1876], London 1939.
- 6 S. J. Gould, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*, London 1977.
- 7 K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* [1844], London 1959.
- 8 L. Vygotsky, *The Socialist Alteration of Man* [1930], in: *Vygotsky Reader*, ed. by R. van der Veer and J. Valsiner, London 1994, pp. 175–184.
- 9 K. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Ethnicity, Nationality, and Non-western Societies*, Chicago 2016.
- 10 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. IV, Cambridge, MA 2006.
- 11 Among others E. Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*, London 2017.
- 12 W. Morris, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. by A. Briggs, London 1986.
- 13 Y. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, London 2015.
- 14 Vygotsky, *The Socialist Alteration*, p. 183.

Julian Germann: Unwitting Architect: German Primacy and the Origins of Neoliberalism, (Emerging Frontiers in the Global Economy), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021, 304 pp.

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When German reunification between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic suddenly appeared possible in late 1989, leading Western European politicians feared the power of unified Germany. Germany could become too powerful on the inter-