

The Thought of Work, by John W. Budd. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2011. Paper: ISBN 978-0-8014-4983-3, \$24.95. 264 pages.

In *The Thought of Work*, John W. Budd crosses disciplines in order to compile this pioneering book that conceptualizes work. Some other books – including, David Spencer’s *The Political Economy of Work* (2009) and Herbert Applebaum’s *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (1992) – have considered different novel conceptualizations of work. This book serves as a complement to these works, and also to labor-studies research in general.

Budd draws on a breadth of disciplines, including theology, philosophy, as well as behavioral and social sciences, in order to develop a multidisciplinary framework. This rich framework promotes a comprehensive analysis of work which, according to Budd, serves as an essential dimension of human experience. The importance of how we conceptualize work emerges from the significant implications work has on our personal and social perceptions, as well as on our access to social and material resources. The author seeks to establish that the conceptualization of work has a direct impact on its actual practice and nature. Furthermore, Budd argues that these conceptualizations not only influence socio-cultural structures and inequalities, but also function as important determinants, affecting the philosophical basis of society.

In his introduction, Budd defines work broadly. Work, in his words, denotes a “purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has economic or symbolic value” (p. 2). In addition, his introduction includes a historical narrative of the evolutionary nature of work, as well as arguments advancing its importance. Chapter one commences with his challenges to the long-standing perception of “work as a curse,” because this particular attitude prevents further inquiry into the meaning of work, as it is essential for maintaining the social order and/or human survival.

In chapter two, Budd examines work as a form of freedom, serving as the foundation for contemporary conceptualizations of work in the western tradition. This definition deals predominantly with freedom from nature as well as from coercion by others. In chapter three, the author considers the mainstream conceptualization of “work as a commodity,” resulting in measuring work similarly to other exchangeable economic goods or services. This chapter also introduces important critiques that stem from this conceptualization, especially in the tradition of Karl Marx. It also includes critiques drawn from the ideas of Karl Polanyi and selected feminist scholars.

Chapter four considers work from the standpoint of an “occupational citizenship.” This conceptualization emphasizes work as an activity, undertaken by humans as members of a community, who are thus entitled to certain rights that can be obtained through institutional intervention. However, this approach fails to consider the important question: “Why do we work in the first place?” Budd seeks to address this matter in the following chapter. Carrying forward the tradition of mainstream economics, chapter five focuses on work from the point of view of its disutility, implying that work is only tolerated as a means to maximize utility through

increasing consumption and leisure. In contrast to the previous chapter, chapter six introduces work as a method for achieving personal fulfillment, drawing heavily on scholarship that stems from psychology. In short, work is deemed to satisfy a nondescript hierarchy of needs.

Chapter seven considers “work as a social relation,” emphasizing that social institutions and the associated power nexus influence conceptions of work. Additionally, this view suggests that work remains a social phenomenon, determining access to resources, social status, and position within a social hierarchy. Budd continues his line of thinking in chapter eight, building on durable influences that institutions have on conceptualizing work. He delves into arguments of selected feminist scholars, whose ideas are briefly introduced in chapter three. The conceptualization developed in chapter eight, “work as caring for others,” challenges some of society’s historic tendencies. A long-standing idea of work, rooted in dominant social institutions and power relations, has devalued “women’s work,” for example, while prioritizing paid employment.

The next conceptualization draws on scholarship in philosophy, sociology, and psychology, and examines how work affects our identities. This chapter considers how work impacts our self-understanding and serves to establish our location in the social structure. The final conceptualization evaluates “work as service.” This includes service to country, to community, to household, and to God. This view allows two contrasting interpretations. For one, this service view of work offers an approach for positive social change or, in contrast, a service approach could further elitist interests by means of social control. Chapter ten concludes with the emphasis that work indeed remains fundamentally important as a human activity, and that the conceptualization(s) of work adopted by any given society would certainly generate significant implications, ranging from the organization and performance of the economy to laboring conditions experienced by the population.

Overall, John Budd relies upon skilled scholarship in offering ten coherent conceptualizations of work. Perhaps this book’s greatest achievement is rooted in the author’s competent crossing of scholarly demarcations, by doing which he stimulates our reflecting on a wide array of disciplinary contexts. As this book enhances our understanding of work, it would further promote critical discourses related to this key dimension of human experience. The analysis also leads to the idea that work should be considered as a guaranteed right. Though Budd alludes to this, he falls short of making a clear statement as to whether or not work registers as a guaranteed right. However, if we were to accept the numerous implications of work, as introduced by this author, we may conclude that, whoever so desires should have access to decent work. Yet, this detraction must not diminish the importance of his accomplishment. This book indubitably proves itself a worthy foundation for further exploring the importance of work as personal as well as societal fulfillment.

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