

# Working out personhood

## Notes on 'labour' and its anthropology

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Labour power is not a commodity which can be detached from a person and bought and sold like dry goods... It is an intimate part of the person... In the Protestant ethic work is a religious as well as an economic necessity; and even though many jobs can hardly be said to engage the full spirituality of workers, the notion that work is essential for the well-being of a whole person underlies our concern about unemployment and about the changing character of work in contemporary Britain. (Davis 1992: 57)

Work is central to our society. Yet to date, anthropology has paid surprisingly little attention to the place of work in our own contemporary society. Here I present the case study of Lucia, a management consultant in Madrid, and her attitudes to work. I use this case study to explore the prevalence and currency of certain idioms of industry, labour and production in the organization of social relationships in contemporary Euro-American society. My main point is to establish that the language and imagery of labour have become part and parcel of what makes a person today (i.e. of our definition of personhood), which I believe calls for a reconsideration of what an 'anthropology of labour' might have to say to anthropology at large.

### Alternative approaches to work

The collection edited by Sandra Wallman on the *Social anthropology of work* (1979)<sup>1</sup> is one of few to examine the world of work. Its contributors examine how a social space is set aside for work, and how work structures social relationships across a range of cultures. This approach presents work as a (partial) principle of social organization, and asks questions such as: What does it mean to work? Who works and why do people work? Who controls work? How does the classification of work touch upon other social classifications (gender, ethnicity, age, hierarchy, etc.)?

Here I look at work from a somewhat different angle, namely how work acts as an idiom through which societies think about themselves, and how social relationships work themselves out. Work is a refraction of other social processes – a means by which people rescale their senses of self and otherness: my interest here is in how, in making sense of the relationships (working or of other kinds) that link them to others, people re-evaluate their self-estimations as morally capable agents.

This approach calls forth questions such as: Do people understand working as an expenditure of personal physical energies, or instead as a supernatural mandate, a way of realizing other agents' forces and powers (as suggested by, for example, Weber in his account of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, or Malinowski in his description of the performance of magic in Trobriand gardening practices). Who owns the powers on which work is premised: do we actually own our bodies and our labour power? Are these two related? And if they are not, where do the forces that animate our working capacities come from? Moreover, what qualities make up these capacities in the first place? Are our labour and intellectual powers expressions of our 'intelligence' and our 'rationality', or do they in some way mark our emotional or religious dependence on others (echoing Weber once more)? Is our labour power 'naturally' imbued with evil or sinfulness or virtuousness, or with different combinations of these and other qualities?

We rarely ask searching questions such as these when



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we try to understand the place work activities occupy in our social life and in our worldviews. In this approach, I combine industry, labour and production under the term 'labour'. I have two reasons for this: firstly, to help demonstrate how much of the vocabulary and imagery of labour (loosely understood as work, employment, production, creative action and industrial relations) inform everyday life and relationships. My second reason is to draw attention to the 'productive' (or what I call 'contributive') values that underlie our understandings of labouring and human activity at large, and thus pervade the images we have of ourselves as creative and autonomous agents.

### The case of Lucia

Lucia works for a management consultancy firm in Madrid. She is a 'strategy consultant', working on how best to plan for the future of her clients. She has been working for the same firm for almost eight years now. Some six months ago, close to her 30th birthday, she was promoted to a senior position, a much-respected step forward in her profession. At around this time she also got married.

Notwithstanding these occasions for celebration, Lucia recently told me that the year that was coming to an end had been the saddest and most trying of her life. She complained that there had been times when she had to stay long nights working, and that it was not unusual for her to have to work at weekends too. She described herself as 'drained' and added that her exhaustion left her little if any time to enjoy the company of friends or relatives. Her days were marked by tedious routine: she woke up to go to work and came back from work to go to sleep. Her life revolved around work and she began to ask herself about the purpose of working so hard. She pondered on why she allowed others, even herself, to push her to such limits, especially during the months prior to her wedding, a time

Fig. 1. In 1935, US President Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration project (the name changed to Work Projects Administration in 1939), as part of the New Deal programme to put millions of unemployed Americans back to work. The posters produced for the project beautifully illustrate the world of emotion and personality that was associated with the notion of 'labour', an idea echoed in the quotation from John Davis' at the head of this article.

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Figs 2 and 3. Working for a future, working for a life. These WPA posters illustrate the quality of future-orientation that Western society has brought to bear on its understanding of work. Work helps us to 'work out' our lives, as an activity to which we dedicate ourselves by putting to efficient use our 'contributive' human powers.

1. There is much literature on the sociology of work, especially on regimes of work (see, for example, Pahl 1988). The SUNY series on the anthropology of work surveys the field with a range of worldwide ethnographies. But these tend to look at the workings of specific labour markets or what people do at work, rather than at how people 'work out' their life-projects.

2. I make no reference to money in my description of Lucia's work life because the question of money rarely, if ever, figured in our conversations (not even when she talked about her 'responsibilities and obligations'). Also, my concern here is more with how labour informs our category of the person.

3. For an example and discussion of reproductive conception as 'conceptualization', see Strathern 1995.

4. For more discussion of this issue see the proceedings of a workshop that took place at the University of St Andrews last January, organized by Mark Harris and David Mills (posted at [www.anthropologymatters.com](http://www.anthropologymatters.com)) (see also Lazar 2003).

she had always fantasized about and yet now came close to ruining. She confided that she was thinking of quitting her job, although no sooner had she told me so than she was already qualifying her statement by saying that she had too many responsibilities and obligations, and that things were of course never that easy. She concluded by saying that she was very confused and that she was not sure what to do.

This was not the first time she had told me about her ambivalent relationship to her job. I say 'ambivalent' because though there is no doubt that she finds it trying and at times overpowering, Lucia would also, every now and then, remark about the thrill, excitement and intellectual challenges of her work. Moreover, she would also often extrapolate her valuing of and excitement about such qualities of novelty, feverishness and extraordinariness to her appreciation of everyday, non-work related affairs, even when making grander statements about how to live one's life – her ideal life being one she would, with characteristic matter-of-factness, describe as a fresh, original and non-repetitive venture.

Lucia had not so far made any serious attempts to leave her job, nor taken any steps in that direction. On good days she would not hesitate to remind herself and others of her good fortune: she worked for a very prestigious firm, her career prospects were promising and she felt she was continually learning new things. So Lucia liked her job. However, she did not feel comfortable with the way it made certain demands upon her life. In particular, she disliked not having time to spend with her fiancé, not being able to meet up with friends after work or escape for a weekend to visit her family back home. For this reason she would try to organize her life around such commitments, and she would, for example, go to the gym during her lunch break, sometimes even very early in the morning, before arriving at work. Lucia thinks that exercising does her good, especially helping her to cope with the demands of work, but she does not want her fitness training to take time away from her friends or her fiancé. On a similar note, I recall vividly my surprise at hearing that for almost a year Lucia had set her alarm clock at 5.30 am, so that she could spend just over an hour studying French before she headed off for work.

One final relevant aspect of how Lucia relates to her work is the terms she uses to characterize the work and capabilities of her colleagues and friends. I often heard her saying of some people she worked with, for instance, that they had their 'heads well furnished' (*cabezas bien amuebladas*), meaning that these were people equipped with the proper 'mental furniture' to carry out certain intellectual tasks. She would use this office metaphor to describe a certain kind of rationality in people, one characterized by

speed and effectiveness in classifying (ideas, people, things) and making decisions. Similarly, people who were deemed to be 'analytical' were distinguished from those who were 'bullshitters', a term she used to describe those who 'clouded' issues and hesitated to establish clear targets and goals.<sup>2</sup>

### Working out alienation

Lucia's anxiety and distress are evidence of the kind of emotional symptoms associated with the alienation many workers experience in contemporary society. Karl Marx would no doubt have described Lucia as alienated, in the sense that the worth of her 'work' would not equal that of her 'labour'. Marx's distinction between work and labour centres upon the former as carrying use-values (something that people enjoy for its own sake) and the latter as an economic category (Marx 1970a; see also Ollman 1971). For Marx, work is a defining feature of man as a 'species being': it is part of our human nature to engage in productive activities (i.e. 'work'); only those activities that are integrated into an economic circuit, however, amount to 'labour'. We all 'work' because it is a foundation of our very human constitution to do so; but the quality of the social relationships that we bring to bear on our work (i.e. whether they are of an economic orientation or not) will determine whether we are 'labouring'.

What is interesting about Marx's distinction between work and labour is that it does not really take into account what we have seen is Lucia's greatest worry, the central part her job plays in imagining, shaping and mediating her relationship with the world – in coercing or enabling her into modes of socializing that may or may not mirror her social desires. Marx's description of the world of labour misses out an important element in Lucia's own account. Lucia thinks about her job as an environment from which relationships emanate and, more importantly, an environment that reflects back on her own understanding of herself as a person.

When judged against Marx's account, Lucia would stand as an example of the underperforming human being, alienated from her own labour by being dispossessed of herself and her human powers. She would be half the person she could be, if she only had a job that allowed her to build relationships, rather than taking time away from them. But Lucia would have it otherwise. Her work and personal life are not discrete and her work routines and leisure preferences suggest that her attitude towards her job may accurately be described as an extension of her attitude towards life. She thinks of her job in ways that help her to work out her life. She learns much from it and she carries her work experience across to other potential employers (the name of the firm she works for enjoys much 'symbolic capital').

Lucia's sense of self stretches outside the realm of work. She measures her capacities as a human agent not in terms of what she can do at work (or what work can do to her), but in terms of what she can get her work to do for her. She gets her non-office relationships to 'work' for her, marshalling relationships in order to enhance her sense of accomplishment and of what it means to be a good person living a good life – making sure that she meets her friends so many times a week, that she is always available for her fiancé, that she visits her family at least once a month, and doing all this in a way that parallels the excitement and thrill of creative 'labour'.

Lucia builds a life for herself by 'working out' her life-project. She uses the imagery and vocabulary of the workplace to envision her own life; she brings the semantic field of 'labour' to bear on her understanding of herself as a social person and on the quality and development of her relationships with others (cf. Wagner 1975: 23–25).

Figs 4 and 5. 'Vber das erst Buch Mose' (left, by Martin Luther) and 'The Ancient of Days' (right, by William Blake): the labour in Genesis and the genesis of labour. Sahlins drew attention to the historical analogy between the human misery and want that befell man after the Fall and the origin of economics: 'The genesis of economics was the economics of Genesis' (Sahlins 1996: 397). Note the different images of effort, production and creation underlying Blake's (1824?) and Luther's (1527) visions of creation.

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In short, Lucia works out her own personhood through her labour. Today's world of work is part of the way we imagine ourselves as capable moral persons, in that our working arrangements can mediate our life-projects and our visions of what it means to live a good life – that is, our effort to harmonize our social relationships with the demands our work places on us.

### The value of work

At times, Lucia found her job 'draining' and trying. This is not surprising, for our ideas about work are part and parcel of how we think of ourselves as physical agents. This may be why Lucia endorsed the old motto of *mens sana in corpore sano* ('A sound mind in a sound body'), and why she stressed the importance of exercising, especially at times of high workload. Lucia 'worked out' in order to cope with the exigencies of both her working and her non-working life.

The terms in which Lucia spoke of people's intellectual powers are also significant. For Lucia, to have a 'well furnished head' is to be a capable and worthy labourer. This kind of rationality and clear mind – which is opposed to that of the 'bullshitter' – is valued because of the speed and effectiveness with which it makes things happen, and thus because it both brings about results and it brings about results *often*.

Lucia interprets labour ultimately as dependent on our mental faculty – a faculty, for that matter, premised on the ability to think *ahead* and thus to a form of 'visionary' intelligence. This echoes another view of Lucia's, that of the 'good life' as a life where new things are happening all the time or, to put it somewhat differently, where there is a frequent and exponentially increasing yield of results (another 'visionary' outlook on life).

A rational person is thus a person who can think clearly *through and through*, and who can therefore see where best to go next (preferably a new place every time). In this context, the capacity for effective work is defined as future-oriented intelligence, against which the qualities of life are then benchmarked: a 'good life' is a full life, packed with events that have been rationally thought out and brought about.

Interestingly, such values as Lucia emphasises are also drawn on in an important and still continuing debate in moral philosophy on the place of 'rationality' and 'reason' in theories of virtue and the 'good life' (e.g. Crisp 1996, Parfit 1984, Sen 2002).

### The contributive rationale of labour

Labour is associated with such qualities as rationality, future-orientation and value addition. The formal model of the labourer is usually as a contributive agent. However, is this necessarily the best or most appropriate model? Can the working person be engaged in labour according to a rationale other than this?

Life has come to be measured in working terms, and we now think of 'labour' as the armature of our lives. We work to live, of course, but we also 'work out' our lives by figuring out where all this work leads us. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that against the backdrop of capitalist society Marx defined work as a 'life-activity' (Marx 1970b: 75), and that we now think of our lives as productive resources, yielding higher or lower life-ores depending on how carefully and skilfully we tend our capacities.

That our sense of worth as human agents has come to rely on the value of our work and our accomplishments as labourers is no coincidence. The language and imagery of work now permeate even what were formerly certainly considered 'private' corners of our lives. Emily Martin, for instance, insightfully describes how women have come to think of their bodies as machines, where giving birth is a 'labouring' pain (Martin 1989). Reproduction, it is true, has long carried such connotations. But the new reproductive technologies have heightened the power of the metaphor, and people today speak of cloning human beings in manufacturing terms, and discuss the moral implications of the process in the language of commodification (Hirsch 1999). In this context, work not only organizes our lives (as Lucia complained), but literally makes them up in the first place. Kinship is thus understood as the industry where we figure out our social relationships, or as the set of (conceptual and technological) tools that we employ in the fabrication of people (cf. Strathern 1999).<sup>3</sup>

Crisp, R. (ed.) 1996. *How should one live? Essays on the virtues*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Davis, J. 1992. *Exchange*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Geertz, C. 2000. *Available light: Anthropological reflections on philosophical topics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hirsch, E. 1999. Negotiated limits: Interviews in south-east England. In: Edwards, J. et al.

*Technologies of procreation: Kinship in the age of assisted conception*, pp. 91-126. London: Routledge.

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There are yet other, perhaps more insidious, ways in which the imagery of 'labour' has taken control of our lives. Words such as 'capacity', 'value', 'efficacy' or 'will power', for instance, have a factory ring to them, echoing the way we inevitably think of ourselves (and evaluate others) as productive agents.

To ascribe human 'powers' and 'capacities' to our definitions of personhood, however, is no mere rhetoric or innocuous metaphorical parlance. For these factory-like images of human nature have in fact narrowed our vision of human agency and motivation to its 'contributive' apparatus: a set of 'visionary' powers aimed at adding values to our life-stock. Thus, our powers and faculties as human beings are now gauged in terms of our capacity to intervene in the world (cf. Weber) or change it (cf. Marx). In other words, agency as accretion, or what, echoing Adam Smith's 'labour theory of value', I call the 'labour theory of agency'. As we use it, this concept of labour is supported by three strands of intellectual history: the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Without going into detail here, it harks back to our evangelical, enlightened and industrial images of humans as, in this order, 'naturally' creative (in the image of the creative God), appetitive (desirous of the world of objects outside) and productive (in the best guise of the industrial manufacturer) beings. The implication is that only those facets of our human existence that have direct effect on the organization of the everyday have been awarded value, to the detriment of our non-interventionist and non-productive (i.e. non-contributive) powers such as the power of the imagination, of memory, or even the power of resisting – resisting change, for example (the power to say 'no', to paraphrase Nietzsche).

### Lucia's non-contributive labour

To substantiate this idea of non-contributive labour, let me once again turn to Lucia. Lucia does not feel alienated from her work. Any unhappiness seems to derive from her feelings that she no longer has the capacity to organize her life-relations – to see her fiancé, to meet up with her friends, to visit her parents, and to try to coordinate all such meetings by making them work towards her general idea of what a (fun and exciting) good life looks like. She feels dissatisfied because she is experiencing a loss of efficacy in her ability to mobilize relationship towards a goal.

Any unhappiness on Lucia's part is more a reflection of her loss of powers as a person; powers which are in turn informed by a specific set of underlying values, such as family life, friendship and love, punctuated by images of spontaneity and novelty. More importantly, at the heart of all such value configurations lies the idea that it is within her (*self-contained*) life that she has to juggle these relationships, struggling to bring them together and accommodate them amidst the demands of her working future.

Despite Lucia's managerial preoccupation with bringing efficiency to the way she organizes her life, she also shows a truthful concern for the 'responsibilities and obligations' that bind her to situations not entirely of her liking. Though there are things about work that Lucia does not like, what is interesting is that she does not express her partial disaffection from such tasks or aspects of her job in ways that signal estrangement or alienation. On the contrary, she complies with such 'obligations' because there are relationships that she cares for and knows that maintaining them is well worth the effort. The point being, of course, not that keeping the job is in her ultimate (economic, utilitarian) interests, but that by keeping it she gains a sense of her own capacity to sacrifice on behalf of those who are dear to her – remember how in order to make time to see her fiancé or parents she would wake up at 5.30 am to study French, or sign up for early-morning

gym sessions. Lucia opens up her human powers by acknowledging her dependence on others; she brings her relational world within the compass of her imagining as a moral person.

This 'sacrificial' side to Lucia's agency supports the non-utilitarian view that people sometimes do things against their own best interest (Parfit 1984), things they do not like, or cope with situations they would rather not see themselves involved in, because that too is part of what being human is all about.

### The work of anthropology

There is a form of agency, then, that is non-contributive, that marks not people's capacity to act upon and change the world but their capacity to take the world into themselves. This form of agency may not be glamorous, utility-oriented or conspicuously efficacious, but it does point to the complexity of a humanity that can resist, cope and endure sacrifice in its interactions with the world, and that is therefore irreducible to one-dimensional action-accretion theories (cf. Laidlaw 2002). That social theory has failed to pick up on and foreground such 'sacrificial' dimensions of agency, and has instead over-theorized our 'labouring' capabilities, speaks, I think, of the individualism that runs through our intellectual predispositions.

Anthropologists typically see their labours in these richer terms, as a space where non-contributive rationale has greater weight than the contributive rationale. Let me therefore conclude with three points about how the 'labour theory of agency' outlined above might be affecting our own work as anthropologists employed as academics.

The idea of 'labour agency' implies 'manufacturing'. I would like to first comment on the 'academic underclass', to use Geertz's expression (2000: 10), namely that of new lecturers and would-be academic anthropologists. Doctoral students are being pressed to finish their theses in three years, to get a foot on the tutorial or teaching assistantship circuit, to attend conferences, publish, start getting their names 'out'. Few anthropology graduates in the 1980s, let alone before, were pressed to research and work under such conditions. Notwithstanding the wider forces at play within the institutional structures of academia, it is irresponsible of our academic elders to allow the intellectual rigour of our discipline to be 'streamlined' in such a way.<sup>4</sup>

My second point builds on this and has to do with how the wider 'professionalization' of the academy redefines the image anthropologists have or used to have of themselves – as ethnographers, educators, mentors, intellectuals. The spread of neo-liberalism to higher education has altered this image, a point often remarked upon by contributors to the recent corpus of writings on audit cultures (Shore & Wright 1999, 2001; Strathern 2000b). Against the yardstick of 'labour agency', the stature of an intellectual is today measured by her quantitative contribution to knowledge – to 'productive' knowledge, that is (cf. Strathern 2000a: 291).

My third point is a methodological one, namely how our refashioning as 'anthropological labourers' forces us also to reconsider our relationships with those we are studying. Fieldwork in urban settings has often been conditioned by the fact that many, if not all, of our informants have a job to attend. Yet this is a point that has, surprisingly, rarely been made by urban ethnographers. This is especially the case if the anthropology that is being carried out is 'at home', where both informants and ethnographers are therefore labourers, and where the term 'informant' may turn out to be a convenient way of eclipsing and obviating the anthropologist's own class relations with the people with whom she is 'working'. The political implications of this are of course enormous, and it is probably about time that we start to take them seriously. ●