

BOOK REVIEW

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John W. Budd. (2011). *The Thought of Work*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 264 pages.

While work is something central to almost everyone, we probably give little thought to the various philosophical perspectives and theoretical concepts underpinning the notion. In asking my friends and colleagues what work means to them, I heard answers such as “it’s what I do so I can have fun and buy toys” and “I feel personally connected to my career and do this because I love it.” Those I talked to about the topic never quite addressed the numerous perspectives of work presented in the recent book by author and labor relations scholar John Budd, although their comments were related to many of his topics. In *The Thought of Work*, Budd outlines different conceptualizations and historical perspectives of work covering the many academic disciplines that address the concepts and applications of work.

First, I must admit that when starting this book review, I was concerned by the title. I imagined deeply philosophical ideas, and difficulty applying any of it to my teaching or research. I could not have been more wrong. While the book is centered on the variety of historical and scholarly ways to think about work, it is written in an easily accessible way. The author provides clear definitions of the numerous perspectives, from labor economics to industrial and organizational psychology to human resources, which provides clarity for

readers from countless backgrounds. Budd’s outline covers ten broad traditions, from conceptualizing work as freedom to viewing it as a commodity and as service. Throughout the sections, he provides a rich background of historical information and draws on countless philosophical and academic perspectives to summarize and integrate the many aspects of work.

One broad theme of this book is that *work* is embedded in many different aspects of the human experience. The concept can include activities done for pay, or the value of work can be without pay, as in work as caring for others. Regardless of the academic theory or conceptualization, it cannot be denied that work is central to everything we do in life. As such, it is a reflection of the human experience. From a historical perspective, the evolution of work is a very interesting read. The author begins by describing the roles of tools and tasks over time and how workers became more specialized after hunter-gatherer times. A thorough description of industrialization follows. Across the description of the historical evolution of work, I found myself wondering whether we are shifting back (or adapting) to a different form of the putting-out system with telework. It will be interesting to see how work and our conceptualizations of it change in the next 50 to 100 years. Given the current economic and political environment, along

with technological advances, we might even see dramatic changes in the next five to ten years.

The author clearly describes how these historical changes in perspectives of work vary over time. One early section in the book describes work as a curse, as in a curse from God: We work because we have sinned and we have to repay this sin, so we toil in work. This supernatural explanation and the shift to more natural explanations is an idea I teach regularly to undergraduates in a history of psychology course. I look forward to incorporating ideas about work from the book with the content of my courses. Because the author outlines different aspects of work—sacred, secular, political, psychological, social, and economic—and how these impact our life and the rest of humankind, those who teach in other disciplines will find additional relevant perspectives to include in their teaching.

Another theme throughout the book is that the source of motivation for work varies. Some may work only for a paycheck, while others work so they are not seen as lazy by their peers. As Budd suggests, compensation induces us to work, or we work so people do not think we are lazy, or we work to attain social status. Ultimately, there are a variety of reasons why we work. These ideas and others presented throughout the book made me ask of myself, “Why do I work?” It seems important to me that work is more than just something we do for a paycheck—work is freedom and personal fulfillment. Yet, in reading sections of the book I began to become more upset that policymakers may not view work the same way. Consider a focus on Budd’s description of how economic dependency can undermine democracy and this relationship with work. One may draw parallels to the recent story of the NPR journalist who was fired for making personal commentary on Fox News. The outcome of this case may be able to explain a primary focus on either economic dependency or on democracy. This and many other points in the book highlight how conceptualizations of work may be used as practical explanations for what motivates human behavior.

I was especially fascinated with the treatment of work viewed as a commodity or

something with economic value. The author points out that while the view may be preferred by those with neo-liberal economic leanings, this view does not allow for explaining or improving the cycle of poverty. In this section, Budd distinguishes between materialized labor and labor power, explaining all concepts in clear and concise terms with many examples. His treatment begs the question, in work does one sell the fruits of one’s labor (i.e., materialized labor) or the capacity for working (i.e., labor power)? This made me question: What do I do, and am I happy with that?

Throughout, Budd suggests that how we conceptualize work can help us structure it to give personal meaning to what we do and how we spend our time. To me, this is the distinction between the personal philosophies of “work to live” and “live to work.” The second half of the book (Chapters 5–10) addresses why people work and how work is experienced. He includes work as caring for others, service, and a source of social and psychological meaning. These notions of the structure and nature of work can also be the main premise of various research projects in the social and behavioral sciences and philosophy.

Considering this, much of the content in *The Thought of Work* serves to set a research agenda for examining work across disciplines. It can help academics become more aware of the narrowness of their own perspectives of work, and at the same time provides direction for a more comprehensive view of work. Perhaps researchers in psychology or management might consider exploring how organizations or employees conceptualize work and how this is reflected in an organization’s culture. Political scientists could use various conceptualizations of work to explain the work of political parties. It would be interesting to know whether those who classify themselves as Republican actually view work as more of a commodity, and whether those who consider themselves more Democratic view work as freedom. Researchers who study sustainability could also examine whether conceptualizations of work differ among those who value ecology more

or less. These are just a few of the research ideas sparked by this book.

As previously mentioned, the multidisciplinary approach of this book is refreshing. Budd thoroughly describes distinctions in scholarly and research perspectives such as ideas presented in social relations research versus psychology research versus economic scholarship. In addition, the content addresses developmental perspectives, gender issues, and historical perspectives, as well as both positive and negative aspects of work. For example, he notes that work can be fulfilling, but at the same time not necessarily healthy for those who work long hours under stress. In several places, the author highlights gender differences in work and how this both has and has not changed much over time. There is decent coverage of multinational perspectives. However, at times the content of this book takes more of a Western, individualistic focus. While there are some examples of Eastern conceptualizations of work, it would have been nice to see more of these, particularly given the importance of globalization and multinational work.

The last section of the book outlines how various conceptualizations of work are implicitly related to our conceptualizations of human nature. Budd also emphasizes the importance of drawing from many conceptualizations over relying on one definition of work. How we conceptualize work has effects on decisions organizational leadership make, ways work is evaluated, and the allocation of organizational resources. He also addresses multiple levels of analysis particularly well in a section describing how our ideas of work help frame our self-identity and team identity, and help us identify our place in society.

Overall, this was an easy-to-read treatment of work, especially given my preconceived apprehension based on the title that it would be “too philosophical.” Throughout the reading I found myself making notes and asking questions that the author quickly addressed in following paragraphs. It seemed as though he was writing with an anticipation of what the reader would be thinking. Budd is also very good at structuring boundaries for what will not be able to be addressed or

resolved in this forum. Also, the balance between chapters was quite refreshing. Readers who find themselves uncomfortable with one view of work will likely find the next chapter to be more aligned with personal views. Personally, the section on work as a commodity made me a bit uncomfortable. As a passionate academic with a psychology background, I cringed at the idea of work as purely an economic value traded in the marketplace—a labor economist would likely disagree. But, the following chapter I read with renewed vigor. An ideal view for me is work as occupational citizenship. Generally, the entire content was personally interesting to me—which made it difficult to read all sections equally as an objective academic!

There is enough overlap between the various conceptualizations and their presentation to see both connections and distinctions. The author notes that these philosophical perspectives on work are not mutually exclusive. He provides adequate references to other chapters regarding the connections among ideas, making it easier for the reader to follow overlapping concepts. This is also very useful for both researchers and practitioners to make associations among the various views presented in the book. As an example, the HR section on work as personal fulfillment is contrasted with other views of work (i.e., work as a commodity). To me, as a scholar in the area of human resources, it was nice to see some examples of where our field could be doing more comprehensive work (e.g., in the area of labor unions). This amazing organization and flow of the writing made the book an easier read than I had initially anticipated.

In summary, *The Thought of Work* has made me think more deeply about the personal meaning work has for me. Readers can expect to become equally as passionate about the meaning of work from this book. The content is both personally and professionally applicable, as everyone has a stake in these different conceptualizations of work. For those in economics, sociology, psychology, business, gender studies, political science, religious studies, or nursing, the connections are very clear; yet, the culmination of various

views is presented without bias toward a particular academic discipline. This book should be on the reading list of anyone interested in exploring what work is and why we do it.

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University. She currently is an associate professor of psychology at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and also serves as a consultant with the Organizational Effectiveness Research Group. Her research interests and publications focus on topics including training, learning teamwork, and leadership.