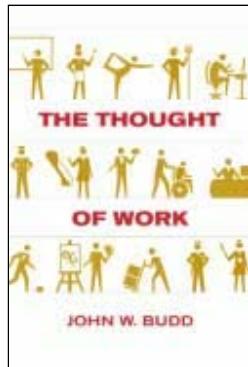


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## The Thought of Work



### The Thought of Work

**John W. Budd**

New York: Cornell University Press, 2011. 264 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4983-9 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Mohammad A. Ali (pictured at right)



This book is about work. It defines work, explains why work is important, elucidates on how work has been conceptualized throughout human history, and how these conceptualizations help us understand the historical treatment of work and workers. The main premise of the book is that work, which is an integral and highly critical aspect of human life, is understood and conceived narrowly in today's scholarship. Therefore, Budd wants to reiterate the importance of work by enumerating multiple meanings attached to it and to postulate the need to have a deeper understanding of one of the most crucial activities of human experience.

### Defining Work

Budd begins by establishing the importance of work in our lives and states that work is a crucial human activity and its significance lies in the fact that as human beings work defines us as who we are and what our standing in the society is. We engage in work to satisfy our multifaceted needs, such as earning a living, building and creating, developing our values, satisfying our egos and building our self esteem, creating a social identity and relating to other individuals and groups, and gaining independence. On the societal scale, work organizes societies by often creating social structures and classes. In sum, according to Budd, work is ubiquitous in our individual and social lives. It is a part of our existence and thus needed to be understood in its plethora of conceptualizations.

With a broad agenda, Budd follows an inclusive approach in defining work. Work is "purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has economic and symbolic value." The definition is wide enough to include paid and unpaid work performed inside and outside the household. It also includes work done in the informal sector and volunteer activities but does not include leisure activities.

### The Ten Conceptualizations of Work

After establishing the importance and complexity of work, Budd introduces us to the most insightful aspect of the book, the ten conceptualizations of work. The conceptualizations are, work as: a curse, freedom, commodity, occupational citizenship, disutility, personal fulfillment, social relations, caring for others, identity, and service. Budd argues that each of the above conceptualizations provides us with a deeper understanding of the core assumptions upon which social norms regarding work and understanding of human nature are predicated in societies.

These theoretical categories represent a painstaking synthesis of theories from several social science disciplines, philosophy, and theology. This Herculean task of critical fusion of myriad theories was exacerbated by the fact that each discipline looks at work through its particular lens. However, the purpose of this multi-disciplinary approach was twofold: to understand and appreciate the contribution of each discipline in defining work; and to fully comprehend a rather complex phenomenon.

### **Work as Disutility**

To understand the links among conceptualization of work, societal imperatives, individual lives, and social definition of human nature let us look at "work as disutility," a conceptualization that Budd argues represents the narrow approach to understanding work in recent scholarship. Work as disutility is based on the idea that work is solely done for money, which means that in itself work has no utility, but by doing work one can get the means, i.e. money, to support and enjoy one's real life. This conceptualization, according to Budd, is one of the ways that the neo-classical economists justify their view of the fundamental individual objective as "the consumption of goods, services, and leisure in a way that maximizes one's personal utility ... [and] work itself does not provide utility ... work is generally seen as *reducing utility*."

Budd further explains that there are two ways in which neo-classical economists see work reducing utility: one, based on definitions of work by eminent economists. Budd concludes that they see work as painful and not capable of giving pleasure; second, work is seen as the opposite of leisure, the more you work the less time you have for leisure. Based on the above, work has a pain and opportunity cost, but people still work because they get compensated for it.

So what are the implications of seeing work as disutility? Some of them are: human beings are seen as having only one purpose for work, i.e., money. Therefore, any other reason to work such as self-actualization and identity are not even considered; employee motivation is solely linked with higher compensation, and all intrinsic motivators are ignored; based on a marginal analysis of labor markets modern economists see work as disutility as the basis of labor supply. Therefore, individuals will cease to work when the pain from work equals the pleasure of acquiring goods and services from work; conditions of work become less important as work is already opposite of pleasure and utility; work as disutility also raises issues relating to principal-agent problems, shirking, and incentives; managers would create work systems with monitoring to reduce shirking and link individual incentives with performance and measurable outputs; and finally, such a monitoring system will signal the workers that they are not trusted by the management.

In sum, the book provides a comprehensive understanding of work and its connection with individual and social aspects of our lives. It does a great job at synthesizing theories and concepts from several disciplines. It essentially raises our understanding of work to the next level where we are able to discern between different societal attitudes and employer policies regarding work, organization of work, treatment of workers, working conditions, and value of different kinds of work, by comprehending the core, i.e., how work is conceptualized in a particular society. Furthermore, the book sets the tone for a re-evaluation of how society thinks about work and raises a need to rethink work as an important and

complex human activity. Finally, at the individual level, the book makes one think about one's own conceptualization of work and helps in reconfiguring it in the right perspective.

*Mohammad A. Ali earned his doctorate in management from the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations. His thesis topic was "Stakeholder Management." His ongoing projects cover the fields of employment relations, international labor standards, strategic human resource management, ethics and corporate social responsibility, and stakeholder management. He is currently an assistant professor at the School of Management at New York Institute of Technology.*

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Labor and Employment Relations Association  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
121 Labor and Employment Relations Building, 504 E. Armory Ave., Champaign, IL 61820  
Tel: 217-333-0072 | Fax: 217-265-5130 | LERAOffice@illinois.edu | www.LERAweb.org