

Work and culture: some comparisons of England and Japan

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This paper focuses on the central problem of the strong work ethic underlying capitalism.¹ Historians and sociologists have found it impossible to determine why this arose or to what it is related. Comparing Japan and England, I first look at some social structural features common to both civilizations, in particular the large middling strata, social mobility, and the absence of family security. I then consider the idea of indebtedness and suggest that in both civilizations work is a form of repaying a debt. In Japan, this is to one's fellow men; in England, to God. Since, in both cases, the relationship is an unequal one, the debt can never be repaid. Hence there is constant striving. In the Western case, the sacrifice of personality that this involves is predominantly painful; in Japan it brings social rewards, giving a certain joy to work:

... for my real mental defect is the restlessness which causes me always to long for what is beyond my grasp, and makes what I have most coveted lose its charm as soon as I have caught hold of it. It is not, I know, my especial malady, but that of human nature; still, I believe that I suffer from it peculiarly.²

If I had enjoyed tranquillity and calm, I doubt whether I should ever have worked. It costs me so much, that if I were tolerably comfortable in inactivity, I should continue there. It has always been because my mind

¹I would like to thank Gerry Martin for a number of stimulating conversations on this theme, and also the Renaissance Trust for their support in this work

²A. de Tocqueville, *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 2 vols, Cambridge, 1861, II, p. 334.

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was uncomfortable at home that it sallied abroad to obtain, at any sacrifice, the relief of hard intellectual work. This is the case now.³

In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou labour! was Jehovah's curse on Adam (Genesis iii, 19). And this is labour for (Adam) Smith, a curse ... It seems quite far from Smith's mind that the individual, 'in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill, facility', also needs a normal portion of work, and of the suspension of tranquillity. ... Smith has no inkling whatever that this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity - and that, further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits - hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour.⁴

The question

The question of work currently looms large. Capitalist civilization is based on a very strong work ethic, yet we are currently entering an era of mass unemployment and underemployment. It is timely to look back and see the roots of our present contradictory situation.

There is widespread agreement that the attitude to work in Western capitalist societies is unusual. Any anthropological survey or textbook will point to this fact when comparing the situation between 'us' and 'them'. Two brief summaries may be given:

The characteristically Western value of work for its own sake, classically analysed by Max Weber in his *The Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, had no place in traditional economics ... in such communities labour was an intrinsic part of a primary subsistence cycle, or else it was bound up in a particular context of social relations. It was not, as it so often is now, a tedious and in itself unsatisfying obligation, to be undertaken only in order to earn money so that the demands of governments, schools and shopkeepers can be met.⁵

Or again, as Bohannon writes:

Most peoples of the world contrast 'work' with 'laziness'. They see work not as an unpleasant necessity, but as an integrative activity. That is to say, it is the activities that a person performs so that some other member of the community will perform another and complementary action.... It is possible to have fun working as well as playing. Work and displeasure are also separate.⁶

³ Ibid., p. 435.

⁴ K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. M. Nicolaus, London, 1974, p. 61.

⁵ J. Beattie, *Other Cultures: Aims, Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology*, London, 1964, p.259.

⁶ P. Bohannon, *Social Anthropology*, New York, 1969, p. 220.

Although some warn us against overdoing the contrast,⁷ that there is difference and what it consists of are not really in dispute. The major elements can be listed briefly. In modern Western capitalist societies there is a pronounced distinction between 'work' and 'non-work', somehow linked to the difference between 'Pain' and 'pleasure'; work is seen as an end in itself and not just a means to an end; people continue to work even when it is no longer economically necessary; they are often driven by an 'inner' compulsion, rather than by external needs; they sometimes look on work as something to which they are 'called' (a vocation). Thus while the total amount of work an individual does may not be any greater than in many 'traditional' societies, the whole attitude and involvement in it seems different in the modern West.

An attempted answer

One of the first to explicitly address the question of the peculiar capitalist attitude to work was, of course, Max Weber. His thesis and some of the counter-criticisms have been elegantly reviewed elsewhere in this volume, and I shall not go over this well-trodden ground again.⁸ What emerges from the vast 'Protestant ethic' debate seems, in a nutshell, to be this.

Any good undergraduate can point to a dozen reasons why Weber's suggestions of an 'elective affinity' between Protestantism and the peculiar work ethic are unsatisfying. The timing is wrong; many instances of a similar attitude to work can be seen before the Reformation. The area is wrong; many Catholic areas of Europe had a similar work ethic and some Protestant and even Calvinist areas did not have a pronounced work ethic. Within particular countries, the work ethic did not seem to differ significantly according to denomination; for instance, Anglicans and Puritans were not significantly different, and even Catholics and Protestants often shared a similar attitude.⁹

Even if one accepted the timing and geography of the Weber argument, most of the problems remained unsolved. If Christianity was at the heart of it, why did it have this effect only in the sixteenth century and in certain parts of Europe? Weber wrestled with this problem and ended up with a very weak causal argument: there was an 'elective

⁷ See F. L. K. Hsu, 'Incentives to Work in Primitive Communities', *American Sociological Review*, 8 Dec. 1943, pp. 638-42, and the essays in *The Historical Meanings of Work*, ed. E. Joyce, Cambridge, 1987.

⁸ See especially Ch. 3, pp. 56-9, Ch. 7, pp. 135-41, and Ch. 11, pp. 222-7.

⁹ See e.g. T. H. Breen, 'The Non-Existent Controversy: Puritan and Anglican Attitudes to Work and Wealth, 1600-1640', *Church History*, 35, 1966, no. 3; E. S. Seaver, *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London*, London, 1985.

affinity' between the work ethic and Protestantism, but one did not 'cause' the other, for Protestantism, while perhaps a necessary, was not a sufficient cause.

Yet with all the criticisms and lack of explanation, one is always left with a feeling that Weber was half-right: 'Weber's insight, namely that what was to be explained was the nature and origin of a new kind of purposeful self-discipline, is surely close to the mark.'¹⁰ In other words, the question he asked is right; it is his answer that is unsatisfactory, both historically and causally.

Unfortunately, if we agree that there is something peculiar to explain, then it is difficult to think of anyone who has progressed further than Weber. Let us look at just three attempts to consider the problem. Edward Thompson, in several works, has considered the new work discipline. He approvingly quotes Fromm to the effect that 'capitalism could not have been developed had not the greatest part of man's energy been channelled in the direction of work'.¹¹ Yet apart from some discussion of the links with Methodism in its later history, there is no real attempt to explain why such an ethic should have emerged, or rather, as Thompson rightly points out, become more pronounced.¹²

Michael Walzer accepts that there was a new attitude to work and self-discipline. He also accepts that it was somehow linked to Puritanism. But he is puzzled as to why this should be the case. He builds on Weber's argument about 'elective affinity' and suggests that both Calvinism and capitalism may have been the consequences of something else, 'anxiety'. Thus, for instance, he contends that Weber

has argued that Calvinism was an anxiety-inducing ideology that drove its adherents to seek a sense of control and confidence in methodical work and worldly success. But he has not even raised the question of why men should adopt an anxiety-inducing ideology in the first place, a question to which his own concept of 'elective affinity' offers a possible answer. Now it is probably not true that Calvinism induced anxiety; more likely its effect was to confirm and explain in theological terms perceptions men already had of the dangers of the world and the self . . . Puritan 'method' led to tranquillity and assurance through the 'exercises' of self-control and spiritual warfare ... Puritanism cannot, then, be described simply as the

¹⁰ R. Iiffe, "'Specialists without Spirit, Sensualists without Heart': Weber, Discipline, and the Protestant Work Ethic', unpublished paper given at the Achievement Project Symposium on Vocation, Work, and Culture in Early Modern England, Oxford, 1992, p. 39.

¹¹ E. R Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, 1968, p. 393.

¹² Idem, 'Time, Work-discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 38, 1967, pp. 56-97 (86).

ideological reflex of social disorder and personal anxiety; it is one possible response to the experiences of disorder and anxiety

Yet Walzer can proceed no further and we are left with the question of why there should be particular anxiety in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth century.¹³

The present state of the question is much as it was when Keith Thomas surveyed the field in 1964. He accepted that something needed to be explained. He spoke of 'the new respect in which the mechanic was held by some of the thinkers and scientists of the Renaissance', and argued that 'only in the sixteenth century does the fundamental economic importance of labour as a factor of production seem to have been explicitly recognized'. Along with this came 'a new insistence upon the duty of every man to work.' Yet Thomas thought that 'In a sense this theme had been an element in Christianity from the start. It reached its peak in Protestantism, particularly Puritanism, but its origins lie in the Middle Ages, in the preaching of the Friars and the Lollards.'¹⁴ So it was new in degree, but not in kind.

Yet as to the question of why it happened, Keith Thomas can only point out the inadequacy of the arguments. In relation to the religious causation, following Dr Knowles, he wrote:

It did not, I believe, derive from monasticism ... It is in the religious teaching of the post-Reformation period, among Catholics perhaps as well as Protestants, that the positive merit of hard work is most clearly asserted.¹⁵

If it was not primarily Christianity in itself that caused the attitude, how, asked Thomas, is the appearance of this new ethic of work to be accounted for? He considered the economic explanation, namely that 'labour was now the most important factor of production, the necessary preliminary to material advancement'. But he quickly rejected this, for 'had not this always been the case?' Economic circumstances 'do not, therefore, provide an entirely satisfactory explanation for the new emphasis upon the importance of hard work', something of an understatement of their weakness. Thomas then admitted- defeat, continuing 'But, whatever the reason . . .', it did happen.¹⁶

If we step back from these particular discussions, we see that we are in a strange position. If we widen the Weber thesis somewhat, we know

¹³ M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*, London, 1965, pp. 307-9.

¹⁴ K. Thomas, 'Work and Leisure in Pre-industrial Society', *Past and Present*, 29, 1964, pp. 50-63 (58).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-450.

that something momentous happened. A work ethic developed in the West that was both necessary for and linked to capitalism. We know that it reached its highest articulation in certain Puritan groups in the seventeenth century, even if it was to be found before the Reformation and in non-Protestant areas. It was somehow linked to religion, if not caused by it. For the rest the puzzle is still there.

A comparative approach

The comparison made by Weber and the others cited above was basically between two models: a 'traditional' or non-Western model where the work ethic was absent or muted, and the modern capitalist world where it was present. We seem to have reached an impasse with this approach. This is partly because it is very difficult to test causal links in such a binary opposition. The situation was forced on Weber because he could see no example of a work ethic like that of the West in the rest of the world; the peculiarity of the West was its interest,

Faced with this problem, we could try to seek new insights by conducting a thought experiment, by inventing a society which had a similar work ethic to that of the capitalist West, yet was not Protestant or even Christian. This would show what other pressures might lie behind the inner compulsion to work. Fortunately, and much more interestingly, we do not have to invent such a model, or simulate it, for it already exists in all its puzzling splendour in Japan. The model was not available to Weber, for when he wrote, as Bendix notes, little was known about Japan and it was only just emerging as a powerful, independent and separate example; hence 'Weber's discussion of Japan was not extensive'.¹⁷

There can be little doubt that the Japanese have had, for many centuries, an attitude to work which seems, on the surface, very similar to that of the capitalist West. Many have attested to the early emergence, power, and duration of the Japanese work ethic. Reischauer speaks of 'what may be the most deeply ingrained work ethic in the whole world' in Japan and its neighbours; he describes how 'the Japanese work ethic even today seems little eroded, as compared to the situation in countries of the vaunted Protestant heritage'.¹⁸ Similarly, the anthropologist Robert Smith writes that 'Surely the most outstanding result of the utilization of the strength of primary group affiliation in Japanese industry is the negligible erosion of the Japanese work ethic'.¹⁹ The quality of the

¹⁷ R. Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, London, 1973, p. 371n.

¹⁸ E. O. Reischauer, *The Japanese*, Cambridge, Mass., 1977, pp. 14 and 155.

¹⁹ R. J. Smith, *Japanese Society Tradition, Self and the Social Order*, New York, 1985, p. 61

commitment to work is well captured in the autobiography of the most famous Japanese figure of the nineteenth century, Fukuzawa:

I had been studying without regard to day or night. I would be reading all day and when night came I did not think of going to bed. When tired, I would lean over on my little desk, or stretch out on the floor resting my head on the raised alcove (tokonoma) of the room. I had gone through the year without ever spreading my pallet and covers and sleeping on the pillow.²⁰

Some social causes of the work drive: Japan and England

In considering the deeper causes of a similar drive to work in the two civilizations, we can put on one side the climatic theory, which is flirted with by Reischauer. He tentatively suggests that 'the work ethic ... may be basically associated with climate', the argument being that a tough climate made people hard workers.²¹ As the motto of my school put it, Japan was a 'dura virum nutrix' (a hard nurse of men). This Spartan view of history, like the economic one discussed and rejected by Thomas, is too universal; most climates and technologies make work difficult and make hard work necessary. Japan and Western Europe are no exceptions in either respect.

A more promising start in answering the question might be made by looking at the peculiar social structure of Japan and, in particular, England, but also Holland and much of Western Europe. One feature of this is the unusually large 'middling' group in each society. The argument here is that the work ethic we are interested in is associated with the 'middling groups' of a society. In other words, it is not likely to be found in either of the two extremes, a large peasantry, or the nobility. It is basically a shopkeeper, middling, craft mentality. Hence, where such groups are large and important, so the ethic will be likewise. This fits very well for Japan and England, which both have unusual social structures. In both, there was a surprisingly large group of the 'middling sort', the tradesmen, artisans, lower gentry, upper yeomanry - those who lay between the extremes of very poor rural workers (peasants) and very rich hereditary rulers (nobility).

A second feature is the unusually 'open' nature of the social structure in these two civilizations. The argument here is that if status is based on achievement rather than ascription, then people will work hard and continue to work hard. This is more likely where the social structure is

²⁰ Y. Fukuzawa, *The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa*, trans. E. Kiyooka. New York, 1972, p. 79.

²¹ Reischauer, *Japanese* (n. 18 above), p. 154.

not closed into rigid 'castes', out of which people cannot move. If the social structure is likened to a ladder, then in societies where the rungs are close together and people can move from one to another relatively easily, they will work hard to do so. This is apparently a characteristic of Japan - though the usual freezing into permanent ranks was beginning to occur in the long peace of the Tokugawa. Thus, for example, Jacobs argues that 'Chinese society is not a mobile society ... In Japan (as in Western Europe) in contrast, the instability and constant re-shifting in the status hierarchy implied the possibility of the rise and fall (even repeatedly) of any class . . .'.²²

In England, over many centuries, there was constant social mobility and, within one generation, children of the same parents could be near the top and near the bottom of the social pyramid. Life was hence a never-ending game, almost a gamble, in which a person could lose most of what he had won. The insecurities of fortune's wheel fits very well with those religious and social insecurities which Weber and his followers have documented. 'Yet instead of suggesting that the insecurity flowed from the terrible visions of hell and damnation for the predestined failures, as Weber did, it is clear that, as Walzer suggested, the anxiety lay behind both religious and economic activity. It can be seen to arise naturally from this shifting world where nothing was firm, all was to be won or lost.

If we turn away from ownership of the means of production, or class, to status and status honour, and control over the means of consumption, the same contradiction is to be found. It is clear that from the Middle Ages on we are dealing, in England, with a society built on the assumption that the differences between the estates Or callings are very important. The cultural markers which tell people about this - costumes, diet, deportment, sport, etiquette, linguistic codes - were all very elaborated. There were constant attempts to regulate and control them and a great concern with the aping of manners. Yet unlike almost all other pre-industrial societies, these ascriptions, while fairly fixed as a system, were not permanently attached by birth to individuals.

The same appears to be true in Japan in the early modern period. As Jacobs writes:

In Japan (as in western Europe) in contrast, there was no ideal system of stratification which outlived any specific hierarchy. Rather there was a constant rise and subsequent recognition of corporate occupational associations, and a constant instability in any specific hierarchy of stratifica-

²² N. Jacobs, *The Origin of Modern Capitalism and Eastern Asia*, Hong Kong, 1958, p. 142.

tion. This instability further accentuated the struggle to achieve self-legitimization and corporate recognition for one's novel role in the division of labour ...²³

It appears that there was hierarchy, but an open and shifting hierarchy, a meritocratic system of sorts. Ultimately, wealth, not blood, was the greater gainer of position and wealth could be created by skill or fraud, whereas birth was not so easily manipulated. It was a situation where money and contracts, not blood and status, ruled. Through luck and hard work, or through bad fortune and sloth, a person could move fairly quickly, certainly within a lifetime, from near the top to near the bottom of the ladder. There were no discrete, enduring groups or orders, based on some unassailable criterion which lay outside personal manipulation.

This flexibility was closely linked to the family systems of the two civilizations. In most societies, one's position is based on birth status, blood, and ultimately on kinship. One can do little to alter it. However hard one strives, one's position cannot be changed. In such a situation, one works at a certain level as a reflection of one's status, rather than to create it. Certain statuses carry a heavy load of manual work, others little. Hard work from childhood will have little effect.

Here we note a peculiar similarity between Japan and Western Europe, and particularly England, by the early modern period: namely that they are the two major civilizations where family status is not assured, but has to be earned. This is shown most strongly in the arrangements for succession and inheritance in the two civilizations.

Normally, all (male) children inherit and succeed to an equal and assured position. Birth gives inalienable family rights. The idea that only one son should inherit, usually the oldest (primogeniture) is very unusual. As Maine noted, 'It was unknown to the Hellenic world, it was unknown to the Roman world. It was unknown to the Jews and apparently to the whole Semitic world.'²⁴ It is 'a great rarity in the world', yet it was a distinctive feature of North European society, fully extended in England for instance by the end of the twelfth century.²⁵ Primogeniture, as Bloch wrote, 'was to become one of the most-important and distinctive features of English social custom'.²⁶ Even the oldest son was not safe, for as Engels noted when contrasting Europe and England, 'In

²³ Ibid., p. 134.

²⁴ Sir H. Maine, *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions*, London, 1875, p. 198.

²⁵ J. Goody, J. Thirsk, and E. F. Thompson, eds, *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200-1800*, Cambridge, 1976, pp. 376, 192.

²⁶ M. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon, 2 vols, 2nd edn, London, 1962, 1, P. 189.

countries with English law, the parents have full liberty to bequeath their wealth to anyone and may disinherit their children at Will.²⁷ The power to disinherit is limited to England and English colonies; the only other civilization which had the same possibility was Japan.²⁸

In Japan, 'By the fourteenth century the practice of equal inheritance had been abandoned in the upper reaches of warrior society.'²⁹ It became

the custom to select only one child as successor to the name and property, and custodian of the ancestral tablets of the house. The first Meiji civil code simply regularized this custom by giving preference before the law to first-son succession.³⁰

Combined with the widespread use of adoption of non-kin to replace sons as heirs, this meant that a household head had the power to 'disinherit any of his children, in other words the power of absolute rejection from the family'.³¹

It is not difficult to see the degree of insecurity this would create, forcing, from birth, the realization that even in the womb of the family, nothing was assured. Only by struggle and effort could security, of a sort, be achieved. Younger children in both civilizations had no assured place, and even the oldest son could lose his patrimony. As Bracton had memorably put it in the thirteenth century, 'Nemo est heres viventis', no one is the heir of a living man (i.e. there is no automatic birthright).³²

The effects through the centuries must have been immense. They are graphically described by a Frenchman, Taine, when describing the typical Englishman of the nineteenth century:

left early to fend for oneself; marriage to a woman with no fortune; a large family of children; income all spent, no savings; work very hard and place one's children under the necessity to do likewise³³

Taine linked this to 'the law of primogeniture', so that 'as a consequence everybody is required to help him or herself and acquire, at an early age, the idea that he must be the artisan of his own fortune'.³⁴ Or as he

²⁷ F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, trans. E. Untermann, Chicago, 1902, p. 88; K Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *History of English Law Before the Time of Edward 1*, 2nd edn, 2 vols, Cambridge, 1968, 11, p. 269.

²⁸ R. Lowie, *Social Organization*, London, 1950, pp. 146, 149.

²⁹ R Duus, *Feudalism in Japan*, 2nd edn, New York, 1976, p. 31.

³⁰ R. J. Smith, 'Small Families, Small Households, and Residential Institutions', in *Household and Family in Past Time*, ed. R Laslett, Cambridge, 1972, p. 441.

³¹ R. N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan*, Glencoe, Ill., 1957, p. 47.

³² See A. Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, Oxford, 1978, pp. 102-6.

³³ H. Taine, *Notes on England*, trans. E. Hyams, London, 1957, p. 60

³⁴ *Ibid.*

wrote earlier, 'according to my Englishman all they owe their children is an education: the daughters marry without a dowry, the sons do the best they can for themselves'.³⁵

The same was true in Japan. For instance, Smith noted that 'it was the genius of the civil code that it required impartable inheritance and recommended primogenitorial succession to the headship of the house. All other children were thus spun off from the family into the factories or the military, and swelled the population of the cities'.³⁶ The connection between single-heir inheritance and industrialization appears to work well in both civilizations.

A combination of all these social structural features in both England and Japan by the sixteenth century led to an early form of the world described by De Tocqueville when he saw it in its pure form in America:

In societies of this nature each man feels incessantly spurred by fear of falling and eagerness to rise; and since money has not only become the principal mark, by which men are classed and distinguished, but also has acquired a singular mobility, passing from hand to hand without a pause, transforming the status of individuals, raising or lowering families, there is hardly a man who is not obliged to make a desperate and continuous effort either to keep or to acquire it.³⁷

The ideological level; debt and sacrifice

The social and legal pressures can be examined along another dimension, namely that of ideas and feelings concerning debt. Built into the ideology of both areas, this is the idea of imbalance, which forces the individual into a constant position of inadequacy.

If there is anything in the Weber thesis, then a good deal of the pressure to activities in early modern Europe (especially Protestant cultures) was an individual feeling of guilt or sin, concerned with the relation between a single individual and God. A woman, or man, was born in sin, but through God's love was redeemed to eternal life - perhaps. For there was the rub. It was not certain to the person concerned, even if it was known to God, whether she or he was saved or not.

Thus, in a sense, work and discipline and the orderly use of time were ways of repaying the debt that Christ had set up, repaying God's love. Yet the more one repaid, the more there was to repay, because the greater became one's obligation to a generous God for his kindness in

³⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁶ Smith, *Japanese Society* (n. 19 above), p. 34.

³⁷ A. de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Regime*, trans. M. W. Patterson, Oxford, 1956, p. xvi.

accepting the repayment. Thus, instead of being like a bank overdraft which was being paid off, it was more like a loan to a Third World country: the more that was paid off, the more was subsequently lent, and the more there was to be paid off.

In such a situation the striving is ceaseless; the pit one is digging gets deeper and deeper, the rainbow recedes as one hurries towards it. This 'open' predicament drove people on and on. Like a son with a very kind father, there was no end to what should be done to satisfy. This combination of guilt at one's own sin, lusts, weaknesses, feelings of worthlessness and insecurity and inability to make any worthy offerings, and an overpowering sense of how much was owed to a marvellous and loving God combined to put an enormous pressure on sensitive people. This can be seen in many contemporary diaries, for instance that of Ralph Josselin.³⁸

The result was that well-known 'inner-directed' struggle to be true to one's vocation or calling and through it satisfy some of these demands. It was in the relationship of the individual to God that the person worked out his destiny. Work, thus, was a privately inspired activity dictated by conscience. Of course there were the external rewards, but they were on the surface. At a deeper level one was satisfying oneself, or rather, satisfying God.

The Japanese situation is similar in that there is a desire to repay something, a debt that cannot be repaid, and an obligation that is open and endless and which increases in size the more one attempts to repay it:

But he can never repay; he always stands in debt. This theory, it would seem, has some of the dynamic potentialities of the idea of original sin. It represents a fundamental 'flaw' in human nature which cannot be overcome by man alone but only by some intervention from above.³⁹

The loan expands, like work, to fill the time and energy of the individual. Both work and the debt are open-ended and not closed. There is no threshold or fixed level.

Like reputation, work is a fire that has constantly to be fed, and the more it is fed the faster it consumes the fuel. Work thus creates work, rather than making it unnecessary. It is not a matter of there being a fixed quantity of work and of time shrinking and expanding to fit with it, as in agrarian societies or those with fixed status groups. Rather, we are in a Parkinsonian world where work expands to fill the time available, and when it fills up the time available it seems to overflow the

³⁸ A. Macfarlane, ed., *The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616-1683*, Oxford, 1976.

³⁹ Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion* (n, 31 above), p. 73.

edges. Then one tries to make a little more time available, and still it overflows, and so on. The solution which seems obvious in such a situation is to work harder, waste less, be more organized, delegate work. Yet the treadmill continues: the faster one steps, the faster the wheel spins.

This is the similarity in effect. The difference is in the inner dynamic of the cause. Rather than lying in a single relation between an individual and God, as in the Western case, in Japan it lies in a multiplicity of relations with other individuals.

As I understand it, the relationships of people to people in Japan were very similar to those of man to God in the West. A person was, in himself, nothing. He was born as nothing, insignificant, a worm. Yet he was then endowed with many blessings and kindnesses, not by God but by his fellow human beings and principally their parents and other relatives. Yet, as with the Christian God (and especially given the fickle or contractual Japanese family), he could not be certain of this. All he could do was strive to be worthy and strive to repay.

This repayment consisted of work, or rather more generally, an endless flow of different kinds of communication: honour, respect, gifts, hard work, a loving attitude, and so on. Now all this is also characteristic of most peasant societies, for instance the filial duty which is so strong in China and India. What is different in Japan seems to be two things.

First, there is the element of uncertainty: just as the Christian God can withdraw his love and send one to Hell, so the earthly parents in Japan can withdraw their love and adopt another son and heir. One needs to be constantly proving to oneself both that one is chosen, called, has a vocation, and that one is good at the vocation. Second, there is the open-ended element. In the normal situation, there is a balance: in a sense the barrel of family work is a certain size and after a certain amount of effort by everyone, it is full up. Then one can relax in a relatively easy old age. In the Japanese case the barrel seems to have a hole in it. How does this hole appear? It occurs through the same psychological trick as that in Christianity, namely that one starts in an unequal and dyadic relationship. In Christianity this inequality is man-God, in Japan it is everywhere. Basically, there are only vertical relationships, which means that the two partners in an exchange start off as unequal. Consequently, when they exchange, rather than balancing the relationship as in a conventional market exchange, the relationship becomes even more unbalanced. A gives a 'gift' of work and effort worth x to B. B then gives a counter-gift of blessings, including the overwhelming blessing of receiving the gift, which is worth $x + y$. Thus after each exchange one is yet deeper in debt.

This is something like Mauss's 'spirit of the gift', but it works in a reverse way to that which Mauss envisaged.⁴⁰ In Mauss the 'spirit of the gift' adds to the receiver's obligation, providing 'interest', which has to be repaid (A gives the gift, x , but it also has the invisible spirit, y , which is added value and needs to be returned in tangible form, with further added value z). Yet in the Japanese case, the mechanism is different. In this case there is contained in each gift an implicit counter-gift, greater than itself, for we may represent it as a matter of giving x , from which has to be subtracted y , which is the debt one incurs to the receiver who is superior and honours one by receiving the gift. There is value subtracted. So while the receiver will reciprocate with a gift of apparently equal value, it is in fact far more valuable than what was given in the first place. There is thus a sort of built-in echo. The harder one shouts, the louder the echo.

Now it may strike us as curious that in Western societies, where the premiss of intrinsic inferiority is not to be found, this idea of incurred debt should still be a powerful mechanism. The reason seems to be that the vertical, dyadic relationship has been transferred from the human level, where it exists in Japan, to the relation between man and God. Thus, for example, we see that God is to Ralph Josselin exactly what one's father, lord, boss, husband are to a Japanese. He is infinitely more powerful, loving, generous, all-seeing. He is the fount of all blessings, but also a stern bringer of (justified) punishments if one errs. God can do no wrong. If evils befall, they are the results of one's own failures. If blessings come, they are the results of His kindness and not one's merits. It is a 'tails I lose, heads you win' game, where every toss of the coin means another lost game and the need for a further round becomes ever more pressing.

If this hypothesis is roughly correct, then it is easy to see how it dovetails nicely with the infinite and expanding demands of consumer capitalism, whose chief requisite is a feeling of never being satisfied. The harder one strives, the further the goal recedes, a theme well pursued by Sahlins, for instance:

Before the judgment of the market, the consumer stands condemned to *scarcity*, and so to a life sentence at hard labour. Nor is there any reprieve in acquiring things. To participate in a market economy is an inevitable tragedy: what began in inadequacy will end in deprivation. For every acquisition is simultaneously a deprivation of something else that could have been had instead.⁴¹

⁴⁰ M. Mauss, *The Gift: Form and Function of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London, 1954, passim

⁴¹ M. Sahlins, *Tribesmen*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1968, p. 77.

It is not difficult to see how this occurs when the world of goods is infinite and every decision is a choice between things. In this situation, every choice is a deprivation of the things not chosen, as Sahlins points out.

One could argue that this is only a difference in degree and not kind. In every known society, one is choosing between different goods; that is what economics is about. Yet there is a point where a difference in degree becomes a difference in kind. Many societies have perfected the art of providing people with endless 'Hobson's choices', in other words the illusion of choice. One appears to choose, but there is really no choice, and hence no deprivation. Yet perhaps even more important than this is the question I have discussed above, namely what happens when one does take action.

Now if we agree that such exchange, communion, or 'conversation' is essential to give life meaning, we may still wonder why a good part of it should focus on work. Perhaps this is not so surprising. For obvious reasons, activity in the external world, doing things, constitutes a very large part of the lives of most human beings. This activity gives pleasure and staves off hunger. It may even be a basic human biological drive; it is certainly essential to survival of the species. From very early on such activity must have had a symbolic or communicative as well as a practical value. It was a way of signalling to others. This is clearly true of play, where the symbolic/signalling value is, by definition, all there is (since by definition it is not of practical use), and yet it is indulged in very seriously indeed, as we see with *homo ludens*. The great advantage of concentrating on work as the main channel of communication is that one can literally have one's cake and eat it. It can be both a meaningful social relationship and of practical advantage. It has the heady attraction of alcohol, with the health-giving properties of medicine. No wonder that it becomes an addiction.

In a sense this was the attitude which the Puritan preachers were trying to inculcate. They exhorted people to see work not merely as a practical activity, but also as a way of symbolically communicating with God. Making and doing things was a way of glorifying God, and God would be more pleased with constructive, useful things like the doing of good works than the negative and destructive things of giving up, the smell of burnt sacrifices.

It is worth looking here at the difference between active and passive work. Very broadly speaking, many people in Japan and Protestant countries value positive work, while passive and negative work is what is valued much more commonly in Buddhism, Hinduism, or tribal religion. For we notice that whereas in the majority of societies there is a widespread emphasis on the need for sacrifice, renunciation, and the

destruction of material goods, and inactivity and negative actions, this is not what one finds in Japan and England.

There is no idea of sacrifice in the normal sense in either Japanese or English religion. That is to say, one does not find a tethered sheep or goat waiting to be 'sacrificed' in a Shinto shrine or Anglican church in the way one would in a Hindu or tribal shrine. Yet there is, of course, sacrifice of another kind. The sacrifice has been internalized. The sacrifice is not of outer things, but of parts of the personality which are unacceptable to God or the superior. Not smoking offerings but a repentant soul, as a seventeenth-century divine might put it, are acceptable in the sight of God. But why was this? Is it just a necessary part of the religion? It cannot be so, for Catholicism, a variant of Christianity, incorporates a good deal of the idea of sacrifice.

The essence of sacrifice is the idea of exchange or communication. The communication takes the form of giving something that is valued, an external object, for instance a sheep, which is received by the other, and in return a favour is granted. Sacrifices may be in vain, but in general it is assumed that they will work.

Now the idea of outward sacrifice is based on an egalitarian and mechanical view of the 'Other'. It assumes that we own something that God or the Other wants. We give it up to them; they are pleased; they give us something back. It is a form of spiritual barter between two partners or groups who are on the same plane, equals, but separated because one participant is of this world, the other is of another. Thus it needs to be a special form of communication which will cross this boundary. Some powerful symbolic device is needed, like the use of death and the message of blood, to cross from the material to the spiritual world.

None of this is much use, however, for the seventeenth-century Protestant or the Japanese, for they start with different premisses. First, God cannot be bribed or forced by mere 'things'. Since everything belongs to God or the Other in any case, all we are doing is giving back what we have been given - which is not ours to give. Second, the two partners in the exchange are so unequal that a small action by 'us' could, unaided, hardly be expected to have much influence or exert much pressure. God is not like some patron with whom one can 'do deals', in the same way as a good father or mother is beyond simple forced reciprocity. A much subtler approach is needed and a much greater gift is needed in order even to begin to tempt God or one's father to take an interest. After all, the essence of gift giving is to give something of what is mine to you. What then indeed is mine, and what do I have to give in a world where I seem to have *received* everything?

Here the unequivocal answer of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century divines was that the only worthwhile offering, the only sacrifice that God

wanted, was a person's will and personality, the whole of one. God had made man with free will for this express purpose; He had made him free so that in his freedom, and not as a slave, he could give God back the freedom. Through the central paradox of freedom, to make oneself 'unfree' in this way was to gain true freedom. just as Rousseau was later to argue that only in relinquishing individual will into the general will would the individual become free, so the Christian argued that only in handing back his freedom to God would the Christian find true freedom.

This was the real sacrifice. One could choose to give or not to give what was one's own, that is the ability to make such a choice, free will. One could, as in the feudal or marriage contract, freely enter into a contract with another (lord or husband). Yet once it was entered into it was for life, unless the contract was somehow broken at a very deep level. A free and independent heart and spirit was what God was seeking. One entered such a contract out of love and gratitude for God's goodness and also because one needed the shelter of a lord and master. What was needed was the total commitment of one's deepest essence. One could not buy off or bribe God by giving him a bit of blood or the odd marrow. He needed a disciplined and repentant heart, from which would flow the rest.

This partly explains why work is so important, for if the central sacrifice is the core of the individual, that is to say his will, heart, spirit, stomach, mind, intellect, whole demeanour, and total commitment, then everything becomes sanctified. It is a matter of placing oneself at the disposal of another, becoming 'their man' in the feudal sense. One can see how one of the main ways of expressing this deep commitment is through activities, through doing things, not merely because they have to be done but in an especially effective and virtuous way as a love offering. We have all experienced this mildly in relation to our parents, teachers, lovers, and so on in the West. Yet few now feel its force in relation to God, or comprehend the force it has for many Japanese.

In this self-offering or self-sacrifice, in the Christian case to God, in the Japanese case to the many Others to whom one is increasingly in debt, one can use work activity of any kind as a symbolic instrument, as the outward way to express one's offering. Making a pot, sweeping a room, making a computer, keeping honest accounts, all become symbols for something else. Work becomes not just a means to economic ends; nor is it just a pleasurable creative activity or a pleasant social activity. It is all of these, but it also has a spiritual dimension. It is the using of one's whole body and mind in one's vocation to praise and glorify the Other. In early modern Europe, the Other is God (or in a later period, the internalized God, one's conscience); in Japan it is other Japanese. Thus work has an added dimension.

This added dimension gives work the dignity and meaning which it lacks in many civilizations. The tendency in most societies is for work, particularly work with one's hands, to be servile. It is regarded as demeaning because it leads to subservience, a loss of liberty. One is a servant to others, which is on a continuum with being a slave. There is a loss of liberty. One has to work out of necessity. Dignity comes when one no longer has to work. A life of non-work, idle ease, is consummately to be desired; the 'leisure class' is the universal condition.

Yet somehow the Protestants and Japanese managed to invert or reverse this. People might agree that on the surface one is working for another, and hence there is a loss of liberty, be the other Toshiba or the University of Cambridge. Yet at a deeper level one is not working for other, equal, people and hence demeaning oneself in relation to them. In Europe (England) one is really working for the glory of God, a worthy master, whose service does not demean. In Japan one is working for the person above one in the vertical chain, who is working for the person above them, and so ever upward through the chain to the apex, the God-Emperor. There is nothing demeaning in this either. Work is noble for it is in a noble cause and for a noble recipient.

Usually work is a form of servitude because it is status-bound. 'I am, therefore I work.' Birth and work go together; it is automatic and the lot of most. Rest from work is both an expression of and a cause for high status; it is the goal of all sensible human beings.

In parts of the West and Japan it is the reverse. We start free and with no innate obligation to do anything. To work is a privilege, a contract freely entered into, a 'vocation'. Without work, one is not really free. Thus work liberates, for in service there is freedom. As Marx suggested, man realizes himself in work in the Christian tradition. To paraphrase Descartes, 'Laboro ergo sum'; I work, therefore I am. Without this means of expressing oneself through activity, a person is less than human. The worst thing one can do is to deprive a person of meaningful employment. Unemployment is thus a double blow: a practical blow to a person's purse, and a symbolic blow to his personality. He is being told that he is worthless, that God and his fellows do not need him, that he has nothing of value to offer.

Thus whereas many societies would consider that to be paid to do nothing would be the ultimate goal, the West and the Japanese chafe at the humiliation and loss of any opportunity to express their worth through work. The more work the better. The higher the status, the more the work (hence overworked doctors, lawyers, media personalities, academics, and so on). This is a situation which would strike people in most civilizations as bizarre. The whole point, as they see it, is that the higher the status the less the work: the point of high status is to save one

from the 'drudgery' of work. Affluence and leisure go together in most societies, as Veblen has illustrated.⁴² But in the 'inner-directed' phase of Protestantism, as well as in Japan, they do not go together; affluence can only be gained and maintained by constant hard work.

Conclusions

There are remarkable similarities and curious differences in the attitudes to work in European and Japanese civilization. Where the two traditions are united is that in both cases work is valued and limitless. It is symbolically as well as instrumentally important. It is an expression of a person's identity as well as a means to wealth. Take it away, and you destroy the person. Hence the bitter irony of a civilization which has built up a strong work ethic, and is then faced with a technology which makes much work redundant. Having trained its workforce to work, it then deprives it of meaningful work.

The great difference between the Japanese and European traditions is really in the mix of the motives to work. In Europe, there is deep ambivalence to work; it is ultimately a sacrifice, as Marx noted. In the Japanese situation, since work largely arises from the need to communicate and express in relation to others, it is often regarded as rewarding, strenuous but pleasant, like a sort of game. Thus, for example, discussing the meaning of the word 'wa', Smith observes that 'The word expresses a quality of human relationships, referring to "the cooperation, trust, sharing, warmth, morale, and hard work of efficient, pleasant, and purposeful fellowship ...".'⁴³ The same author notes that 'Reischauer (1977:154-5) is impressed, as are most foreign observers, by the intensity of the individual's identification with the work group and the "enthusiastic, even joyous, participation in its activities . . .".'⁴⁴ 'In Japan, farm factory, and office workers throw themselves unquestioningly into their work'.⁴⁵ A job in Japan is not merely a contractual arrangement for pay but means identification with a larger entity - in other words, a satisfying sense of being part of something big and significant.⁴⁶

The similarity could be explained by noting the curious identity of background social structure in the history of England and Japan. The insecurity, anxiety, mobility, and feelings of indebtedness which lead in both to a drive to work seem related to some curiously similar features

⁴² T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, New York, 1953.

⁴³ Smith, *Japanese Society* (n. 19 above), p. 50.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴⁵ T. Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, Tokyo, 1989, p. 111.

⁴⁶ E. O. Reischauer, *The Japanese Today*, Tokyo, 1988, p. 133.

of the social, economic, and political structures of the two civilizations which we have briefly seen above: the atomistic kinship system, open social structure, large middling groups, achievement rather than ascription as the basis for status. It is also related somehow to the presence in both of puritanical, anti-magical, and ascetic forms of religion, Christianity in one case, and a unique blend of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism in the other.

The difference, however, is just as important. It seems partly to be a result of the fact that the social satisfactions of work, as a form of communication and establishing the meaning of an individual, are much greater in Japan. The need to communicate is much greater in a 'relational' civilization, and this is achieved through work. Work thus becomes 'fun', a fulfilment and realization of personality in the way that Marx hoped to achieve through socialism. This difference, therefore, could be seen to be related to the difference of social structures between an individualistic and 'small-group'-based society.

Second, there is the difference in religion or ideology. As Marx pointed out, the Judaeo-Christian tradition looks on work as a curse, imposed on Adam when he was expelled from the Garden of Eden. The New Testament could be seen as an attempt to overcome this through the message of the Divine Carpenter, stressed by the Puritans, that work is ennobling, and may even be pleasant. The tension between the two views is beautifully captured by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Adam is cast out and told that he must labour and that this is a curse. He consoles Eve with the truly Protestant argument, 'With labour I must earne / My bread; what harme? Idleness had bin worse; My labour will sustain me' (x, 1054). This tension is not present in any of the religions which have mixed in Japan; none of them has a negative attitude to work.