SOME RECENT BOOKS


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In former times classical scholars were wont to impinge on the subject of work in an elliptical and dichotomous fashion: in nostalgic terms for agriculture, and in guarded terms for *techne banausikos*. Such delicacy has long been swept away, first by the Marxists with their ambitious theories about ancient labour, and then by the economic historians with their weighty compilations of data concerning ancient trade, industry, technology, and agriculture.

Though the literature on work in the ancient world is now vast, it has not been easy to get straightforward answers to simple questions, especially questions of a reflective nature. Here Professor Mossé steps in with a brief and informative conspectus, and some common sense suggestions about proper perspectives.

We must first, she warns, divest ourselves of later notions: ideas of Judaeo-Christian inspiration that work is expiatory; and modern socialist mysticism about work as its own justification, with the corollary, in the women’s emancipation movement, that women’s right to work is the gateway to women’s self-redemption. (The Marthas exalted and the Marys rejected.)

After an introductory survey of economic conditions in ancient cities, the author turns to the idea of work in antiquity. There is a popular theory that in antiquity politics and war were deemed the only pursuits meet for citizens; that manual labour was despised; that this attitude arose out of the institution of slavery; and that technological stagnation was a consequence. Professor Mossé is sceptical about this belief, against which she brings a number of arguments. She points out that, with the exception of Sparta, peasants and urban bourgeois were citizens. That much of the manual labour was done by free-men and slaves working side by side. That, furthermore, work on the land was generally held in respect; to build one’s own house and weave one’s
own clothes was a source of pride; and even the work of the
artisan could be admired if it were so superior in craft-
manship as to warrant the ascription of divine inspiration.
Her conclusion is that what is despised is not manual
work, but the ties of servile dependence between artisan
and user which labour tends to generate. If labour does not
lead to this degradation of the labourer, then labour is
esteemed. All too often however, when a man works for
another for wages he loses his independence, his freedom,
his autarkeia. The banausos is held in contempt not because
of his work, but because of his forfeiture of self-sufficiency.
Hence the enduring respect for the peasant, and for any man
who sturdily provides for his own household: such men retain
their hold on autarkeia, however humble its level. Hence too
the firm seating of ancient religion in the land; rural life, in
contrast with the ambiguities of urban life, is nearer to the
divine attribute of supreme autarkeia.
This is a cogent argument, one which prompts reflections
about the demoralising effect of the wage system of modern
times. The argument would be stronger however if Professor
Mossé had enquired further into the nature of autarkeia. For
self-sufficiency is a paradoxical concept (a man is most
self-sufficient when he is least self-sufficient), and not
nearly such a simple thing as is represented here. The dis­tinction between servile fear and filial fear (vide Plato,
Laws i, 646-7) provides an analogy for banausos and
autarkes which would be worth exploring.
Thus Professor Mossé rejects the slavery theory of work
as having the true situation upside down: dependent work
did not become contemptible because it was done by slaves;
slaves were put on to it because it was already contemptible.
She likewise rejects the theory that slavery was responsible
for the lack of technological progress. She has no alternative
explanation to offer for a static technology, except the
general observation that the ancients had little interest in
the matter — which is a not very illuminating remark, yet
probably the best that can be said on the subject pending
a more comprehensive philosophy (or theology) of that mys­
terious and spasmodic quest called ‘progress’.
Professor Mossé concludes: ‘Just as the city-state was
maintained as a political unit even after it had lost any real
meaning, once it was integrated into the immense Hellenistic kingdoms or the Roman Empire, similarly the archaic mentality, which valued effort only when it was expended in the agon, in competitive sports or in the game of war, lived on even after the eclipse of the society which had given it birth. Thus the idea of productive work as a form of moral training remained quite foreign to the ancient mind....'

If this book has a weakness, it is the author's brevity about crucial topics. We have already referred to autarkeia. Here, in this last passage, we have another case of a pregnant theme left unexplored. The agon is not dealt with elsewhere in the book, and is slipped in here at the end without comment. Yet surely the theme of the agon lies near to the heart of the matter. Plato makes the agon the fulcrum of the Laws. In our own time Huizinga and Hugo Rahner have powerfully advanced the cause of homo ludens. The agonistic theme could, with advantage, have constituted one of Professor Mossé's early chapters, for work cannot be understood without its correlative, play. And a few words about modern science as agonistic, and hence 'meet for gentlemen', would have put the question of technological progress in better perspective.

With these reservations (concerning omission rather than commission) we may strongly recommend this book. Maps, dates, plates, appendices, bibliography and index complete a work skilfully translated from the French.

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