The Historical Persistence of Working-Class Culture: How Laborers Created the Ethical Foundation of Western Civilization[1]

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Abstract

This article highlights four historical events that shape our present: the world's first industrial strike in ancient Egypt to protest workers' health and safety; working-class efforts to improve labor conditions during the Roman Republic and Middle Ages through strikes and the creation of guilds; the social justice activism of the prophets of Western religions (all working-class folks!); and the creation of the selfie and the transition from a culture of character to our present obsession with celebrities and individualism that began during the Renaissance. Each case highlights unique features of working-class culture, working class reactions to societal changes, and the success of working-class resistance efforts. What all these different events have in common is that they demonstrate the historical persistence of working-class culture which, I believe, remains Western civilization's greatest asset.

Keywords

[1] This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Working-Class Studies Association 2025 Conference, "Class and Social Justice," held at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia, December 2-5, 2025. I thank the Working-Class Studies 2025 Organizing Committee for making this wonderful event possible, and to the conference participants for their valuable feedback on my original presentation. Although scholars debate the meaning of the word "civilization," and what constitutes "Western civilization," in this paper I adopt the widely accepted understanding that defines it as the shared cultural, religious, political, and scientific traditions that originated in the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean region and which over time have expanded globally. For discussion, see further Spielvogel, 2012, esp. pp. xxxi-xxxii. Although Western civilization owes its legacy to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, such as the Egyptians, Sumerians, and Romans described in this article, its religious focus is fundamentally and resolutely biblical, based on the Jewish Scriptures and their later use by Christians and Muslims, whose scriptures acknowledge their debt to earlier Jewish monotheistic scriptures (a.k.a., Old Testament). For the relationship between religion and Western civilization, see further Green, 2006, pp. 1-22. Class is a notoriously difficult concept to define. I understand class as a group of individuals with similar economic positions. In this study, I build on Marx's concept of class antagonism, namely that classes stand in a particular relationship with one another in regard to privilege, authority, and power and that the relationship between classes is often antagonistic. Or, as Engles and Marx (2002, pp. 6, 10, 202-03, 219) emphasized, all history is the history of class struggles. For this study, moreover, the historical focus is on those in traditional working-class professions as well as those who spent part of their lives in one social class, and the rest in another. For extensive discussions of the latter, see the seminal study of Ryan and Sackrey (1984). For the problematic aspect of definitions of class of relevance to this study, see Pifer, Riffe, Hartz, and Ibarra (2022). Because Western civilization spans many thousands of years, in this study I focus on selective events, all of which are dated, as historical snapshots to highlight significant events in the history of the working-class.

Strikes, social justice, unions, guilds, working-class culture, working-class ethics, individualism, celebrity culture, character, the selfie

Hot and Angry Workers Strike (1159 BC)

The temperature at noon could reach 106 degrees Fahrenheit (over 41 degrees Celsius) in the remote southern Egyptian town of Deir el-Mednia. Each day its workers—stonecutters, plasterers, artists, and water-carriers—walked thirty minutes from their village to their worksite where they lived and toiled in inhumane conditions apart from their families, for eight days, followed by two days of rest. While these men labored in the oppressive heat, their wives and children back home prepared food, did laundry, and manufactured items for sale to supplement their husbands' incomes. The employer of these men was Pharaoh Ramesses III (reign, 1186-1155 BC): considered the last great ruler of Egypt.[2] However, things were not going well in Ramesses's kingdom.

Twenty-nine years of foreign military exploits to expand Ramesses's realm had taken their toll on Egypt's vulnerable working class. His overspending and endless overseas wars had led to great loss of life among his conscripted soldiers and had crashed his economy; everyone was suffering.[3] Although grain was running low in the royal storerooms, which was intended to feed his subjects in times of economic distress, Ramesses insisted that no cost be spared for his great jubilee ceremony to commemorate his thirtieth-year on the throne.[4] After Deir el-Medina's workers were not paid and their food rations were reduced, they decided to take an unprecedented step that would have ramifications to the present. Deir el-Medina's laborers threw down their tools and walked off the job, refusing to work for their god-king until their conditions improved. It was the first strike in Western history.[5]

Deir el-Medina's residents were the most important members of the working class in Egypt because they were necessary for Ramesses's survival in the afterlife. They constructed the tombs for the Pharaohs in the famed Valley of Kings. According to Egyptian religion, the Pharaoh's body had to be preserved through mumification so he could join his ancestors and the gods in the afterlife. His citizens would then be resurrected with him after their deaths to perform labor for their god-king for eternity: their lowly working-class status would last forever![6] Despite his abuse of those who built his tomb, Ramesses was convinced he had nothing to worry about since Deir el-Medina's working class could not enter the afterlife without him: they had no choice but to obey him since he was divine. But Deir el-Medina's tomb builders believed that social justice was more important than their eternal existence.[7]

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[2] Egyptologist Faulkner (1975, 247) writes that "…with the death of Ramesses III the glory departed, and Egypt was never again an imperial power."

[3] During his reign, Ramesses III fought successive battles with a foreign enemy the Egyptians referred to as the "Sea-People": likely north Levantine and western Anatolian populations who attacked Egypt by land and sea, leading to massive conscription to fight them. See Ben-Dor Evian, 2017-08, pp. 267-85.

[4] For the events of his reign and his legacy, see further Snape, 2012, 404-42; Gardiner, 1948, pp. XIV–XVII, 45–58.

[5] The Deir el-Medina strike is considered the earliest recorded collective labor action in Western history. See further Edgerton (1951, pp. 137-45) and Faulkner (1975, pp. 244-47).

[6] Concerning the importance of these workers, Egyptologist Edgerton (1951, p. 137) remarks: "To Pharaoh's point of view, one of the most important purposes for which Egypt existed was the perpetuation of his individual life after death as a 'great god' among the greater gods. This good purpose could not be achieved without the loyal efforts of the necropolis artisans. Wise Pharaohs, therefore, could not neglect these men."

[7] Bourdieu's (1984, p. 457) comment on the reason for strikes in modern times among the working class describes the situation in ancient Egypt: "The ordinary means of the workers' struggle, strikes or demonstrations, are for them a last resort, which they will consider only when driven to extremities by excessive injustice ('If need be, we'll take to the streets')."

For eighteen days, Deir el-Medina's laborers ignored their god-ruler's order to return to work. "We are hungry," they declared. Ramesses and his officials were paralyzed with fear for nothing like this had occurred in Egyptian history. However, Egypt's divine kings were expected to embody the most sacred quality known as *ma'at:* a word which loosely translates as truth, harmony, and justice. Pharaohs were expected to practice social justice, take care of their citizens, and serve as a model of righteousness since they were the divine representatives on earth of Egypt's vast pantheon of deities. Now *ma'at*—the bond of trust between the gods and humans—had broken down and undermined the longstanding relationship between the Pharoh and his subjects. Efforts by local officials on behalf of Ramesses to appease the workers by sending them pastry instead of their salary failed as they struck again. Finally, only after they received their back payments did Deir el-Medina's laborers return to work. Egypt's working-class had gone on strike against their god and won. However, they quickly realized that their victory was temporary, and that repeated sacrifice would be necessary.

Deir el-Medina's workers went on strike again when their next payment was late. As strikes continued to occur, they no longer pleaded for their missing wages but demanded social justice from their Pharaoh, chanting: "We have gone on strike not from hunger but because we have a serious accusation to make; bad things have been done in this place of Pharaoh."(Wilkinson, 2010, 360). What had begun as a dispute over wages now transformed into repeated strikes throughout the country to protest corruption, injustice, and the continued abuse of the working class by Egypt's divine rulers. The country was never the same. The working class no longer respected their god-kings: the royal tombs were robbed, their mummies destroyed, and officials became reluctant to intervene and protect their rulers' physical remains from desecration. Strikes now became common; the Pharaohs were helpless and unable to respond.[8] The age of the god-kings was over. The country went into a period of decline from which it never recovered.[9]

Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx wrote that all history is the history of class struggle (Engels & Marx, 2002, 6, 10, 202-3, 219). Although the story of the first strike in Egypt may appear unique since we customary regard the withholding of labor to protest unfair working conditions as a modern phenomenon, this is not true. Rather, the ancient Egyptian workers recognized the concept of structural leverage, namely the power associated with a group's position in the social structure. They understood that any system contains within itself the possibility of a power strong enough to alter it.[10] Consequently, they knew that if they conducted widespread strikes to undermine what was most important to their rulers, namely their eternal survival and prestige, the working class would win. However, they also knew that great sacrifice was involved, namely their eternal existence. Yet, they were not only willing to fight for their rights, but for those of subsequent generations of the working class as well.

Laborers throughout antiquity, like Deir el-Mednia's workers, have likewise realized that if they banded together they could bring about great social change, although often with great cost and suffering. Those in Egypt were willing to forfeit their afterlife to improve their lives: a sacrifice their rulers were unwilling to make, and which forced Egypt's Pharaohs to the bargaining table. Let us turn to the ancient Roman

[8] Numerous Egyptian documents record work stoppages due to delayed or absent distribution of grain rations during the reigns of the following Pharaohs: Ramesses III (reign 1186-1155 BC), Ramesses IV (reign 1155-1149 BC), Ramesses IX (reign 1129-111 BC), Ramesses X (reign 111-1107 BC), and Ramesses XI (reign 1107-1078/1068 BC). For a list of these documents, see Antoine, 2017, pp. 223-34.

[9] Breasted, 1924, pp. 177-95; Wilkinson, 2010, pp. 334-35; Mark, 2017.

[10] For this understanding of structural leverage, see further Imig and Bond, 1997, pp. 476-79; Yosso 2005, pp. 69-91.

Republic for a momentous event that Marx and Engels regarded as a fundamental example that demonstrates all history is the history of class struggle: a series of labor strikes known as the Struggle of the Orders during which a new working-class strategy emerged to oppose unjust labor conditions and worker exploitation.[11]

The Struggle of the Orders (500 BC to 287 BC)

The ancient Roman Republic was divided into two classes of free citizens: the working-class poor, known as the plebeians, and the aristocrats, known as the patricians.[12] The Struggle of the Orders was a conflict between the two. Although the long simmering tensions between these groups have often been interpreted as a conflict between two political orders, it was a class struggle as Marx and Engels recognized. The patricians dominated labor, owned most property, and held nearly all political and economic power. They also occupied the state's religious offices: the rich determined the will of the gods for all! (Beard, North, Price, 1998, 64). In contrast, ancient Rome's working class produced the Republic's food and resources, provided its labor for its great buildings that tourists marvel at today, and were conscripted in its legions to fight whenever and wherever its elites demanded. The Roman biographer Plutarch (ca. 40s-120s AD) wrote of this time: "The wild animals that roam over Italy have a den or hole to lurk in, but the men who fight and die for their country enjoy only the common air and light but nothing else; homeless, they wander about hopeless with their wives and children."[13] Despite their service to the Republic, the working class often ended up in debt bondage, barely one step above slavery (Beard, 2015, 146-53).[14]

The patricians inherited their disdain for the working class from the Greeks, whose elites abhorred those who labored with their hands, including craftspeople and artisans.[15] Manual laborers, the patricians held, were devoid of masculinity, honor, and patriotism since they did not own land or manage others: consequently, the plebians did not deserve the rights and privileges accorded to the rich and influential, or respect from the gods. Finally, the plebians had enough. Like their ancient Egyptian predecessors, Rome's working class went on strike.

In the opinion of the distinguished classicist Mary Beard, the decision of the plebians to strike is one of the most radical and coherent manifestos of popular power and liberty in antiquity, and has inspired working class movements in many countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Beard, 2015, 150). What made it unique was that Rome's working class realized that they were the majority and decided to punish the system that oppressed them. They literally shut down society. The plebians refused to work,

[11] Marx, 1913, pp. 15-16; Marx, 1976, pp. 481-82.

[12] The esteemed Roman historian Syme (1939, p. 11) in his seminal discussion of this time writes that the patricians held power not through cooperation with the masses, but by their unethical insistence on holding supreme power, wealth, and glory. For a similar and recent assessments, see Beard, 2015, pp. 146-53; Osgood 2018, pp. 29-85.

[13] Plutarch, *Life of Tiberius Gracchus,* 9.828c. All ancient texts are cited according to the numbering followed in the editions listed in the bibliography. Translations are those of the author.

The classification of social divisions in ancient Rome, like our varying uses of the terms working class and middle class, is complex. The difference was based on birth: one had to be born into a patrician family to become one. However, there were plebians who by our standards were affluent but lacked political power and were therefore technically plebians. However, most plebs fit the definition of working class used in this study since they were barred from social advancement, unable to transcend their class solely because they were born plebians and worked with their hands. See further Brunt, 1971, pp. 42-59; de Ste. Croix, 1981, pp. 332-37. The famed historian Rostovtzeff (1957, esp. pp. 469-527) likewise proposed that the later Roman Empire declined and ultimately collapsed due to class conflict like the Struggle of the Orders.

[15] See, for example, Herodotus, 2.167.1; Livy 8.20.4, 21.63.3-4; Polybius, 3.22.3-14.

no longer took up arms, and at times left the city *en masse*.[16] Shops closed, commerce ceased, and there was nobody left but the rich to do the work. As Rome's working class temporarily saw their grievances rectified, the patricians would soon oppress them. But the working class were relentless: they repeatedly went on strike until Rome's patricians were forced to give them legal equality through the creation of a Plebian Assembly whose laws were binding upon all. Now the working class had legal representation that allowed them to hold some of the nation's highest offices (Bond, 2025, 1-43).

Marx considered the Struggle of the Orders an example of how the long-term sheer brutality in the exploitation of workers, accompanied by a more or less systematic division of labor, was untenable for the working class.[17] This conflict is also unique because the plebeians displayed what Tara Yosso (2005, pp. 69-91) calls resistance capital: the resources, skills, and strategies that individuals or communities possess to resist, challenge, and navigate oppressive systems or structures. Resistance capital is the desire to challenge power dynamics to advocate for social justice and remedy social inequality. It is also an example of what Jack Metzgar's (2000, pp. 58-83; 2021a, esp. pp.150-71) account of the 1959 steelworkers strike—the largest work stoppage in US history in which over five hundred thousand workers stayed off the job for 116 days—refers to as working-class delayed gratification. Although these modern steel workers had no strike fund, no assistance programs to help with emergencies, and little or no savings, they refused to work not merely for increased wages or benefits, but, like the plebians, to improve work rules and stop exploitation. They wanted to limit management's ability to rule their workplaces: in other words, they went on strike for social justice. Likewise, their ancient Roman working-class predecessors were just as determined. They, like their Egyptian precursors, repeatedly struck against their oppressors for social justice with fewer resources than their modern-day successors: although the plebians faced potential starvation, they willingly left their homes and cities in their quest for social justice.[18]

Rome's working class during the Struggle of the Orders ultimately improved their lives through collective action, organization, and their willingness to endure immense suffering in the pursuit of equality and social justice. However, as Engles and Marx observed, class struggle never ends but begins anew with each generation. The plebians recognized this and attempted to avoid a shortfall of many modern trade union strikes which, although successful, often tend to focus on making improvements for their workers in the present instead of demanding long-term structural changes to benefit future generations.[19] By repeating their strikes, and taking the radical step of temporarily abandoning society, Rome's working class focused on creating a better life for future generations. They forced political concessions that lasted for over a century, which were only undone after the Roman civil wars led to the creation of a dictatorial regime known as the Roman Empire. But the struggle for the working class to obtain justice and a fair society in

[16] For an astute discussion that recognizes the role of the ordinary plebians in this strike, see Ungern-Sternberg, 2005, pp. 312-332. For the struggle of Rome's working class and the violence that often accompanied their struggles for equality, see further Osgood 2018, pp. 29-85.

[17] Marx, 1976, pp. 481-89, 467-69, 339-454, 599-610

[18] The earlier 1936-1936 Great Flint Strike and its aftermath provide a modern parallel. It cripped the auto industry in Michigan as auto workers, like their steelworker counterparts and the ancient plebians of Rome, demanded a fair wage and decent working conditions. General Motors exceeded pre-Depression profitability after this strike but failed to rehire laid-off workers and lowered entry-level wages. This led to what has been dubbed a new maxim: "workers make all the sacrifice; management gets all the benefits." The consequence was that the auto industry, having violated the moral economy of shared sacrifice and shared reward, caused labor to mistrust management. This led workers to believe that future benefits would only come through their use of structural leverage through repeated work stoppages as the plebians had done. See Murray and Schwartz, pp. 98-153 (quotation, p. 144). The result was a succession of strikes, in the past sometimes accompanied by violence, that continues today.

[19] See further Velden, 2024, pp. 426-38.

the Western tradition preceded the Romans and goes back to the earliest books of the Bible that espouse what I believe can be called a working-class ethic rooted in social justice.

Western Religion and Working-Class Justice (1900 BC-632 AD)

The three major Western Religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are all based on working class ethics.[20] This should not be surprising since the founders of these faiths were itinerant working-class laborers. While most were born into working-class families, others belonged to a unique category I will refer to as reverse crossovers because they consciously chose a working-class lifestyle.[21] Abraham and Moses were the first. Both are not only considered the founders of Judaism, but the theological pillars of Christianity and Islam as well.[22] Scholars believe that Abraham lived sometime between 1900 and 1700 BC. According to the Bible and later Jewish legends, he was an upper-class, affluent, member of what is known as the Sumerian society, the Western world's first civilization, from the city of Ur located in modern Iraq.[23] Moses also came from an elite background.[24] He was raised in the Egyptian king's household. I classify Abraham and Moses as reverse crossovers because they willingly gave up their professional urban upper-class lifestyles, abandoned their wealth, and left their homelands to become working-class semi-nomads devoid of citizenship and legal rights.[25] Although scholars do not regard the biblical stories about Abraham, Moses, or other figures in the New Testament, as well as the Qur'an, as entirely factual, this is not relevant to the present discussion. Rather, what is important is that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in

[20] Scriptural citations are from the following editions: (Old and New Testament), Nestle, et al. (1994); (Qur'an) 'Alī (1989).

[21] Working-class scholars use several terms to identify those who have changed their social class from working class to the professional class, some of whom claim dual affiliations and identities with their new middle-class professional life and their former working-class family and communities. Among the most popular is the term "straddler" coined by Lubrano, 2004, esp. pp. 193-223. For discussions and additional terms, see further Linkon, 2021, pp. 20-31; Jensen, 2012, esp. pp. 146-77, 202-06; Metzgar, 2021a, pp. 88-95; Ryan and Sackrey, 1984, pp. 1-19. For the related designation "class migrants," see Williams, 2020, pp. 4-5, 26, 50-51. The term "code-switching" is often used in working-class literature to describe the discomfort many feel in changing social class, and their conscious behaviors to hide, or straddle, their social class of origin. See further Ardoin and Martinez, 2019, pp. 21-31, 162-78; Elkins and Hanke, 2018, pp. 35–47. Sennett and Cobb (1972, p. 21) call the difficulties caused by upward mobility "status incongruity." I (Atkinson, 2022, pp. 95-112) prefer the term crossover since I do not believe it is possible to have dual affiliation and identity with one's former working-class community. Rather, to crossover to a new social class is to erase much of one's working-class self, making it impossible to return. I believe that working-class crossovers are essentially ghosts trapped in a liminal limbo, neither a member of the working class nor the new class in which he or she lives and works. For similar perspectives, see further Cruz, 2021, pp. 9, 103; Eribon, 2013, pp. 1-10, 102-09; Hurst, 2010; Metzgar, 2021a, pp. 88-95. See also Case, 2017, pp. 16-35.

[22] God had told Abraham, "Through you all the people of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). This covenant became the basis for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all of whom believe they are the inheritors of the original Abrahamic covenant. For the historical background of these faiths, see the accessible discussions in Crossan 1993; Donner, 2010; Ehrman, 2008; Fredriksen, 2018; Frevel, 2023; Hoyland, 2019; Shoemaker, 2012; Shoemaker, 2022.

[23] Abraham's biography can be found in the biblical book of Genesis, chapters 12-25. For legends about his life, see further Ginzberg, 1909, vol 1, pp. 183-308. The Sumerians, who lived in the lush valleys between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers—the site of Biblical Eden—created the first known civilization over six thousand years ago (5500-1475 BCE). They created a writing system and produced hundreds of thousands of documents, among them tax records, business records, law codes, prayers, and stories, including the famed Epic of Gilgamesh (Crawford 2004, pp. 16-213). Although they lived over six thousand years ago, their society was much like our own, including a common disdain of the working class among the elites. Although only few Sumerian men and women could write, meaning that our extant documents reflect the views of the more affluent and not peasants, these texts frequently denigrate the working class. Examples include a fable mocking the various working-class professions and warnings to students to study hard to avoid the fate of the working-class lest they end up laboring in the fields behind a plow and an ox. See Kramer, 1981, pp. 104, 140, 266, 344; Pfeiffer 1969, pp. 437-38.

[24] Moses's life can be found in the biblical Books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. For the various biblical and post-biblical legends about Moses, see Ginzberg, 1909, vol 2, pp. 243-75.

[25] For the various biblical and post-biblical legends about Moses, see Ginzberg, 1909, vol 2, pp. 243-75

their scriptures, and later legends, all claim their founding figures were working class. This makes Western religion unique for its working-class focus, which is based in the foundational law code of all Western religion—the Torah.

The Torah, a Hebrew word meaning Law, comprises the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures, commonly known as the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Torah is an idealistic and utopian code that champions the rights of the working class. It reflects the ethics of a semi-nomadic society in which everyone must cooperate to survive in a harsh desert landscape: it defines principles of justice that are binding upon all, including morality, and views social justice as a national covenant.[26] Abraham and Moses spent much of their lives wandering in the desert, barely surviving. Having no legal rights, they often were prey for civilized folk, for whom working-class nomads were despised because they did not fit into any perceived social class. Both had to take up arms to protect their families and followers. They lived what Cynthia Cruz, writing of those who have left their working-class origins behind, refers to as "nomadism: moving from place to place with no fixed determination in mind."[27]

The foundational ethic of the Bible as found in the Torah was created by working-class semi-nomads who lived in a liminal space, neither settled nor fully wild, with few rights, and who never fully assimilated into their surroundings because of their rejection of their former social class. Even when ancient Israel abandoned its semi-nomadic lifestyle and became an urbanized society in which commerce increasingly exploited the poor, a new brand of teachers unique to the Western tradition known as prophets emerged to champion the traditional working-class values that had long defined a semi-nomadic society.

In contrast to the common perception that the biblical prophets predicted the future, they rarely did so. Rather, prophets were mediators between humans and God. They were primarily social commentators who denounced sinners for not obeying the laws of the Torah and largely reserved their wrath for the rich and the powerful. Nearly all the prophets were from the working class, and likely illiterate: their followers wrote down their teachings in books along with biographical information about them that eventually became part of the Bible. The first prophet whose teachings were recorded in writing was a man named Amos, who was proud of his working-class heritage. Amos boasted that he was uneducated and earned his living as "a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees" (Amos 7.14). These occupations reveal a great deal about his working-class status: he did not own land, meaning that he was at the lowest socio-economic level in an agricultural society since he was a hired laborer. Because he owned no property, he had to move about to earn a living tending sheep and harvesting crops for others. Although watching sheep was a demanding job in a desert environment, dressing sycamore trees was an even more arduous task. It entailed climbing ladders in the hot sun to split the sycamore pods with a special knife to ripen their fruit. Because the sycamore tree could attain a height of over thirty feet (over nine meters), it was a dangerous job. Hired hands such as Amos were allowed to graze flocks in the fields of affluent property owners in exchange for performing this arduous labor.[28] Constantly on the move from job to job, Amos was able to keep abreast of current affairs. His anger at the political and economic establishments of his time led him not to focus

[26] See further Kaufman, 1960, pp. 291-340. The author has spent considerable time with semi-nomadic tribes while working as an archaeologist in the Middle East. This section is informed by what they have taught me about their lifestyle, and their working-class approach to society and social justice.

[27] Cruz, 2021, pp. 160, 1-10, 102-09 103; see also Case, 2017, pp. 23-25. Fisher (2014, pp. 133-38) describes the state of moving through anonymous environments for the working-class, as Abraham and Moses did, as "nomadalgia." For a similar discussion of working-class academics as being in "limbo," see Crew, 2024, pp. 17-32.

[28] See further King, 1988, pp. 116-17.

on religion, but social justice. Martin Luther King Junior in his famous "I have a Dream" Speech of August 28, 1963, quoted Amos's principal demand: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Neither Amos nor or any of the biblical prophets accepted money. They believed it was necessary to eschew material wealth to live what has been called "the doctrine of the primacy of morality: the idea that the essence of God's demand of man is not cultic, but moral."[29] They chose to remain working class to identify with the masses, and to advocate for social justice against the rich.

Jesus followed the Old Testament prophets by not accepting money. He too was a working-class peasant whose family lived a precarious existence on the margins.[30] Jesus was not the mere carpenter of popular imagination. Rather, in the original Greek of the New Testament he is referred to as a builder: a manual laborer who worked in both wood and stone.[31] The small town of Nazareth in the Galilee region of northern Israel where he grew up is largely devoid of trees. This means that Jesus likely spent much of his time cutting and hauling stone to erect and maintain the countless miles of terrace walls cut into the hillsides to grow crops. Also, he certainly did gig work cutting and hauling stones for roads and walls in the nearby Roman-dominated metropolis of Sepphoris, which was only three-miles (five-kilometers) from his hometown of Nazareth.[32] Jesus would have walked thousands of miles (kilometers) in his lifetime looking for work, building up considerable physical endurance and stamina as he roamed from job to job across dangerous and uneven roads and dirt paths, likely avoiding bandits and wild animals, to provide for his family, as well as to pay the required taxes to Roman authorities.[33] Itinerant working-class laborers like

[29] Kaufmann, 1960, p. 345. Unlike the court prophets, who were educated and worked directly for the state, Amos emphasized that he earned his living through manual labor and was therefore not compromised by the rich or the state. The same is true for nearly all the biblical prophets, as well as Jesus and Muhammad who, although they attracted both rich and poor followers, before their religious callings earned their livings through manual labor. For the "I Have a Dream" Speech, see American Rhetoric.

[30] Like the term working class, there are many definitions of a peasant. I adopt the definition of Joyce (2024, p. 21) who defines it as follows: "A peasant is a country person, a person of the land." In his study of peasant societies, Joyce emphasizes the precarious nature of peasants, particularly those without land who, like Jesus working as day laborers, must depend on strangers for their survival. Precariousness was central to their existence.

[31] In the Greek of the Gospels of Mark (6:3) and Matthew (13:55), Jesus is called a *tekton* (τέκτων). Although commonly rendered as "carpenter," it better translated as craftsman or builder, as it is used to describe itinerant laborers working with wood and stone.

[32] The author has spent considerable time living in this area and excavating sites from Jesus' lifetime, and well as walking many of the routes he traveled. Although Jesus's later teachings displayed contempt for worldly goods, in this section I focus on Jesus's upbringing which a leading scholar on the historical Jesus (Crossan 1993) describes as a Mediterranean Jewish peasant lifestyle. As a carpenter, he and his family were at the lowest and most vulnerable socio-economic realm of Palestinian working-class society.

[33] Deines, 2014, pp. 11-50; Reed, 2000, pp. 100-38. Although the Romans taxed recently conquered lands such as Jesus's homeland less to win the support of their peasants, the working class nevertheless had to perform unpaid services for the state in addition to handling over a portion of their wealth to their occupiers. For the plight of the working-class in agricultural societies, see further Lenski, pp. 1966, pp.189-296. Banditry was common in Jesus' homeland, and attracted many from Jesus' social class, namely those without land, who preyed on the rich, but also who at times attacked local populations to survive. They illustrate the perilous state of the working-class poor, for whom a bad harvest or inability to repay loans led some of them to become bandits to provide for their families. For the marginal position of bandits in Roman society, between working-class peasants and the affluent, see further Shaw 2026, 297-315. The great Jewish Revolt against the Romans (66-70 AD) was largely led by bandits and working-class peasant farmers, many of whom greatly suffered under Roman domination. The conflict, which began as a struggle for independence, quickly devolved into a war between Palestinian society's social classes, and proved to be the greatest revolt the Roman Empire faced during the first century AD. See further Atkinson 2026, pp. 3-15.

Jesus were considered the lowest of the working class. His detractors chose to insult him by publicly highlighting his lower working-class status by referring to him as a mere "son of a carpenter."[34]

Christianity's other foundational figure, the Apostle Paul, like Abraham and Moses, was a reverse crossover who left his upper-class life to become an itinerant tentmaker. Paul grew up in Tarsus, located in Cilicia in today's Turkey, one of the Roman Empire's leading cities. He bragged that he had studied under the famed Jewish sage Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was also trained in Roman literature and rhetoric, meaning that he was among the few educated at the time. Nevertheless, he chose a low-status itinerant working-class profession. He became a tentmaker, which was an occupation that also involved manufacturing and making repairs to garments, saddles, shop awnings, and shelters for soldiers. Because working class professions in major cities, such as Corinth in Greece where he spent eighteen months practicing his craft, were highly regulated non-citizens such as Paul had to work as subcontractors earning paltry sums for their labor (Acts 18:11). Paul proudly proclaims that he was often "in hunger and thirst, frequently without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Corinthians 11:27; see also 2 Corinthians 4:22), as he traveled from city to city practicing his trade and preaching the new Christian faith. In his writings he often boasts of his lowly working-class status (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 1 Corinthians 4:12; 9:6; 2 Corinthians 11:27; cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:8; Acts 20:34-35).[35] The same was true of Islam's founder, the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad came from a respected family in Mecca, located in today's Saudi Arabia. He lost his parents while young, making him an orphan: the lowest status and most vulnerable member of his tribal society. He worked a variety of jobs, mainly tending sheep for others, before a wealthy widow named Khadijah hired him to operate her caravans. Muhammad traveled great distances, suffered from the elements, and had to ward off bandits as he transported merchandise for her throughout Arabia.[36] He became known as an honest working-class member of Meccan society and was nicknamed "al-Amin," which means "the trusted one." At the age of forty, according to Islamic tradition, he received the first revelation from the angel Gabriel, who would deliver God's word to him for twenty-two years (610–632 AD) that eventually became Islam's Scripture, known as the Qur'an. Like Jesus, Muhammad focused on social justice. The Qur'an espouses a working-class ethic based on the Torah as it demands the protection of women, orphans, and workers while denouncing wealth and demanding social justice from those in power.[37] Leading tribal leaders threatened to kill Muhammed because of his teaching that the rich must take care of the poor outside their tribes and share their wealth with the needy. In 620 AD Muhammed fled his hometown with a small band of his followers to save their lives. He crossed over 250 miles of desert and moved to Yathrib, a city later renamed Medina, where he produced what is widely regarded as the first constitution in Western tradition. It is a document based on social justice that granted all the city's residents equal rights despite their religion.[38] Forced to fight many wars, Muhammed eventually emerged victorious and transformed Medina's formerly pagan shrine into a place for the worship of the God of Abraham and Moses. He died in 632 AD at the age of sixty-two.

[34] Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55.
[35] See further Meeks, 1983, esp. pp. 9, 27, 29; Horrell, 1996, p. 76; Meggitt, 1998, pp. 75 77.
[36] The standard biography of Muhammad (ca. 570-632 AD) is the *Sirat Rasul Allah* of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 768 AD), which is available only in the recensions by Ibn Hishām and al-Tabari edited nearly a century later. For the text, see Guillaume, 1995, esp. pp. 68-660.
[37] Donner, 2010, pp. 39-89.
[38] Arjomand, 2009, pp. 555-575; Wildan, 2013, pp. 17-36.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all share a working-class ethic based on social justice,[39] the condemnation of excessive wealth,[40] the respect for the working class,[41] and the demand that the poor be protected.[42] The prophets of Western religions all faced new economic systems of free trade that threatened to undermine the traditional working-class identities of their societies, which were often imposed by religious leaders who sought economic gain.[43] In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engles echo the message of the prophets when they denounce free trade as the shameless, direct, and brutal exploitation that is often veiled by religious and political illusions (Engels & Marx, 2002, 222). The cultural critic Mark Fisher has described what is left behind when such shameless exploitation takes hold of a society as it did in the time of the biblical prophets, Jesus, and Muhammed, namely the collapse of beliefs, a situation in which tradition counts for nothing, and the erosion of long-established time-honored values upon which family life depends: obligation, trustworthiness, and commitment (Fisher, 2009, 1-11, 31-8). Over time, the working-class organized to protect themselves from the brutality of free trade, the loss of a social safety net, and to give themselves some measure of control over their fate.

Guilds: Working-Class Communal Protection (10th-14th Centuries AD)

During the Middle Ages the working class increasingly organized into collective bodies to protect themselves and to provide some measure of control over their fate. These groups they created are commonly known as guilds or associations. They are the ancient form of trade unions that began during the Greek and Roman periods: many Romans abhorred Christianity because they viewed it as an association comprised primarily of the working-class poor.[44] The first guilds were organized by entertainers, and soon spread to a variety of occupations, such as bakers, crafts, merchants, and eventually to all types of working-class professions. Guilds became particularly common during the Medieval period. Members elected officials, made their own rules, and collected dues, which were used to cover injuries and to provide their working-class members with a dignified burial and a tombstone as well as money for their surviving families. Over time, guilds became permanent organizations of those in the same profession or trade. They eventually gained recognition by local, provincial, and central governments. Guilds worked

[39] See, for example: (Old Testament) Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:2; Exodus 22:21-23; Psalm 82:3-4; Isaiah 1:17; Proverbs 31:8-9; Micah 6:8. (New Testament) Matthew 25:34-40; Luke 4:18-19; James 2:15-16; Galatians 3:8. (Qur'an) 2:267, 274, 282; 3:195; 4:135; 5:8; 16:90; 59:7; 70:24-25.

[40] See, for example: (Old Testament) Deuteronomy 8:18, 15:7; Proverbs 3:9-10, 13:11; Ecclesiastes 5:10. (New Testament) Matthew 6: 24, 31-33; Luke 12:33; Corinthians 5:11; 6:9-10; 8:9; Hebrews 13:5; 1 Timothy 6:10; James 5:1-6. (Qur'an) 2:177; 4:29; 9:34; 25:67; 63:9; 64:15; 89:15-17.

[41] See, for example: (Old Testament) Exodus 20:9-10; Proverbs 12:24, 14:23; Ecclesiastes 5:18: Psalm 90:17, 128:2. (New Testament) Matthew 5:16; Colossians 3:23-24; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. (Qur'an) 3:195; 17:35; 33:72-73; 53:39; 62:10.

[42] (Old Testament) Exodus 22:21-27; Deuteronomy 5:11, 15:7-8; Leviticus 19:9-10; Psalm 82:3-4; Proverbs 19:17, 21:13, 22:9, 31:8-9; Isaiah 58:6-7; Ezekiel 16:49. (New Testament) Luke 3:11, 12:33, 14:12-14; Matthew 25:31-46; James 2:14-17; 1 John 3:17-18; Ephesians 4:28: 2 Corinthians 8:9. (Qur'an) 2:271, 274; 4:36; 17:26; 76:8-9.

[43] For a modern parallel based on popular sports culture that discusses how class identities are insecure, tied as they are to global vagaries in capital movements, see Williams, 2023, pp. 41-57.

[44] For examples and inscriptions documenting the rules of these associations and their membership, see Kloppenborg, 2011. For the influence of working-class associations on Christianity, see Kloppenborg, 2020. Lucassen, De Moor, and van Zanden (2008, p. 6) define European guilds as: "… permanent, generally local organizations of people in the same profession or trade or a combination of the same professions, recognized by the local, provincial, or central government, and which have as their main, but certainly not exclusive, purpose the defence and maintenance of trade monopoly rights with regard to fellow citizens and outside competitors." In this study, I am primarily referring to working-class craft guilds rather than merchant guilds.

to ensure their working-class members received appropriate wages for their labor and, when necessary, banded together against exploitation through strikes.[45]

Contrary to conventional stereotypes, guilds were inclusive rather than exclusive and did not prohibit others from entering their professions (Surdam, 2020, 226-8). However, the focus was on the group. Some medieval guilds prohibited their members from attracting attention to their products: there were even strictures against advertising. Workers operated in studios in which many anonymous artists contributed to the final product under the leadership of a master craftsman who employed them and who sold their collective products to wealthy patrons. Individual credit was frowned upon; self-portraits were rare. The social status of artists was the same as that of other working-class laborers: they seldom achieved any fame. Rather, artists were hired laborers who answered the whims of their workshop owner to please potential clients: they followed orders and produced art they were paid to create and not free to produce what they wanted (Kliner, 2012, 595-691). In exchange, they were taught the special skills required of their craft, which were shared with all. Then, with the advent of the Renaissance, things rapidly changed for the worse for working-class artisans, and eventually for all of us, as a culture of personality emerged to replace the traditional working-class culture of character. It began with the arts.

With the rediscovery of classical artistic techniques and literature during the Renaissance, patrons began to value innovation and creativity.[46] Humanism emerged from this largely scientific quest to imitate the past, reject divine explanations and, most of all, to celebrate the dignity, value, and rational agency of the individual. Humans were now the focus of attention and acclaim, as epitomized by Leonardo de Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, which many believe is a self-portrait that places his physical body, and by association his intellect, at the center of the universe.[47] With the increasing separation of art from craft in the Renaissance, the formerly close relationship between master and apprentice, who were long bound together, became severed as individuation came to dominate. Consequently, skills were no longer passed along to other workers, but became part of an artist's unique identity and not to be shared.[48] A select group of artists now prospered because of the distinctiveness of their work; a number became wealthy, prominent, and famous while the relentless pursuit for renown destroyed others.[49] This new focus on the individual and the quest to no longer be identified as the working class among artists led to a change in creativity that not only defines us to the present, but which increasingly enslaves many of us in a perpetual quest to reshape ourselves.

In 1568 the famed painter Giorgio Vasari published *The Lives of the Painters* which consisted of biographies of artists with the intent of making them famous. This new appreciation for creativity and artistic "genius" was fully manifested in the High Renaissance, when superstars like Michelangelo and Leonardo were treated as near equals to the Popes and Kings that employed them. Patrons no longer sought

[45] See further Dagron, 2002, vol. 2, pp. 385-461; Lucassen, De Moor, and van Zanden, 2008, pp. 5-18.
[46] For the cultural factors behind these changes, largely through the Western rediscovery of Aristotle, see further Rubenstein, 2003, pp. 206-98; Greenblatt, 2011, pp. 110-263. As guilds declined, their former members were increasingly forced to seek employment as artisans along with other day laborers and frequently moved from place to place seeking work. Some toiled under the great masters as temporary workers. See further Komlosy, 2018, esp. pp. 8-18, 28-29, 99-106.
[47] Isaacson, 2017, pp. 140-57. Leonardo's contemporary, the Florentine philosopher Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* placed humans at the center of creation, emphasizing the belief in "Homo faber" (Man the Maker), asserting that our greatest creation is to shape our own life histories. For a photo, see "Vitruvian Man": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian_Man
[48] See further Sennett, 2008, pp. 119-46.
[49] Hale, 1994; Wittkower and Wittkower, 1963, pp. 189-81; 67-97, 133-49.

art from workshops where anonymous working-class artisans toiled, but from great creative masters to enhance their own social standing through ostentatious displays of their wealth. Artists began to acknowledge their own importance through self-portraits, sometimes even including their own depictions in their commissions, and sought to become the equals of their upper-class patrons.[50] Then, the greatest change came with the sixteenth century AD German painter Albrecht Dürer—the creator of the selfie.

The Self-Makers and the Selfie (15th Century AD)

Albrecht Dürer was the first artist to seek superstar status. He did not merely want people to praise his art, but his persona as well. In other words, he wanted to be famous for being famous. His contemporaries joked that he was too busy to take commissions because of the inordinate amount of time he spent on his hair, which he treated with egg whites to facilitate and control its curling (Koerner, 1993, 169-72). He often included his self-portrait in his commissioned art, dressed in extravagant costumes with his elaborately curled hair so that people would recognize him. Dürer produced thirteen self-portraits in which he depicts himself as divine. In these, he does not portray himself in profile but looking directly at the viewer in the pose traditionally reserved for Jesus. To make certain that the audience recognized it was him, in his most famous self-portrait he placed this inscription: "I, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg painted myself thus with my own colors, at the age of twenty-eight years." To the left, he included the date, 1500, and below it an AD monogram, which not only represents the Latin abbreviation *anno Domini,* "in the year of our Lord" to denote the beginning of the Christian era, but also his initials.[51]

Albrecht Dürer not only became the first modern artist to prominently sign his portraits, but he also purchased his own printing press. He did so to control the design and dissemination of his image, making himself independent from patrons and thereby taking full credit for his work. Dürer hired agents to sell his art at fairs and markets in cheap versions, undermining other artists in the process (Ashcroft, 2017, 66-7). The more his works and portraits circulated among the masses, the more famous he became. With Dürer we see the birth of a new creative class: the self-makers: people who, in the words of the cultural critic Tara Isabella Burton, possessed the creative qualities that enabled them to transform not just art, but their public personality and through it their destiny (Burton, 2023, 14-15). Dürer is an example of the modern phenomenon that the sociologists Donal Hortan and R. Richard Wohl call "parasocial interaction": a psychological experience in which illustrious and influential persons construct a false intimacy with their followers (Horton & Wohl, 1956, 215-9). Like contemporary social influencers, Dürer used visual self-presentation techniques he created and fully controlled to engage with his fans by fashioning a non-existent, but seemingly personal, relationship with them. Although physically distant from his admirers, he came to influence their lives through their adulation of him and their quest to become like him.[52] With Dürer we have the beginning of our modern culture of personality, namely the quest for adulation by those without talent who seek to become famous merely for being famous.[53] The philosopher Charles Taylor calls this transition to a more secular age "expressive individualism" in which people are encouraged to find their own path to self-fulfillment and to do their own thing (Taylor, 2007, 299-321). The individual,

[50] For a similar assessment of artists and social class mobility in the modern era, which he describes as "upclassing," see Bourdieu, 1984, esp. pp. 99-168.
[51] For this portrait, see "Albrecht Dürer": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albrecht_D%C3%BCrer. Dürer also signed and dated his other self-portraits.
[52] For parasocial relations created through contemporary technology, see Kim, 2022, pp. 414-34; Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen, 2016, pp. 21-44.
[53] Susman, 2003, pp. 271-85. See further, "Famous for being famous": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famous_for_being_famous

not the group, matters. The problem is that fame becomes a drug. It afflicts our modern society as evident by the increased quest for fame through social media and rising rates of depression as many today fall into a hedonic lassitude, unable to do anything other than pursue pleasure in their quest for recognition without accompanying deeds rather than through the pursuit of traditional working-class accomplishments (Fisher, 2009, 21-30).

The emerging capitalist industrial class would increasingly emulate Dürer and others like him and use self-promotion to justify their existence, and their exploitation of the working class with their development of the cult of the celebrity. It was a form of social Darwinism in which few entrepreneurs rose to the top to become God-like celebrities while those at the bottom suffered.[54] The famous, typically the affluent, depicted themselves as possessing a charisma they had acquired, they claimed, through hard-work: the proverbial pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. In this new social order those at the bottom, the upper-class were increasingly convinced, deserved their lower working-class status because they lacked the innate charisma of the powerful and affluent or had not worked hard enough.[55] This increased focus on individualism and fame following the widespread implementation of the industrial model of production only made things worse for the working class. We still suffer from it.

Industrialism and "The Invention of Work" (19th-20th Centuries AD)

The rise of industrialism fractured traditional social relations as long-established support networks of households, villages, and guilds vanished. This increasingly left many workers exploited and unprotected since they had to leave their homes to relocate close to factories, forcing them to become isolated individuals devoid of the centuries of working-class culture and community that had anchored their lives.[56] As clashes with management increasingly occurred the working class sought ways to assert their rights and to demand fair wages and safe working conditions. Like those thousands of years before them, they resorted to strikes.[57] There were many successes such as laws limiting the length of the work day, increased wages, and the introduction of statuary health care and accident insurance for industrial workers in several European countries that created a social safety net, which over time increasingly came to be financed by employers and workers alike. However, these reforms led to the creation of what has been termed the "invention of work": a system in which labor is highly regulated between government agencies, companies, and, less so today, by unions that emerged in modern times to replace the guilds.[58] With the advent of scientific management, often called Taylorism after the philosophy of Frederick W. Taylor, the

[54] Nicholson, 1998, pp. 52-68. For the related concept of "virtual self," see Burton, 2023, p. 205.

[55] See further Cain, 2012, pp. 19-33; Burton, 2023, pp. 1-8. Sennett (1998) takes a similar perspective and notes that the disjointed time created by the new capitalism, in which employment is becoming contingent, hampers the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives as they become transient, moving from job to job and making few lasting social or community ties.

[56] For Engles and others, the concentration of large numbers of workers in early factory neighborhoods led to the creation of a new social formation: a proletariat created by the introduction of machinery that led to the formation of a new working class, and the dawn of a new stage of history in which workers were increasingly exploited. See Engels, 1887, pp. 125-42. For the social conditions that led to the creation of the modern factory and how it disrupted traditional working-class village life, see further Freeman, 2018, esp. pp. 1-42.

[57] There are too many to mention, but some of the most important took place in early modern Italy, Holland, England, and other European nations, although statistics show there were over 383 labor strikes in Britain alone between 171 and 1800. See Dobson, 1980. See also, Cohn jr., 1980.

[58] See further Komlosy, 2018, pp. 93-217; Mejstrik, and Buchner, 2013, pp. 5-11. Komlosy (p. 19) defines work as: "… a targeted, market-oriented, remunerated activity excluding occasional and needs-based non-remunerated activities."

situation worsened. Taylor urged employers to strip workers of their independence and pride by classifying, tabulating, and reducing work to individual tasks to create a system where the worker could perform "…at his fastest pace and with the maximum of efficiency." (Taylor, 1913, 12). He also urged management to make skilled jobs, as much as possible, simplified by breaking them into smaller tasks to be performed by unskilled laborers at a lower rate of pay (Taylor 1913, pp. 37-39). Former craftworkers in factories no longer had any knowledge to pass on as their skills were no longer valued or needed.

With Henry Ford's creation of the modern assembly line a new problem emerged. As Antonio Gramsci recognized, although his workers received greater wages, allowing them to purchase the products they manufactured, Ford's factory workers now faced the dangers of industrialization Marx had warned about, namely the current precarious position of workers as all security has been removed from the workplace.[59] Labor is now in a constant state of flux and workers are unable to keep up the pace of work-place quotas and the speed of modern assembly lines, and forced to continually adapt to their oppressive working conditions, which with the continued introduction of new technologies continues to increase workloads (Atkinson, 2022, 101-4). Max Weber (1978, 973-4) observed that the competitive marketplace, with its demands that workers perform their tasks with as much speed as possible, led to increased bureaucratization. The result is that organizations increasingly became more like one another. This phenomenon is often referred to as isomorphism: a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face similar circumstances (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 147-60). In the case of the industrial revolution, businesses replicated one another through their use of technology, and their adoption of a brutal pace of work, in a competition for efficiency and profit as manufacturers increasingly sought to resemble one another for fear of falling behind and making less profit. Over time, these unfair working conditions were taken for granted and increasingly became standard. Although professions did not disappear with these changes, their "guild power" has been replaced by the power of capitalists, the state, or both, as even the most accomplished professionals no longer control their workplace as their skills are less valued, and largely subdivided into isolated individualized tasks so that workers become mere functionaries.[60] This has led to the present development of what has been called "the Unwinding," the unraveling of the social contract that has left the working class to their own devices to find success and salvation (Packer, 2013). Yet, despite these negative changes forced on the working-class, I believe that little has changed when it comes to the existence of distinctive working-class culture.

The Persistence of Working-Class Culture (The Present)

In the 1990s the American psychologist Johathan Haidt was interested in how understandings of morality differed across cultures. After attending a conference in Brazil, he decided to conduct a survey in which he asked persons in two Brazilian cities and Philadelphia in the United States questions about what he called harmless taboos: disturbing but innocuous hypothetical scenarios that evoked a judgmental response and therefore provided some insight into the person's moral thinking (Haidt, 2012, 3-186). Haidt expected the answers to vary by city: however, he was surprised by the outcome. Class differences between respondents within each country were the greatest: cultural differences made little difference in the moral values of his subjects. Working-class respondents in both countries emphasized communal standards while those from the upper-class emphasized individual notions of personal freedom to justify acting as they wish. The Anthropologist Richard Shweder in a study of cross-cultural ethics discovered something

[59] Gramsci, 1971, pp. 277-318; Marx, 1976, pp. 794-802.
[60] See further Krause, 1996, esp. pp. 252-86.

similar.[61] He found three major clusters of moral themes in society. The first, autonomy, is the idea that people are first and foremost autonomous individuals with wants, needs, and preferences that should be satisfied as one wishes. The second, community, is based on the idea that people are first and foremost members of large entities such as families, teams, armies, companies, tribes, and nations. The third, divinity, emphasizes religion to maintain that humans are temporary vessels within which a divine soul has been implanted, consequently it stresses the group and morals. Autonomy tended to cluster among the affluent while the working class characterized the latter two moral themes. In her interviews with working-class men in the United States and France, Michèle Lamont discovered something similar to Haidt and Shweder. She found that morality is a more important criterion of work for the working class than for professionals and managers, and that solidarity is a distinctively working-class virtue grounded in a community of class interest.[62]

The conclusions of these three researchers regarding the differences between the working and professional classes, I believe, is the same as that put forth by contemporary working-class theorists such as Jack Metzger and Barbara Jensen, who find the existence of a distinct working-culture of belonging in contrast to a middle-class culture of becoming.[63] Likewise, in his study of first-generation working-class graduates, Paul Dean (2026, pp. 102-14) found they possess what he terms "working-class cultural capital," which he defines as the skills, cultural knowledge, and attitudes that are rooted in the social and cultural experience of working-class origins. Like Metzger and Jensen, Dean highlights such distinctive working-class cultural characteristics as hard work, practicality, resilience, ingenuity, authenticity, and the importance of sacrifice.[64]

Conclusion

This view of morality grounded in being, becoming, belonging, and community reflects the working class in all the cultures I have described in the present study. Working-class culture has transcended time, beginning with the earliest civilization and continuing today.[65] Its major characteristics tend to be persistence, sacrifice, a communal focus, and an emphasis on social justice. This working-class culture with its ethical system has persisted across time: we find it in the first civilization of the Middle East and in today's workplace. It is a unique culture that values integrity and authenticity that has only changed history for the better, but whose contributions to Western civilization remain largely ignored.[66]

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[61] Shweder's research is most fully presented in Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park, 1997, pp. 119-69.

[62] Lamont, 2000, esp. pp. 17-54, 153-68, 215-49.

[63] See the seminal studies of Jensen, 2012, esp. pp. 79-116; Metzgar, 2021a, esp. pp. 77-76; Metzgar, 2021b, pp. 231-41.

[64] In the influential and widely cited book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life,* Robert Bellah and his associates (1985, p. viii) deny the existence of a distinctive working-class culture and write that everyone in the United States thinks largely in middle-class categories.

[65] I could easily expand the present study into a book examining additional studies that would further illustrate my point. For a contemporary example of working-class ethic, see the study of zookeepers conducted by Bunderson and Thompson (2009, pp. 32-57). In their interviews, they found that these laborers kept their difficult, dirty, and poorly paid jobs because of their sense of duty, obligation, and responsibility characteristic of traditional working-class culture.

[66] In his defense of the existence of a genuine working-class culture, Metzger (2021, p. 233) writes: "My argument is that working-class culture is genuine in the sense that it has an internal coherence that is separate and distinct from middle-class culture; has positive value both in itself and for American society; and vitally contributes to the shaping of middle-class life and culture even as it forms itself within and around that dominant culture." Although Metzger recognizes that working-class culture does have some deficits, the same, as he notes, is true of professional middle-class culture. Nevertheless, the timeless values of working-class culture, which Jensen calls "a roomier sense of now" (2012, 60), has, as highlighted in this study, consistently benefitted Western Civilization from its very beginning. The same cannot be said of other social classes.

My broad historical overview of the persistence of working class-culture across several thousand years on three continents among various races and cultures, I believe, supports the theme of the new working-class studies that puts class at the center because it is so deeply interwoven with other formative elements of society, such as race, gender, work, and structures of power.[67] The lesson to be learned from history is that the working-class as the majority of society's workers has, and can continue to, achieve great things. However, at best, any gains are temporary; continued sacrifice is necessary.[68] Nevertheless, if the working class can adhere to their traditional values in the face of oppression history demonstrates they can better their lives and improve society by restoring its lost working-class values of becoming, belonging, and community, that are essential now more than ever for saving our world. Or, to quote Samuel Gompers, the founder of the American Federation of Labor, who, in his citation of the biblical passage in Genesis 4:9 to demand that society treat workers fairly, warned the upper-class: "you are your brother's keeper, and unless you help to lighten his burden yours will be made so much the heavier." (Gompers, 1919, 22).

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[67] This understanding of the importance of class is indebted to Russo and Linkon, 2005, 1-18; hooks, 2000, pp. 1-9

[68] See further the seminal study of Zweig (2012, pp. 4, 11) who, in stressing that the working class are the majority, writes that to be working class is to be in a place of relative vulnerability—on the job, in the market, in politics, and in culture.

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