

The Cultural Value of Work

Traditional wage labor has experienced a significant decline in industrialized countries over the past few decades. The spread of temporary work, the proliferation of subcontracting arrangements, the use of artificial intelligence (AI), the shipment of manufacturing jobs overseas, and the employment of foreign contract workers are among the key factors driving this decline. The result is a rise of labor insecurity and fragmentation among increasingly diverse forms of flexible labor arrangements. This book examines this important transformation by considering the impact of foreign contract labor on temporary migrant workers in their places of employment and home communities. It assesses work as a source of value in capitalist, reproductive, domestic, and cultural economics, and argues for a new, work-centric field of economics. Rich in examples, it is a sophisticated anthropological appreciation of the many forms that work can take and what these forms mean for the creation of value in people's lives.

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*Livelihoods and Migration in the World's
Economies*

David Griffith
East Carolina University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009100281

DOI: 10.1017/9781009109000

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First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Griffith, David, 1951– author.

Title: The cultural value of work : livelihoods and migration in the world's economies / David Griffith, East Carolina University.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Traditional wage labour has experienced a significant decline in industrialised countries over the past few decades. The spread of temporary work, the proliferation of subcontracting arrangements, the use of AI, the shipment of manufacturing jobs overseas, and the employment of foreign contract workers are among the key factors driving this decline. The result is a rise of labour insecurity and fragmentation among increasingly diverse forms of flexible labour arrangements. This book examines this important transformation by considering the impact of foreign contract labour on temporary migrant workers in their places of employment and home communities. It assesses work as a source of value in capitalist, reproductive, domestic, and cultural economics, and argues for a new, work-centric field of economics. Rich in examples, it is a sophisticated anthropological appreciation of the many forms that work can take, and what these forms mean for the creation of value in people's lives"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022970032 (print) | LCCN 2022970033 (ebook) | ISBN 9781009100281 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009112109 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009109000 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Labor—Social aspects. | Labor—Anthropological aspects. | Foreign workers—Social conditions. | Precarious employment—Social aspects. | Emigration and immigration—Economic aspects. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Anthropology / Cultural & Social

Classification: LCC HD4901 .G775 2022 (print) | LCC HD4901 (ebook) | DDC 306.3/6—dc23/eng/20220506

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022970032>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022970033>

ISBN 978-1-009-10028-1 Hardback

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For
Kerry Preibisch, 1974–2016,
scholar, mother, teacher, friend
With deep admiration

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Preface

While in graduate school, I taught in a women's prison and a men's prison; assisted professors in anthropology, sociology, political science, and a food institute with their work; cooked during the breakfast shift at the Old College Inn; and cared for my two daughters when my wife Nancy needed to work on hand-sewn dolls, wreaths, stuffed animals, and other crafts she sold in artisans' markets. To this – our livelihood constellation – my wife and I added student loans that I invested instead of spent, whatever subsidies came from living in graduate student housing, close attention to our budget, and, eventually, research grants for my doctoral dissertation work. This was neither the first nor the last time in my life I had multiple sources of income, but it was probably the first where Nancy and I were able to combine work that would result in enhancing our family's future and work that classified as low-wage, temporary, and precarious.

Upon graduating, my university job wasn't sufficient to support a family of four. My wife still had to make her crafts, wait tables in restaurants, tend bar, and spend her days researching schools and recreational programs and sustaining the social networks it took to raise two children. The tips she earned from waiting tables and tending bar were critical to making ends meet. Shortly after we were settled, I started consulting, taking odd jobs in what was not yet called the gig economy, conducting research for various government agencies, evaluating AmeriCorps programs around the United States, providing technical assistance for the Corporation for National and Community Service, and earning small infusions of cash by writing, publishing, reviewing, investing, and public speaking. For a time, travel reimbursements were nearly as critical to our cash flow as Nancy's tips. Over time, we came to combine between nine and eleven sources of income, not one of which was sufficient to lift us into the middle class but all of which gave us a comfortable lifestyle within an ever-expanding, but still closely watched, budget.

This book argues that combining multiple sources of income into livelihood constellations is becoming a critical part of the human economy – an economy

marked by precarity, insecurity, widening income gaps, and other depressing developments that have made developing livelihood constellations a central part of planetary life. Not everyone does it for the same reasons that Nancy and I have, but I don't doubt that many of our motivations are the same for many of the world's peoples: seeing to the health and well-being of our children, hedging against precarity, saving for emergencies, and surviving in increasingly insecure times. Nancy and I have been fortunate. Unlike most of the people I profile in this book, we have had plenty of good luck. That good luck began with our parents. In the random way that fate is assigned, we both happened to be born into families and social contexts that were already tilted toward privilege. We were white and middle class in the US Midwest, educated in Iowa's schools – institutions responsible for creating, at the time, the highest literacy rate in the nation – and our families and networks were such that they neither burdened us with requests for assistance nor would have refused our assistance had our luck changed for the worse. At the same time, many of the people who helped us through our youth were racist, fascist, and intolerant; they were physicians, orthodontists, lawyers, businesspeople, and insurance agents. They never would have considered themselves racists or fascists, but, in hindsight, it's clear that they were. It's amazing that Nancy and I escaped much of that, rebelling against the foolishness that surrounded us even as we succumbed to some of it to find lovers and spouses acceptable to our families, stay out of jail, establish credit, land employment, and accumulate more than most people deserve.

Again, this is unlike most of the people I profile in this book. They too may have been subjected to racism, fascism, and intolerance, but from a different direction and with different consequences. Instead of helping maintain whatever privilege they were born into and acquired, racism, fascism, and intolerance have been directed at them, preventing them from upward social mobility and undermining their well-being. Paul Farmer calls this “structural violence” and David Graeber “spiritual violence,” but in most cases, it looked less like violence than the daily despair that grinds people down into pulp for the labor market. Guestworkers often become extreme cases of this, having to work long hours in foreign settings without their families, subjected to high rents and wage theft, idled for days at a time, yet willing to tolerate these conditions for the higher wages they can earn in the countries in which they work on temporary contracts. The sacrifices they make for their families are heavy and intense. In spite of the challenges they face – violence, racism, nationalism, anti-immigration, wage theft, harassment, and so on – they often survive and even flourish, freeing their children from manual labor through investments and education, building nicer homes, and adding more satisfying

lifestyles to their livelihood constellations. These are alternatives to the social relations of an economic formation we call capitalism. They have been with us for centuries, and they continue to be developed and thrive, yet many who study economics ignore them. They are more likely to provide well-being than despair and less likely than wage labor to be based on deception, violence, and theft. They will become models, I hope, for the future of the human economy.

Acknowledgments

Cultural anthropologists inevitably develop a number and variety of relationships with the people they are interested in during the course of fieldwork and while analyzing the heavy volume of information that derives from visiting, interviewing, reading, writing, and theorizing about human behaviors observed, described, and experienced. This body of work includes information gleaned from these relationships over a period of nearly four decades, although most of the data come from more recent encounters. My deepest thanks go to the hundreds of workers, peasants, and fishers from Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, Puerto Rico, and the Gulf of Mexico as well as immigrants, refugees, and guest workers from Mexico, Central America, the Middle East, and the Caribbean with whom I spent time in the United States and Germany, at their places of work, at their homes, and, quite often, in many different types of labor camps.

This work would not have been possible without several agencies, funding programs, and private foundations that have had confidence in my research. The National Science Foundation provided funds for a project titled “Managed Migration and the Value of Labor” (Cultural Anthropology, award no. 1157386), which financed the work in Guatemala, Mexico, Canada, and the United States at the center of this book. The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research provided funds for a project entitled “Founding Forests” that enabled research on naval stores and the Palatine migration discussed in Chapter 3. Research on both artisanal and commercial fisheries was conducted for the National Marine Fisheries Service (also called NOAA Fisheries) of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), out of the Southeast Fisheries Science Center in Miami and the Southeast Regional Office in St. Petersburg, Florida. University of North Carolina’s Sea Grant College Program also provided me with funds for a study of North Carolina’s coastal labor force. The US Department of Agriculture funded a study of immigrant entrepreneurs that informed a good deal of Chapter 7.

While preparing the manuscript, I was fortunate to join a team of researchers from the University of Florida and Columbia University under a project

entitled “Towards a Multi-scale Theory on Coupled Human Mobility and Environmental Change” supported by the Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory under award no. W911NF1810267 (Multidisciplinary University Research Initiative [MURI]). The research team of Rachata Muneeppeerakul, Jeffrey C. Johnson, Upmanu Lall, Rafael Munoz-Carpena, and Michael Puma, and the program officer, Dr. Lisa Troyer, provided valuable insights and feedback on how we conceptualize human migration, including managed migration, and its relationship to livelihoods that depend heavily on the natural environment. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the Army Research Office, the US government, or any of the other agencies, organizations, or foundations listed here.

East Carolina University, once again, provided support in several ways – too many, really, to count – and, along those lines, I have to thank Marilyn Sheerer and Ron Mitchelson for stellar leadership while I was Director of the Institute for Coastal Science and Policy, Reide Corbett for his tireless efforts promoting Integrated Coastal Programs and the Department of Coastal Studies, and Randy Daniel for providing a steady hand to the Department of Anthropology. Two colleagues who deserve special recognition are Kerry Preibisch, to whom this book is dedicated, and Ricardo Contreras – my two co-principal investigators on the NSF Managed Migration project. Tragically, we lost the keen mind and pleasant demeanor of Kerry due to illness before she was able to see the project through to its conclusion, but I like to think that her contribution to the project, which was vital, contributed to her happiness during the last years of her life. Ricardo and I could not have accomplished as much as we did without her.

Three of the chapters in this work contain portions of articles that were previously published, here significantly revised and reorganized: Portions of Chapter 4 originally appeared in *American Anthropologist* as “The Value of Reproductive Labor” by David Griffith, Kerry Preibisch, and Ricardo Contreras, 2018 (120[2]:224–236); portions of Chapter 6 in *Human Organization* as “Enforced Economics: Individual Fishery Quotas and the Privileging of Economic Science in the Gulf of Mexico Grouper–Tilefish Fishery” by David Griffith, 2018 (77:42–51); and portions of Chapter 7 in *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies* as “The Value of Reproduction: Multiple Livelihoods, Cultural Labor, and Immigrants in Iowa and North Carolina” by David Griffith, 2020 (43[1]:142–160). Many thanks to the editors of these journals and the anonymous reviewers who provided feedback on early versions of the articles.

Several scholars contributed to this work in various ways, either reading drafts of the book, providing research assistance in the form of help with data

xvi Acknowledgments

collection or direction for additional reading and analysis, or organizing conferences where I elicited feedback on my ideas. Angela Stuesse, Steve Striffler, Christian Zolniski, Lee Maril, Jaqueline Hagan, Brianna Castro, Nathan Dollar, Alejandro Portes, Patricia Fernandez-Kelley, and Rubén Hernández-León were helpful along these lines, as were five anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press. Elizabeth Juárez Cerdi of El Colegio del Michoacán (Michoacán College) provided important assistance with fieldwork in Michoacán. My friends and colleagues Carlos García Quijano and Hilda Llorens provided insights I have incorporated into the text while we were working together on a project on foragers in the Puerto Rican mangroves.

Finally, as always, I could not have produced this work without the love and support of my wife of more than four decades, Nancy, our two daughters Emily and Brook, and their children, our grandchildren: Gavin, Ben, Sophie, and Vera. To them I owe more than thanks; I owe my happiness.