

The doctrine of 'hard working' is the worst kind of religion

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Mary Evans explores the outbreak of rhetoric about 'hard work' and argues that it has two functions: it serves to somehow make the performer of that task a better person, whilst at the same time legitimating vicious policies towards those who are not 'hard working'; and second, in framing that latter category as the thieves of the rewards of the worthy it encourages us to avoid remembering that the rewards for the 'hard-working' are getting fewer and fewer: disposable income is decreasing as are all forms of public support.



It has currently become impossible to listen to any politician without encountering some reference to those 'hard-working families' who are so much to be admired and so clearly demarcated from many others, be they born in the UK or elsewhere, who spend their days conniving in new ways to de-fraud the benefit system.

One of the many aspects of this invocation of the 'hard working' is that a number of quite salient points about their daily lives are seldom mentioned. Thus although the idle shirkers have lives that are presented to us every day in the press ('benefit mother flies to Spain'/ 'shopping spree by benefit family') not very much is said about the conditions and the rewards that the 'hard working' actually receive. It is seldom mentioned, for example, that 'hard work' often involves shift work, working for less than the living wage or working for a company whose owner or owners do not pay full UK taxes. Somehow, the day-to-day experience of this 'hard work' has little except a mythical or even an ideological status.

This curious phenomenon suggests that the outbreak of rhetoric about 'hard work' and the 'hard working' has two functions. The first is to re-connect with that understanding of work which was, as Max Weber pointed out, so dear to the heart of sixteenth century Protestants. But as Weber also pointed 'the people filled with the spirit of capitalism today tend to be indifferent, if not hostile, to the Church.' As he went on 'the thought of the pious boredom of paradise has little attraction for their active natures'. The present revival of the ideology of 'hard work' however seems to have brought together once again religious and secular ideas: 'hard work' will save us and separate us from the idle whilst the new ideology about work gives it that moral force, and stature, which detracts from those tricky questions about the allocation of social rewards and the mechanisms through which they are distributed. To be 'hard-working' allows immediate access to judgement over others, it becomes not a description of the nature of work (which may very well be hard, repetitive and of no value whatsoever) but its value is that it is a position from which others can be judged. It vindicates what used to be described as 'washing the coal', that 'common task' (as the Anglican hymn describes it) which somehow makes the performer of that task a better person, whilst at the same time legitimating vicious policies towards those who are not 'hard working'.

But the second function of the invocation of the binary between the 'hard-working' and the apparently idle is that in framing that latter category as the thieves of the rewards of the worthy it encourages us to avoid remembering that the rewards for the 'hard-working' are getting fewer and fewer: disposable income is decreasing as are all forms of public support. The New Policy Institute recently reported that 600,000 people in London are now paid below the living wage, 40% more than five years ago. The very city that sections of the Coalition Government are hailing as the most 'vital' metropolis of the twenty first century only functions through the work of this group of the population. Moreover it is a population which has to compete (with little or no hope of success) for housing in a market where prices are rising out of all contact with average earnings. Even those outside this group cannot but notice that even the hardest of hard work cannot absolutely guarantee a secure standard of living.

This new fervour for 'hard work' and the 'hard working' comes at the point when many voices, and many of them far from the usual suspects, are suggesting that the political economy so closely connected to the ethic of hard work, that of capitalism, has reached a point where its interests and impact over the lives of millions, are now so distant from political control, and yet so beset by contradiction, that it cannot survive in its present form. In this context, the

vindication of what seems to be a mindless new religion, that of hard work, seems singularly pointless as well as inappropriate. Not only does this religion divert attention from more important questions about the morality of rewards (or the lack of them) but it also completely fails to ask questions about the value of work and its products. The doctrine of 'hard working' then becomes the worst kind of religion, refusing questions and possibilities, and all too likely to guarantee less the pious boredom of paradise than the life doomed to unrewarded servitude.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Mary Evans is a Centennial Professor at the LSE, based at the Gender Institute. She has written on various aspects of gender and women's studies and many of those publications have crossed disciplinary lines between the social sciences and the humanities. She was a founding editor of the *European Journal of Women's Studies* and is presently working on a study of narratives – and continuities – of class and gender. Her latest edited book is [Gender](#) (Routledge, 2010).