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## [Book review] Making a Living, Making a Difference

Ilmakunnas, Johanna

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*Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*

Maria Ågren (ed.)

New York & London, Oxford University Press, 2017

258 pp., £74.00 (hardback), £26.49 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-19-024061-5 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-024062-2 (paperback)

*Making a Living, Making a Difference* is the result of ‘Gender and Work’, a major research project, led by Professor Maria Ågren at Uppsala University. Leading questions of the project – and the book – have been how women and men made a living, what their work meant for themselves, their family and kin, as well as for the state locally, nationally and globally in early modern Europe. These are by no means original or unusual research questions, whereas the approach in answering them is quite subversive. Instead of approaching work by drawing on occupations, titles and institutional normative sources such as legislation or taxation, the project has invented a novel methodology, the verb-oriented method, which the team has also presented in a number of previous publications and conference papers, both in English and Swedish.

To better understand people’s everyday practices and contingent nature of work, the verb-oriented method, based on big data and digital humanities, analyses how people described their own work and the work done by others. The project members have collected a database of some 16,000 verb phrases, spanning from 1550 to 1799, and divided them into four main categories: court records, accounts, petitions and diaries, offering a wide array of different sources, both administrative (court records, petitions and partly accounts) and private (diaries and partly accounts). Importantly, the methodology, sources and possible distortions are discussed in detail. I found this both important and inspiring as a historian: the methodology is so rigorously argued and revolutionary that the significance of it cannot be overestimated.

The size of the dataset and analysis of verbs describing what people actually did have produced important new knowledge on a number of key issues in understanding early modern societies. These include the work done by servants, soldiers, lower civil servants, children, old people, workers on an ironmaking estate, peasants and gentility, among others, and the importance of multiple employment, seldom analysed in previous scholarship. Ågren and her team stress that in Scandinavian societies, both men and women worked and that the work of women was often crucial for their making a living as a family. The Nordic two-supporter model has long historical roots and the hegemony of the male-breadwinner model of the long nineteenth century is something of a parenthesis, as *Making a Living, Making a Difference* shows convincingly, and it stresses that the state formation in seventeenth-century Sweden would have been impossible without every subject contributing to it. Furthermore, the results clearly show that gender was a less important category for distinction in early modern societies than marital status and household position. These nuances alter significantly our understanding of women’s agency and gendered work, because even though many tasks were gendered, almost none were performed distinctly by men or by women.

*Making a Living, Making a Difference* as an academic book is very much a team project, perhaps a novel way to work for the historians contributing to it. Thus, I would argue that the book is important not only in exploring how people worked in the past but also how historians work today and how they will work in the future. Whereas most scholars, including economic historians, co-author their research, historians tend to publish single-authored work. However, the scale of the ‘Gender and Work’ dataset and the skilful combination of macro and micro levels, as well as referring to previous scholarship in the field, clearly show the advantages of teamwork when tackling complex research questions, big data and long timespans.

The verb-oriented method established within the ‘Gender and Work’ project has been inspired by the work of Sheilagh Ogilvie, especially her book *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (2003). In turn, the verb-oriented method has stimulated other scholars exploring early-modern work. Two examples are ‘Women’s Work in Rural England, 1500–1700’, a project led by Jane Whittle at the University of Exeter, and the international research network, ‘Producing Change: Gender and Work in Early Modern Europe’, led by Alexandra Shepard at the University of Glasgow. I would also count this inspiring of other scholars as a key result of the ‘Gender and Work’ project. In the near future, we will hopefully see important rereading and re-evaluating of women’s and men’s work in early modern Europe, building a more nuanced picture of early modern societies and households and everyday practices of women, men and children across the social spectrum.

Notwithstanding the innovative approach and break-through results, certain limitations in *Making a Living, Making a Difference* are disturbing. These include how work is defined as a concept and how early modern Sweden is understood. What work is and how it is defined are complicated issues that scholars have tried to understand in numerable studies. Hence redefining and re-conceptualising work are significant outputs of the book. Work is analysed as an activity and practice – something people did for living. Ågren also argues that work is ‘practically everything people do, except sleep, eat, and enjoy themselves’ (p. 213–14). Despite this generous notion, the ‘Gender and Work’ project – very understandably and well justified – concentrates on how people made their livings and how ubiquitous work was in early modern societies. However, this leaves aside artistic and intellectual work not mentioned in the book and shows that the concept of ‘work’ etymologically includes a notion of both the physical and the intellectual sides in most European languages, as argued for instance by Hannah Arendt in her influential *The Human Condition* (1958).

The complicatedness of defining work is clear when the authors seek to understand work done by a noblewoman, whose diary and household accounts are included in the dataset. The analysis is less rigorous than when regarding other social groups, and the authors do not take an opportunity to discuss whether work had the same meanings for noblewoman Christina Charlotta Rudbeck and peasant Elias Jonsson, whose diaries from the mid-eighteenth century are analysed in parallel. Furthermore, the authors do not draw on recent research on nobility and work in early-modern Sweden,<sup>1</sup> even though the wide reading and knowledge on previous research is impressive, clearly contributing to the arguments developed within the ‘Gender and Work’ project. Furthermore, it would have been extremely interesting to read how the clergy understood work, both work done by others and by themselves as

clergymen, because Lutheranism defined so strongly the everyday practices in early modern Sweden and because *Making a Living, Making a Difference* offers new insights into the household and patriarchy more generally.

Researching and writing about pre-nineteenth-century Sweden perhaps leads to the assumption about historic Sweden is the nation-state Sweden of today, especially if the question is not discussed explicitly. The ‘Gender and Work’ project has deliberately tried to avoid this problem and aims to research the geographical area that was the early modern Swedish realm, which included today’s Finland, Baltic States and areas such as Pomerania in Northern Germany (see map on p. 28). This is succeeded in *Making a Living, Making a Difference* only partially: the large data set collected for the project is almost exclusively collected from areas that belong to present-day Sweden (see map on p. 15). Furthermore, the dataset starts from the 1550s, when Finland (scarcely included in the dataset) was part of Sweden, whereas southern parts of present-day Sweden (included in the dataset) belonged to Denmark until the 1650s.

The dataset that serves as the basis for the research in *Making a Living, Making a Difference* includes a modest sample of court records from one Finnish town (Tammissaari/Ekenäs) from the period 1678–1681, and the primary sources listed under bibliography include court records from only one regional state archive (Vaasa/Vasa) in Finland. For example, there is no data from Turku/Åbo, even though it was one of the biggest and most important towns in early modern Sweden. Furthermore, there are no sources or data that could enlighten the history of work in the Baltic States. This can presumably be explained because the status of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was different from the Finland that was part of Sweden for centuries. However, this omission of sources and data will, one anticipates, be corrected in future, since work within the ‘Gender and Work’ project continues according to both the book and information on the project website.

Naturally, the bibliography includes a number of publications by Finnish scholars, but the amount could have been larger, especially because research on the early modern period is lively in Finland. Surprisingly, the pioneering work on midwives by Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen is not referred to in Swedish, but in Finnish. This is somewhat confusing because it is evident that the analysis of midwives in *Making a Living, Making a Difference* would have benefited from a more thorough reading of Vainio-Korhonen’s *De frimodiga: Barnmorskor, födande och kroppslighet på 1700-talet* (2016). Also, scholars such as Olle Sifén and Anna-Maria Åström, among many others, have written extensively on work and household economy at manors, and referring to their work as part of the analysis presented would have been welcome.<sup>2</sup>

Every work has its strengths and weaknesses. Despite the criticism expressed above, *Making a Living, Making a Difference* is unquestionably one of the most inspiring and well written academic books I have read for a long time. It is a powerful work on gender, work and everyday life in early-modern Sweden, shedding light on past phenomena – work and gender – that are even more complex than scholars, historians amongst them, often even assume. The most important results presented in *Making a Living, Making a Difference* are the relativity of the importance of gender, often (over)stressed in previous scholarship; rereading the meanings of marriage and household; and the importance of the two-supporter model for society and state formation in seventeenth-century Sweden. The methodology in general and the verb-oriented method in particular are pioneering and will

presumably have a major impact on digital history, especially because the ‘Gender and Work’ project combines rigorous analysis of big data and macro-level to micro-level and individual experience. For the ‘GaW’ project, tools of digital humanities are simply tools for the research, not the focus in themselves. This is one of the great strengths of the book, alongside novel results and fresh insight on work, gender and everyday life in early modern European society.

Johanna Ilmakunnas  
Åbo Akademi University  
johanna.ilmakunnas@abo.fi

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Åström, ‘Work and Working’; Ilmakunnas, ‘Adelns arbete’; Karin Sennefelt in *Politikens hjärta* and Charlotta Wolff in *Vänskap och makt* also approach the agency of aristocracy from a point of view that could be fruitful for understanding the notion of work for different social groups.

<sup>2</sup>Åström ‘Work and Working’; Sirén, *Sarvlaks*; Vainio-Korhonen, *De fremodiga*. Since the work by Vainio-Korhonen is referred to in Finnish, her other book on women’s work, *Ruokaa, vaatteita, hoivaa*, should also be mentioned.