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This article explores the theme of work in Wolfgang Staudte’s *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946). It begins with a brief introduction to the history of the German work ethic. From there, it demonstrates how the various characters’ attitudes toward work can be read from a historical perspective. It argues that focusing on the theme of work enables students to develop a nuanced understanding of how the film exposes continuities in German history, reflects the challenges of postwar reconstruction, and initiates the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The final section of the article contains practical tips and worksheets to guide classroom discussion.

Upon returning from a concentration camp to the devastation of postwar Berlin, Susanne Wallner, the heroine of Wolfgang Staudte’s *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946), desires simply to work and to live: “Arbeiten! Leben! Endlich einmal leben!” (Pleyer 1965: 175).¹ Throughout the film Susanne displays the tenacious work ethic representative of the German *Trümmerfrau*, pursuing her activities as an artist, homemaker and rebuildler “with a gusto that borders on the obsessional” (Carter 2012: 16). As her pairing of the verbs *arbeiten* and *leben* suggests, Susanne views work as one of life’s defining elements. Her conviction that work constitutes not just a means of survival but life’s highest moral purpose has a long history in German thought. From Martin Luther’s understanding of occupation (*Beruf*) as a religious calling to the Nazi slogan *Arbeit macht frei* above the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp, the Germans’ approach to work is an integral part of their national identity (Campbell 1989: 13-15). The postwar years are no exception. Indeed, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* demonstrates how the German work ethic survived the Hitler years and formed the foundation for what would become known as the *Wirtschaftswunder*. Yet the film is by no means an unequivocal glorification of the German attitude toward work. It also illustrates some of Max Weber’s reservations about the modern work

¹ Unless indicated by page references, citations are taken directly from the film.

ethic in *Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus* (1904/05), particularly through its portrayal of Ferdinand Brückner, a former Nazi officer turned successful postwar entrepreneur.

Fraught with inherent contradictions (Moeller 2007: 115) and arguably subverting any position regarding German guilt and responsibility, this film nonetheless offers students a historical document from which they can learn about the postwar era, the challenges of *Trümmerfilme*, and the history that led to the destruction of Germany. Focusing on the theme of work offers students a good lens through which to view the film, as the topic is both familiar to them and pertinent to their daily lives. Accessing *Die Mörder sind unter uns* through the historical development of the German work ethic helps students to recognize how the film reflects a distinct cultural legacy and how one can engage with that legacy in order to develop a particular interpretation.

Martin Luther sets a milestone in the history of the German work ethic as the first theologian to promote work as a means of serving God (Tilgher 1965: 49). Prior to the Protestant Reformation, “work was seen as serving God indirectly – it was not valued as inherently rewarding or spiritual, but for the ways it supported God’s kingdom” (Budd 2011: 164). Luther elevates the status of work by defining *Beruf* as a divine calling (Weber 1922: 63). For him, it is unimportant whether one works as a priest or a carpenter: “So long as work is done in a spirit of obedience to God and of love for one’s neighbor, each variety of labor has equal spiritual dignity” (Tilgher 1965: 49). Thus the spiritual significance of work can be understood as a product of the Protestant Reformation (Weber 1922: 69).

In the course of the eighteenth century, Luther’s conception of work as an act that is pleasing God is complemented by a bourgeois understanding, in which work is simultaneously pleasing to man. The idea that work provides the foundation for happiness in this world as well as the next becomes increasingly accepted toward the end of the century (Conze 1972: 172). This new ethos finds its most famous expression in Friedrich Schiller’s *Das Lied von der Glocke* (1798): “Arbeit ist des Bürgers Zierde, / Segen ist der Mühe Preis; / Ehrt den König seine Würde, / Ehret uns der Hände Fleiß” (1992: 65). The poem juxtaposes the technical details of bellcasting with the various stages of human life, promoting a vision wherein life and labour are inextricably linked.

However, with the additional rewards of work also come additional duties. During the Enlightenment, the belief that one must work in order to fulfill one’s obligations to God is supplemented by the conviction that one must work in order to fulfill one’s obligations to humanity. Thus eighteenth-century German thought adds both earthly rewards and earthly obligations to its formerly transcendent philosophy of work. Johann Gottfried Herder summarizes these developments in a poem entitled *Gegengift* (1793-97): “Arbeitet / Ihr Weisen in dem Volk, befördert euer / Und vieler Glück! Wo wohnt Beruhigung? / Wo Segen der liebevollen Gottheit? Wo / Genuß der Tage? Wo das edelste / Vergnügen? Nur in Arbeit!” (Herder 1969: 52). In these lines, the divine and the secular stand side by side as the twin pillars of the German work ethic, a pairing characteristic of the German Enlightenment (Schmieder 1959: 431).

The nineteenth century marks the Golden Age for the German philosophy of work (Tilgher 1965: 90). From German idealism to Marxism, this century sees an explosion of philosophical theories about the relationship of human beings and their work, a summary of which would far outstrip the boundaries of the present article.² What is important from our perspective is the opposition between the basic socialist and bourgeois attitudes to which the above-mentioned philosophies give rise. In *Joy in Work, German Work* (1989), Joan Campbell contends that the primary difference between the two is that the former seeks liberation *from* work while the latter favours liberation *through* work (1989: 27). Socialists focus their attentions on obtaining higher pay and shorter hours, while the representatives of bourgeois thought “develop the notion of joyful work as an inspiration for social change” (1989: 27). Whereas the socialists want to overhaul the existing economic system, the bourgeois seek to solve the class problem by inspiring the lower classes with their own celebrated work ethic (1989: 28-46). Significantly, these generalizations do not hold true for Karl Marx, whose visions for a communist utopia vacillate between the ideal of self-realization *through* work and liberation *from* work (Ehmer and Saurer 2005: 514).

During the course of the nineteenth century, the German work ethic also undergoes a process of secularization (Schmieder 1959: 337). It gradually divests itself from the religious and humanistic foundations established during the Reformation and the

² For summaries of the various theories, see Conze and Tilgher.

Enlightenment, replacing them with an empty feeling of duty or *Berufspflicht*, as Max Weber argues (1922: 204). Weber holds that the modern spirit of capitalism no longer requires the support of religion or humanism, that work has become an absolute end in itself (1922: 46). Ironically, the modern work ethic, after having shed its religious foundations, becomes a religion of its own, i.e., the fundamental purpose and meaning of life:

Totale Arbeit – totale Technik, und dazu gesellt sich als Drittes: totaler Krieg. Der Mensch ist zum Nur-Arbeiter geworden, und er muß tätig sein, getrieben von Kräften, die ihn zu beherrschen drohen. [...] Schließlich wird verkündet, daß um der Arbeit willen gearbeitet werden muß und die bis in Kleinigkeit geregelte Arbeit, die von einer soldatischen, von einer uniformen Masse geleistet wird und zu der nicht nur der autoritäre Staat verpflichtet, ist dann u.U. auch fähig, größte Aufgaben zu lösen; die Freiheit des einzelnen [...] schwindet. (Schmieder 1959: 444)

Schmieder views the religion of work as complicit in the atrocities committed during the Second World War. However, the religion of work or spirit of capitalism, which Weber claims characterizes early twentieth-century society, differs significantly from the Nazis' ideology of work, which gains influence in the 1920s.

The Nazis use the tradition of German work as a principle of national unity, arguing that Germans are bound together not only by blood but also their superior work ethic (Campbell 1989: 321). In 1920, during a speech at the Hofbräuhaus in Munich, Hitler defines the Aryan work ethic as one based on a sense of duty to the community, which he contrasts with the egotism of the money-hungry Jewish capitalists:

Ariertum bedeutet sittliche Auffassung der Arbeit und dadurch das, was wir heute so oft im Munde führen: Sozialismus, Gemeinsinn, Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz – Judentum bedeutet egoistische Auffassung der Arbeit und dadurch Mammonismus und Materialismus. (Phelps 1968: 406)

Hitler contrasts the Germans, industrious and altruistic, with the parasitic and egocentric Jews. Nazi condemnation of a work poor ethic, as Hitler defines it, extends to all of those who are unwilling or unable to work, labeling them asocial or work-shy (*asozial* or *arbeits scheu*), even if they are genuinely ill. Hitler views all such individuals as aberrations in an otherwise robust German nation (Barker 2013: 32).

A short close-up of a newspaper headline, “2 Millionen Menschen vergast [...] in Auschwitz,” connects *Die Mörder sind unter uns* to the Nazis' ideology. The ready association of Auschwitz and the slogan *Arbeit macht frei*, placed above its entrance, serves as a chilling reminder of the Nazi understanding of murder as a form of work.

The words contained a sardonic taunt for those enslaved, deemed unproductive, i.e., no longer useful to the Nazi cause, and thus to be exterminated. *Die Mörder sind unter uns* reveals continuities and discontinuities in the history of the German work ethic. It portrays its theme of work with reference to the Christian, humanist, bourgeois, socialist, and Nazi traditions. In the following analysis, we demonstrate how approaching the film through the theme of work offers new insights into its immediate and wider historical contexts.

The main plot line of the film features the character development of its first protagonist Dr. Hans Mertens. The introductory scenes portray Mertens as the epitome of what the Nazis call a *Gesellschaftsfremder* (Schechtman 2009: 117). The former Nazi field surgeon now suffers from mental illness, is constantly intoxicated and refuses to work. Mertens’ development from an *Arbeitscheuer* to a productive, working member of society draws its motivation from the film’s other characters, some serving as role models and others as antitheses. Each character represents a different type of work as well as a different attitude toward his or her occupation. By comparing and contrasting their various relationships to work, the film draws attention to ideologies that supported Nazi war crimes but also outlines a strategy for moving the country forward.

Yet both of the film’s main arguments – the need to demand justice for war crimes and to restore the country’s faith in humanity – prove inadequate. First, the film’s logic, which is reflected in its title, draws an artificial line between perpetrator and victim: the assertion that the *murderers* are amongst *us* implies an us-against-them dynamic, which oversimplifies questions of historical responsibility (Joel 2010: 1). Second, the film’s constant emphasis on work and rebuilding reflects, even encourages, what W.G. Sebald refers to as the period’s “erstaunliche Fähigkeit der Selbstanästhetisierung” (Sebald 1999: 20), a refusal to deal with individual and collective guilt and suffering in favour of a dogged resolve to move forward.

The first scenes of the film establish an opposition between the two main protagonists (Brockmann 2010: 204). Mertens is introduced as an unemployed drunkard, whose idleness contrasts starkly with his female counterpart’s industriousness. He, morose and unkempt, meanders through the ruins of Berlin toward the entrance of a bar, while she, impeccably groomed and visibly awestruck by her surroundings, walks

purposefully from the ruins of a train station to her apartment. The following dialogues, in which both protagonists speak alternately with Herr Mondschein, reinforce this opposition by developing the theme of work.

Susanne's conversation with Mondschein, a Jewish fellow tenant and resident optician, indicates an initial ambivalence in her attitude toward returning to work, but her preliminary hesitation quickly gives way to steadfast determination. In a confused and fragmentary series of statements, Susanne expresses her astonishment at the pace with which life has ostensibly returned to normal: "Jetzt sitz' ich wieder hier, genau wie damals... Sie arbeiten, als sei nichts geschehen in all den Jahren. Es ist wie ein... ich kann es noch gar nicht fassen! [...] Es ist so schwer, so schwer zu vergessen." The aposiopesis and the ambiguous pronoun *Sie* indicate Susanne's disbelief, her inability to comprehend how people can move on with their lives after experiencing the horrors of war. The pronoun may simply be understood as the formal address for Mondschein, i.e., the second-person singular *Sie*. However, understood as the third-person plural *sie*, it refers to *them*, i.e., people in general (*die Menschen*), whom she mentions a few lines earlier.³ From this ambiguity the viewer may infer that Mondschein acts as a representative of postwar society. While Susanne searches for ways to react to this apparent return to normalcy, Mondschein merely exclaims, "[...] das ist ein Glück" (1965: 175).

For Mondschein, the return to work and everyday life is unequivocally positive. The film frames his decision to reopen his workshop as the key to a state of self-willed amnesia. To Susanne's objection that it is difficult to forget, he responds: "Nein, es ist leicht, Fräulein Susanne, wenn man ein Ziel hat, um das es sich lohnt [zu arbeiten]" (1965: 175). The easiest way to forget is to concentrate on the present and the future, to set goals and to work toward them. Following the previously cited words, Susanne proclaims her desire to work and to live: "Ja! Arbeit! Leben! Endlich einmal leben!" Only now does Susanne assume the ethic of indefatigable work associated with the German *Trümmerfrau* and an unwillingness to talk about her past.

Does Susanne's decision to embrace Mondschein's and, by extension, the Germans' strategy of a work-induced amnesia imply that the film advocates work as a means of repressing traumatic memories? Robert Schechtman, for example, is critical of

³ Cf. Vatter (2009: 97).

Mondschein for precisely this reason. As he points out, Mondschein’s occupation is to help people see more clearly but he has the opposite effect on Susanne: “In urging her to forget, he effectively denies her character – and others like her – the possibility of testifying their trauma. Rather than healing herself, she channels her energies into helping others” (2009: 118). Although Mondschein discourages Susanne from confronting her past and refuses to deal with his own, the film as a whole is not critical of him. On the contrary, it advocates his strategy of willful forgetting. He represents, as his name suggests, the means by which one can navigate the night, the darkness of postwar Germany.⁴ Thus, this sympathetic father figure impedes not only Susanne’s ability to grieve but also his own. According to the logic of the film, work and the resultant amnesia are preferable to wallowing unproductively in one’s traumatic experiences.

The subject of work is also raised between Mertens and the elderly optician in a scene, which takes place the following morning and offers a counterpoint to the earlier conversation. Like Susanne, Mertens expresses astonishment at Mondschein’s industry. He finds the old man washing windows and dusting his workshop, although the effort seems futile considering the visible damage the building sustained during the bombings: “Muß denn das um 6 Uhr früh sein? Sie sollten lieber ausschlafen” (1965: 177). Relaxation is unthinkable for Mondschein, who claims that he has too much to do: “Ich habe noch so viel zu arbeiten” (1965: 177). During this interaction, the audience learns that Mondschein is working in order to prepare his house and business for his son’s return. In contrast to Susanne, Mertens reacts to Mondschein’s diligence with pessimism, attempting to discredit his plan: What if his son has already made his own fortune? What if he never returns? To Mertens’ hypotheticals, Mondschein responds: “Dann will ich gern umsonst gearbeitet haben” (1965: 178). Although he toils to provide a better life for his son, who may no longer be alive, his work also provides him with a sense of purpose and a source of distraction.

Mondschein’s claim that he would have happily worked for nothing if his son turned out to be wealthy reflects the legacy of Enlightenment thought. Mondschein’s primary reason for working is to help others, his son in particular. However, even if his son

⁴ Cf. Weckel (2000: 113).

should not need his assistance, he will not regret the hours he worked but will have laboured gladly, because work constitutes a reward in and of itself. Mondschein's philosophy is not only a vestige of Enlightenment ideas but also directly contradicts Nazi ideology. Rather than being parasitic and egocentric, Mondschein proves an extremely hard-working small business owner, who has nothing to do with the ostensibly parasitic financial system. He is not interested in wealth but in working hard and improving the lives of others, thus clearly contravening the fascist prejudice.

As a doctor in prewar Berlin, Mertens shared this enlightened humanist ideology of work. As an officer in the army, he became a perpetrator or, at the very least, a *Mitläufer*, supporting the Nazis' murderous system with his labour. Until Christmas Day 1942, he seems to have been able to come to terms with his actions. But the atrocities of that day transformed him into an *Arbeitsscheuer* or *Gesellschaftsfremder*, in Nazi terminology. Prior to becoming an officer, Mertens took pride and joy in helping others, as he does once again at the end of the film. The fascist reverence for German work and, by extension, their expectation of duty and loyalty changed this once compassionate, ambitious physician into an asocial, unemployed alcoholic.

Mertens' years as a soldier on the Eastern Front have destroyed the foundation of his work ethic. When describing his first solo surgery to Susanne, he points to his compassion for human suffering and personal ambition as the factors that motivated him to excel. Faced with the decision to perform an unauthorized surgery or allow the patient to suffer, he rose to the occasion: "Seine Not, sein Vertrauen, mein brennender Ehrgeiz [...] ich habe es entgegen allen Vorschriften und trotz der Warnung der alten erfahrenen Operationsschwester gewagt" (165: 188). He became a surgeon because he enjoyed helping others and took pride in his achievements. He defied authority in the name of humanity and, as he openly admits, ambition. Having since borne witness to, and become complicit in, the atrocities of World War II, he has neither the compassion nor the ambition to continue working in any capacity. He cuts himself off from the suffering around him: "ich bin ein ganz besonderer Chirurg, einer, der kein Blut sehen kann, einer, der das Weinen und Stöhnen seiner gequälten Mitmenschen nicht mehr hören will, und einer, der weiß, daß es sich nicht lohnt, diese Menschheit zu kurieren" (1965: 178). The film singles out a specific traumatic experience as the source of Mertens' misanthropy.

Yet even before the flashbacks to Christmas Eve 1942, the night Brückner orders a massacre of 121 innocent Polish civilians, Mertens specifies a particular worldview as the target of his derision. He identifies the bourgeois mentality as the source of society’s evils, resisting Susanne’s attempts to restore order to their apartment and exclaiming bitterly, “wenn es mir notwendig scheinen sollte, *die bürgerliche Ordnung* wieder aufzurichten, werde ich es selber tun” (1965: 178, emphasis added). Once she succeeds in establishing order despite his opposition, he complains to Mondschein that she has made him into a *Spießbürger* (1965: 180). Mondschein, ostensibly oblivious to Mertens’ displeasure, since he also seeks to clear up the destruction and become productive, interprets this as a positive development: “Dann ist ja alles in Ordnung” (1965: 180). In response to Mondschein’s naive defense of bourgeois comfort, Mertens retorts: “Natürlich ist alles in Ordnung. Bei einem Spießbürger ist immer alles in Ordnung” (1965: 180). Mertens despises the *Spießbürger* not only for his shallow materialism but also for the willingness to conform to social expectations it reflects.

Mertens’ accusation that Susanne is a *Spießbürger* begs the question whether her attachment to order and cleanliness merits his censure. On the one hand, the film clearly endorses her postwar mentality of moving forward; the goal of Mertens’ character is to return to work and to embrace Susanne’s domestic happiness. On the other hand, her insistence on order and forgetting mirrors Brückner’s approach to postwar survival. *Ordnung* and *vergessen* are also key words in his vocabulary. He describes his apartment as “tip top in Ordnung” and refuses to confront the bombed-out sections of Berlin, “so was will man ja gar nicht mehr sehen, so was will man vergessen, und zwar möglichst bald” (1965: 183; 185). Superficially, Susanne and Brückner espouse a similar philosophy: work and forget, work to forget. The film draws parallels between their characters in order to demonstrate the difficulty of detecting the depravity of Brückner’s worldview. Susanne finds him charming, as would the audience, at least initially. On the surface, he shares her penchant for optimism and hard work. The difference between them lies not in their approach to postwar reconstruction, but in their reasons for adopting that approach.

Susanne’s reasons are, on the whole, altruistic. Although she uses work as a form of escapism, she also genuinely wants to help others and considers everyone equal and

worthy. While the original screenplay was more explicit about her political allegiances, classifying her as a communist (Weckel 2000: 108), the film is subtler in its description of her political views. However, there are still indications that she holds communist sympathies, including her wartime imprisonment and her Käthe Kollwitz homage “Rettet die Kinder” (Carter 2012: 110). In any case, it is ironic, though not surprising, that Mertens accuses her of having bourgeois tendencies. It is ironic because he, the Nazi *Mitläufer*, accuses her, the communist dissenter, of being a *Spießbürger*, i.e., of an uncritical adherence to social conventions. On the other hand, his accusations are not surprising because her positive work ethic does indeed recall the nineteenth-century bourgeois mantra of joyful labour, making her communist convictions align more with Marxist utopianism than the nineteenth-century workers’ movement.

Brückner, by contrast, represents the Weberian spirit of capitalism. He works neither to serve God nor to help humanity but simply to work and, after the war, to profit. By adhering to the belief that work is an end in itself, he replaces the religious foundation of the Reformation and the humanism of the Enlightenment with an empty void of *Berufspflicht*. His philosophy of work, which he also uses to justify his war crimes, exemplifies Weber’s concerns about the emptiness and unscrupulousness of modern capitalism. Brückner explains his philosophy to Mertens: “Man muß es nur verstehen. Ob man aus Kochtöpfen Stahlhelme macht oder aus Stahlhelmen Kochtöpfe, das ist egal! Nur zurechtkommen muß man dabei, darauf kommt’s an!” (1965: 185) For Brückner, work is work; it does not matter whether one kills innocent people or produces household goods as long as one *gets by*.

Brückner’s opportunism is difficult to detect because his conviction that he is doing good, coupled with his charisma, allows him to conceal it beneath an apparent altruism. In his address to his employees on Christmas Eve 1945, he calls on them to share his enthusiasm for the process of reconstruction, attempting to establish a sense of solidarity through his use of the first-person plural:

Wir werden diese neue Welt errichten, mit unseren eigenen Händen errichten, wir wissen, der Weg dahin wird lang sein, auch schwer und hart, aber nichts soll uns zu viel sein, denn wir wissen auch, daß an seinem Ende ein friedliches Deutschland liegt, das Deutschland, das wir lieben, das niemals untergehen darf, in dem die Gerechtigkeit regiert und die Menschlichkeit triumphiert! (1965: 189)

Brückner’s speech, which focuses on the present and future but also contains Nazi rhetoric, recalls the political position of the nineteenth-century bourgeois, insofar as it features a successful capitalist trying to inspire the proletariat with his own superior work ethic. The irony is that although Brückner claims to share the plight of his workers, the viewer has already seen the luxury of his home and the frivolity of his nighttime excursions. The film further exposes his manipulation and the hypocrisy of his appeal to justice and humanity through montage. While Brückner speaks, the picture fades to scenes from Christmas Eve 1942, when he ordered a massacre of Polish civilians, thereby superimposing the past onto the present. The juxtaposition reveals his apparent goodwill toward his employees as a different manifestation of the same opportunism that led him to murder 121 innocent people three years earlier. Brückner accomplishes both tasks, the speech to his factory workers and the orders to his soldiers, without betraying the least insight into the hypocrisy of his position. As a wealthy industrialist, he expresses false solidarity with his proletarian employees, and as a professed Christian, he mercilessly murders innocent civilians.

The flashback to Christmas Eve 1942 also provides an example of how the film’s religious imagery exposes the contradictions inherent in Brückner’s behaviour and the Nazi regime at large. After he has given orders for the massacre, the German soldiers gather around a Christmas tree singing *O du fröhliche*, while the camera captures the image of a gun hanging on a wall beside a crucifix. The combination of song and image underlines the incompatibility of the Nazi regime with Christian doctrine. *O du fröhliche* is a German Christmas carol, which is traditionally sung in Protestant churches at the end of the Christmas Eve service. It features a military metaphor, in which heavenly armies (*himmlische Heere*) pay homage to the honour of Christ. This intertextual reference reiterates the irony already inherent in the juxtaposition of the gun and the crucifix, the massacre and the Christmas festivities. Instead of celebrating the redemptive power of Christ, as the song indicates, this Christian army murders millions of innocent people.

Religion, the film suggests, should have become suspect, having proved impotent in the face of Nazi ideology; yet believers continue to worship, as seen in the ruins of a church near the end of the film. People’s desire for hope means that blind faith persists, making them vulnerable to further exploitation and deception. Thus, the

charlatan astrologist Timm flourishes, profiting shamelessly from the aftermath of the war. He experiences an economic boom, or “Hochkonjunktur” (1965: 179), by offering a false sense of security for which people like Mondschein happily pay. Having relieved the old man of his money, Timm comments, “Ja, wie leicht ist es doch, den Menschen eine kleine Freude zu machen” (1965: 180). The irony and smugness in his voice suggest that he does not take his prophetic visions seriously but, like Brückner, rationalizes his exploitation as a means of helping others. His form of capitalism preys on human weakness, taking advantage of people’s desire for certainty in uncertain times.

The Western Allies recognized Brückner (Carter 2012: 111) and Timm as embodiments of modern capitalism and consequently distrusted the film as a critique of free-market economies. Their concerns were well founded to the extent that the film suggests the spirit of capitalism forms the basis of Brückner’s war crimes and his postwar scavenging. Brückner earns a fortune by converting soldiers’ steel helmets to cookware. Remanufacturing such resources from war- into peace-time tools (and vice versa) is simple and profitable. When describing his success to Mertens, he conflates the concepts of war and profit: “Aufbau heißt die Devise! Brückners Kompanie marschiert wieder!” (1965: 183). In this context, *Devise* literally means *motto* or *slogan*, but in a wider sense it can also be connected to *Devisen*, foreign currency or exchange. The plan is simple: exchange war with peace but continue to profit. Brückner’s true motto is money, not reconstruction. His use of military vocabulary to describe his business enterprise (e.g., *Kompanie* and *marschieren*) and business vocabulary to describe his military tactics (e.g., *liquidieren*), suggests affinities between wartime and peacetime activities, between killing and economic ventures. His surname, *Brückner*, further emphasizes his role as a bridge between the Nazi regime and postwar society, crossing from one to the other with little effort. He feeds on the carcass of postwar society, exemplifying the same self-interest that prompted him to massacre an entire Polish town. In a morbidly ironic twist, the Nazi officer embodies the egoistical conception of work of which Hitler accused the Jews.

At the beginning of the film, Mertens allies himself with the economic practices of Brückner and the astrologist. He indulges in a self-centered form of capitalism, which seeks profits but offers nothing in return. He seeks to pawn Susanne’s camera in exchange for cigarettes and alcohol, consumes luxury goods while others struggle to

make ends meet, and refuses to work, although his medical skills are desperately needed. Susanne draws attention to his wastefulness, as he opens yet another bottle: “Dafür, was ein kräftiger Zug kostet, muß ein Familienvater einen ganzen Tag lang arbeiten. Haben Sie darüber einmal nachgedacht?” (1965: 180) Mertens does not respond to this question verbally but returns to the hospital the next morning in a futile attempt to resume work, which ends in a temporary psychic breakdown.

Ironically, it is not Susanne but Brückner who brings about the final turning point in Mertens’ character development. When Mertens lures Brückner into a desolated area of Berlin with the intention of killing him, a woman appears out of the rubble, asking him to save her little girl. The scene threatens to devolve, roles reversed, into a repetition of Christmas Eve 1942, where Brückner pleads for humanity and Mertens refuses to listen. The similarity between the two situations catalyzes the latter’s transformation. Brückner draws attention to the potential loss of the life, using words that mirror those employed by Mertens three years earlier: “Hier ist ein Menschenleben in Gefahr, noch dazu ein Kind” (1965: 186). Finding himself in Brückner’s position, having to choose between compassion and self-interest, Mertens springs into action and preforms an emergency tracheotomy. When the mother asks how she can repay him for his kindness, he refuses on the grounds that the joy he derived from helping her was all the payment he requires. His excitement at having rediscovered his career and his calling mirrors the mother’s happiness: “ich bin ja so... so... glücklich,” to which he responds, “[...] ich bin es auch!” (1965: 187). This exchange is not meant ironically but rather underscores that it is the ability to work that brings Mertens back to life.

Die Mörder sind unter uns develops its theme of work in order to demonstrate the evils of the Nazi regime and to present Germany with a path for moving forward. It portrays ideologies of work from various periods of German history, drawing on religious, humanistic, socialist, bourgeois and Nazi thought in order to construct its characters’ worldviews. Mondschein and Susanne represent an altruistic conception of work, which draws on humanist, Marxist, and bourgeois traditions. Brückner and Timm exemplify the spirit of capitalism, which Max Weber forebodingly links to a perverse belief in cultural superiority. Weber foresees the consequences of a work ethic devoid of religious and ethical foundations, placing particular emphasis on the

inevitable self-righteousness of a duty-driven capitalist: “Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz: dies Nichts bildet sich ein, eine nie vorher erreichte Stufe des Menschentums erstiegen zu haben” (1922: 204). Weber’s warning offers a new perspective on the character of Ferdinand Brückner, a man who excels at his various occupations but has no motivation to work beyond his desire to get by. Over the course of the film, Mertens develops from an unproductive, self-indulgent egoist like Brückner and Timm to a compassionate and contributing member of society like Mondschein and Susanne.

Possible Teaching Approaches

Focusing on the theme of work enables students to understand *Die Mörder sind unter uns* in its immediate and wider contexts. They develop a nuanced understanding of how the film exposes (dis)continuities in German history, reflects the challenges of postwar reconstruction, and initiates the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. At the same time, they become aware of the contradictions inherent in the subject matter as well as the ethical dilemmas surrounding various attitudes toward work. Mapping a historical understanding of the German work ethic onto the film’s characters and then comparing the various ideologies allows students to access the film from a new perspective and thus to understand it in the wider context of German history.

The worksheets are designed to promote discussions on the history of the German work ethic and the film’s theme of work. *Arbeitsblatt 1: Hinführung zum Film* helps the students reconstruct the development of the German work ethic using exemplary quotes from various centuries. Use of the worksheet should be prefaced by a short introduction to the topic, which can be derived from the body of this article. In the end, learners are able to see how the German understanding of work evolved, compare various conceptions of work, and reflect on their own use of the term.

The purpose of *Arbeitsblatt 2: Arbeit am Film* is to relate the students’ newly acquired historical understanding of work to the film. This worksheet aims to flesh out the various characters’ attitudes toward work, while helping the students to recognize the centrality of work to various worldviews. In addition to a matching exercise, the worksheet also features a plethora of questions, which can guide the students in their individual readings of the text. It is neither necessary nor desirable that students develop the same reading that was outlined in this article. Indeed we are convinced

that our ideas constitute a mere fraction of what is possible from this perspective. However, regardless of differences in analysis, students should be able to recognize contradictions in the film’s logic (e.g., the Nazi *Mitläufer* accusing the communist dissenter of social conformance). They should reflect on the dissonance between what the film tries to argue and what it actually achieves.

Arbeitsblatt 3: Wortschatzübungen reinforces the vocabulary that is specific to the film and to the time period.

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Arbeitsblatt 1: Hinführung zum Film

Ordnen Sie die verschiedenen Aussagen, die die Wichtigkeit der Arbeit erläutern, ihrem Autor zu. Tipp: eine der Aussagen hat zwei unterschiedliche Quellen.

1 _____ Die Arbeit [...] ist eine hochheilige Sache, an der sich Gott freut, und durch welche er dir seinen Segen schenken will [...] die Frommen und Gottesfürchtigen arbeiten mit frischem und freudigem Geist, weil sie den Befehl und Willen Gottes erkennen.

2 _____ Arbeit ist des Bürgers Zierde, / Segen ist der Mühe Preis; / Ehrt den König seine Würde, / Ehret uns der Hände Fleiß.

3 _____ Ariertum bedeutet sittliche Auffassung der Arbeit und dadurch das, was wir heute so oft im Munde führen: Sozialismus, Gemeinsinn, Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz – Judentum bedeutet egoistische Auffassung der Arbeit und dadurch Mammonismus und Materialismus.

4 _____ Die Arbeit ist zunächst ein Prozess zwischen Mensch und Natur [...Der Mensch] tritt dem Naturstoff selbst als eine Naturmacht gegenüber. Die seiner Leiblichkeit angehörigen Naturkräfte, Arme und Beine, Kopf und Hand, setzt er in Bewegung, um sich den Naturstoff in einer für sein eignes Leben brauchbaren Form anzueignen. Indem er durch diese Bewegung auf die Natur außer ihm wirkt und sie verändert, verändert er zugleich seine eigne Natur.

5 _____ Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz: dies Nichts bildet sich ein, eine nie vorher erreichte Stufe des Menschentums erstiegen zu haben.

6 _____ Arbeit macht frei.

- A) Karl Marx *Das Kapital* (1867)
- B) Max Weber *Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus* (1904/05)
- C) Martin Luther *Auslegung der Psalmen* (1533)
- D) Friedrich Schiller *Das Lied von der Glocke* (1798)
- E) Adolf Hitler *Hitlers grundlegende Rede über den Antisemitismus* (1920)
- F) Heinrich Beta *Geld und Geist* (1845)
- G) Toraufschrift an den nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern (1940-1945)

Zur Diskussion:

Welche Ideologien werden durch das jeweilige Zitat vertreten?

Woran erkennt man, welche Aussage von welchem Autor stammt?

Ordnen Sie die Zitate chronologisch an. Kann man eine Entwicklung der deutschen Arbeitsethik ableiten? Worin hat sie ihren Anfang oder was verliert sich im Verlauf der Zeit?

Welche Verbindung besteht zwischen "Arbeit macht frei" und den vorhergehenden Zitaten? Welche Verbindungen können Sie zu diesen Worten herstellen? Welche möglichen Bedeutungen kann man diesen drei Worten zuschreiben? Denken Sie an die erarbeitete geschichtliche Entwicklung, wie ändert sich die Bedeutung dieser Aussage im Laufe der Geschichte?

Work Sheet 1: Preparation for the Film

Match the following quotations about the importance of work in German society to their respective authors. Hint: one of the quotations has two different sources.

1 _____ Work is a holy thing, which is pleasing to God, and through which He desires to give you his blessing... pious and God-fearing men work with a fresh and joyful spirit, because they recognize God's will and command.

2 _____ Work is the adornment of the burgher, / Blessing the reward for toil, / If dignity honours the king, / We are honoured by industriousness of hands.⁵

3 _____ Arianism means an ethical conception of work and thus everything we stand for today: socialism, sense of community, the common good before the individual good. Judaism means the egoistical conception of work, and thus mammonism and materialism.

4 _____ Labour is, in the first place, a process between man and nature [...Man] confronts nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion the natural power of his body, arms and legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate nature's products in a form that is useful for his livelihood. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he also changes his own nature.

5 _____ Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nonentity images that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.

6 _____ Work liberates (you)

⁵ Translation by Walter H. Schneider

A) Karl Marx *The Capital* (1867)

E) Adolf Hitler *Hitler's Foundational Speech on Anti-Semitism* (1920)

B) Max Weber *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/05)

F) Heinrich Beta *Money and Spirit* (1845)

C) Martin Luther *Commentary on the Psalms* (1533)

G) Sloan above the entrance to the national socialist concentration camps (1940-1945)

D) Friedrich Schiller *Song of the Bell* (1798)

Discussion questions:

What ideologies of work are reflected in the quotations? How do you know which quotation belongs to which author? If you put the quotations in chronological order, can you see a development in the German attitude toward work?

What associations do you have with the quotation “Work liberates” (“Arbeit macht frei”)? Could this quotation have different meanings depending on the historical context (e.g., Protestant Reformation versus Nazism)?

Arbeitsblatt 2: Arbeit im Film

Ordnen Sie die verschiedenen Aussagen den Filmfiguren zu, die sie in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* sprechen. Verschiedene Aussagen können von der/vom selben Sprecher/in stammen.

1_____ Dafür, was ein kräftiger Zug kostet, muß ein Familienvater einen ganzen Tag lang arbeiten. Haben Sie darüber einmal nachgedacht?

2_____ Man muß es nur verstehen. Ob man aus Kochtöpfen Stahlhelme macht oder aus Stahlhelmen Kochtöpfe, das ist egal! Nur zurechtkommen muß man dabei, darauf kommt's an!

3_____ Es ist leicht [zu vergessen], wenn man ein Ziel hat, um das es sich lohnt.

4_____ Wie leicht ist es doch, den Menschen eine kleine Freude zu machen.

5_____ Wir werden diese neue Welt errichten, mit unseren eigenen Händen

errichten, wir wissen, der Weg dahin wird lang sein, auch schwer und hart, aber nichts soll uns zu viel sein.

6_____ Ich bin ein ganz besonderer Chirurg, einer, der kein Blut sehen kann, einer der das Weinen und Stöhnen seiner gequälten Mitmenschen nicht mehr hören will, und einer, der weiß, daß es sich nicht lohnt, diese Menschheit zu kurieren.

A. Hans Mertens

B. Herr Mondschein

C. Herr Timm

D. Susanne Wallner

E. Ferdinand Brückner

Zur Diskussion:

Kann man aus diesen Aussagen einen Kontext ableiten oder erarbeiten?

Welche Ideologien zur Arbeit geben sie wider?

Erinnern diese Ideologien an bestimmte geschichtliche Zeitabschnitte in der deutschen Geschichte?

Warum arbeiten bestimmte Menschen im Film, andere aber nicht? Sind deren Motivationen altruistisch oder (selbst)aufopfernd?

Inwiefern werden die Charaktere durch ihre Einstellung zum Arbeiten definiert?

Kann man aus deren Arbeitseinstellung ein moralisches Dilemma feststellen?

Arbeitsblatt III: Wortschatzübungen

Definieren Sie die folgenden Wörter und formulieren Sie Beispielsätze. Hat Ihre Muttersprache eine Eins-zu-eins-Übersetzung oder müssen Sie die Bedeutung des Wortes paraphrasieren? Welche Wörter sind spezifisch für den deutschen Kontext und warum?

1) die Trümmerfrau, -en

2) der Trümmerfilm, -e

3) das Wirtschaftswunder

4) die protestantische Ethik

5) die Vergangenheitsbewältigung

6) der Beruf, -e

7) die Berufung, -en

8) der Spießbürger, -

9) die bürgerliche Ordnung

10) der (Wieder)Aufbau

11) der Mitläufer, -

12) arbeitsscheu

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German work ethic, Rubble films, *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, German postwar society, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*