Exploring the history of mentality

On the early work of Le Goff[1]

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Introduction

Spoleto, 1975. The conference focuses on symbols and the ways they are understood in the Middle Ages. The speakers are distinguished, their presentations lengthy, detailed, and often somewhat traditional. There is plenty of *Geistesgeschichte* and related art history, with reverent interpretations of texts and images. The room is warm. The simultaneous translations go on and on. When Le Goff begins his talk, it feels as if someone has just opened the windows. He's an enthusiastic man, slightly stout, and speaks with striking clarity. His topic: the rituals between lord and vassal during the granting of a fief. The material was familiar—Ganshof had meticulously compiled it.[2] But Le Goff approaches it differently: not from a legal or institutional perspective, but an anthropological one. The ritual by which a lord and vassal enter their relationship is a sequence of actions that, together, convey meaning. There is always a spatial element—the location matters. The future vassal approaches his prospective lord to show his submission. Le Goff draws an unusual cross-cultural comparison, not from Japan—which had been done before—but from sub-Saharan Africa: 'paying a visit' as a sign of respect and subordination. Just as the 'movements' made by the two participants are meaningful, so too are the objects exchanged: a clod of earth or a branch stands for the land transferred; a sword represents the military service the vassal owes. And the gestures that follow—the commendation (where the vassal places his hands in the lord's), the oath, and

[1] Earlier versions of this text were presented at a meeting of the Amsterdam Historical Society on February 7, 2005, and during the course Culture Historical Research for PhD students at the Huizinga Institute on March 28, 2005. I would like to thank Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld and Anne-Ruth Wertheim for their thoughtful reading and feedback on my manuscript. Many thanks as well to Peter Raedts for information about Chenu, to Ton Goeman for advice on Dumézil, and to Farouk Achour for sharing his insights on political developments in postwar France. Many of Le Goff's works have been translated into English, and some into Dutch. These translations are always listed after the French titles in the bibliography.

[2] Ganshof, *Qu'est-ce que la féodalité?*

the kiss—express the relationship between lord and vassal, whether hierarchical or reciprocal.[3] In the subsequent discussion, Le Goff's tone is courteous yet firm. I notice his eyes—they dart quickly in different directions, as if searching for unexpected connections.

Even back then, Le Goff was already recognized as an innovator. *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* – his first major work – was published in 1964 and sparked considerable interest, both positive and negative.[4] That trend continued. Le Goff has always attracted like-minded thinkers, critics, and those who kept their distance from his ideas. His books are widely cited, and his influence can be seen in research that directly engages with the themes he introduced. Especially in France, this now venerable historian has recently become something of an 'institution,' honored with awards, reprints of earlier work, and publications of various pieces that had remained unpublished or scattered in journals. All this makes it harder to clearly view his early works and to understand how they were perceived when first released.

Beyond that, there are a few overview articles and just a single small book on the subject, as well as a range of responses—some in-depth, some more brief—published in articles and books on the innovative trends in French historiography and the history of mentalities in the latter half of the twentieth century.[5] Le Goff's books also received extensive reviews when they were

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[3] Le Goff, 'The Symbolic Ritual of Vassalage' (1976).

[4] For example, see the reviews by Blok (enthusiastic) and Despy (partly appreciative, but also highly critical).

[5] Concise summaries of his work can be found in Oexle, 'Das Andere, die Unterschiede, das Ganze', Mostert, 'De historicus als menseneter', and Schulze-Irrlitz, *Moderne Konturen historischer Anthropologie* (more detailed, but somewhat disorganized). Revel and Schmittt (eds.), *L'ogre-historien*, published to mark his seventy-fifth birthday, contains valuable information about his activities as a researcher, teacher, editor, and public intellectual, along with the most extensive bibliography of his work to date (see pp. 337–353). Rubin (ed.), *The work of Jacques Le Goff*, which resulted from a conference in Cambridge in 1994 dedicated to his work, features several interesting responses to aspects of his oeuvre, especially from Dunbabin and Murray (to be discussed later), as well as informative contributions about the spread of *Annales* ideas beyond France, and in particular Le Goff's own concepts; the thorough section on Flanders and the Netherlands was written by Walter Simons.
Le Goff's work is further discussed in various books and articles on new French historiography and historical anthropology: Gurevich, 'Medieval culture, and mentalité according to the new French historiography' (highly recommended); Burke, *The French historical revolution*, 71–74; Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (inadequate and unfair); Raphael, *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre* (emphasizing his role as organizer and spokesperson for the '*Annales*' historians); Martin, *Mentalités médiévales* (mainly on his methodological innovations); Goerz, *Moderne Mediävistik*, especially pp. 84–89; Kuchenbuch, 'Zwischen Lupe und Fernblick', 276–277 (where no

released, and he gave numerous interviews, mostly to newspapers, occasionally to academic journals, and twice in book form,[6] where he naturally emphasized his own perspective on his work. In a few cases, one of his books sparked significant debate, as with La naissance du Purgatoire.[7] There was also some controversy over the concept of 'popular culture,' which he helped introduce in the 1960s and 1970s.[8] However, a more systematic reflection on Le Goff's body of work—one that does justice to the methodological innovations that define it —has yet to emerge. This article is an attempt to take a step in that direction.

Perspective

This reflection on Le Goff's work is shaped by my own experience, drawn from years of curious and often admiring engagement with his writing.

His first major book, *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, offered me—and many of my peers—a completely fresh view of medieval Western Europe when it was published in 1964. His essays from the 1960s and 1970s, later collected in *Pour un autre Moyen Âge* (1977), showed how he drew this perspective from medieval sources. At the time, these articles were truly inspiring material for anyone interested in the mentalities of medieval society. Throughout my research, I have often relied gratefully on his ideas.[9] Since the

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page numbers are given, see the name index).

The reception of Le Goff's work can be divided into four phases: The first phase featured a small but passionate following in his Paris circle. In the second phase, individuals and small groups elsewhere became interested in his work. The third phase saw these people incorporate Le Goff's ideas into their research - in Flanders and the Netherlands from the 1970s onward (Simons, 'The *Annales* and medieval studies in the Low Countries', 115–120). The fourth phase consists of the resonance cited here from the 1990s and beyond.

[6] Le Goff and Heurgon, *Une vie pour l'histoire*; Le Goff and De Montremy, *À la recherche du Moyen Âge*.

[7] See, for example, Gurevich's 'Popular and Scholarly Medieval Cultural Traditions,' Bredero's 'The Middle Ages and Purgatory,' De Jong's 'Het vagevuur,' and Genicot's 'L'Occident du Xe au XIIe siècle' pp. 420–426.

[8] The literature on this subject is vast and seemingly endless. It often feels like the same arguments keep resurfacing in various combinations. For instance, Van Engen's 'The Christian Middle Ages' strongly rejects the notion of folk culture, while Schmitt's 'Religion, Folklore, and Society' offers an equally passionate rebuttal. Le Goff's 'Aspects savants et populaires' (1984) takes a more measured, yet firm, stance in defense of the concept. For further insight, see Raphael, *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre*, 371-373.

[9] Künvel, 'Een vurige draak', pp. 109–114. See also, *Beelden en zelfbeelden van middeleeuwse mensen*, pp. 35–38, 64–67, 162, 243.

early 1990s, I have read several of Le Goff's essays with students.[10] Their feedback was usually positive, sometimes enthusiastic. In my view, these works remain an excellent introduction to the history of mentalities.[11]

It is too soon to tell which parts of his body of work will endure over time—the passage of years has not been long enough for that. We also cannot know whether future generations of researchers will remain interested in his topics. Still, he undoubtedly stands as a central figure in medieval studies—and in historical scholarship more broadly—throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. For this reason, taking a problem-oriented approach to his work might offer us insights into the field of medieval studies during that era as a whole: the new opportunities that emerged, and also some of the challenges that future scholars—if they choose—might take up.

In this article, I discuss Le Goff's work from the period when the history of mentalities perspective was taking shape—the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. I shall focus mainly on his early syntheses, *Marchands et banquiers du Moyen Âge*, *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge* , and articles from *Pour un autre Moyen Âge* that are thematically related.[12] These publications highlight several key themes: the rise of distinct group cultures among merchants and intellectuals, the various ways time was experienced in medieval society and the prevailing views on labour during that era. By following how he approached these topics, I want to illustrate how each line of research developed from the previous one and highlight the connections between the different projects.

La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval was written during the period of Le Goff 's academic career that I am about to describe. Still, I have chosen not to discuss the entire book here, since its themes are so broad and varied that it stretches well beyond the subjects I just mentioned. Only those chapters of *La civilisation* that directly relate to those topics will be addressed here.

Unlike many commentators who have retrospectively interpreted Le

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[10] The articles discussed here focus on perceptions of time and attitudes toward work, as well as pieces on group cultures: 'Peasants and the Rural World' (1966), 'Culture cléricale et traditions folkloriques' (1967), 'Culture ecclésiastique et culture folklorique' (1970), and 'Mélusine maternelle et défricheuse' (1971).

[11] Throughout this article, I shall refer to this branch of historical science as 'history of mentality'—the most common term in the 1960s and 1970s, including in Le Goff's work from that period—rather than the more recent alternatives, 'historical anthropology' and 'cultural history'.

[12] Toexplore this, I shall draw on Le Goff's highly insightful intellectual autobiography, '*L'appetit de l'histoire*' (1985), as well as Le Goff and Heurgon's *Une vie pour l'histoire* (1996), and notes from several conversations I had with him. These autobiographical accounts offer valuable insight into the political and intellectual climate of the era. Le Goff, a gifted storyteller, demonstrates in the tales of his life that narrative history and analytical history can complement each other beautifully. *histoire-récit* and *histoire-problème* (story and analysis) can go hand in hand.

Goff's work—often adding their own stylizations—I aim to trace the evolution of his scholarship by reading his publications as they appeared over time. This way, we can see how the new perspective of mentalities history gradually took shape.

A bit about Le Goff's life and career

Le Goff was born in 1924 in the port city of Toulon. His childhood home sat right where the working-class neighborhoods met the shopping district, overlooking what he called 'the most beautiful market in Provence.'[13] He quickly became aware of the different social atmospheres in various parts of the city. Growing up, he was the son of teachers: his father taught English, and his mother gave piano lessons. He often pointed out that their family's social standing improved thanks to their careers in education.[14] Could this be one of the roots of his later fascination with social and cultural differences, and with intellectuals as interpreters of those differences?

He grew up with a strong sense of political engagement at home. His father was a Dreyfusard, and his mother was a left-leaning Catholic who became politically active in the mid-1930s. At just twelve years old, Le Goff joined an organization dedicated to fighting antisemitism and racism.[15] His progressive views continued to guide him throughout his life, leading to political action, involvement in the French Resistance during World War II, opposition to French government policies in Algeria and Indochina, and a few years of membership in the PSU.[16] As I see it, this commitment manifested in his scholarship through a deep interest in the largely anonymous majority of medieval people and a respect for their cultural identities.

According to Le Goff, his parents' marriage was built on love, mutual respect, and shared moral convictions. Yet, they differed in one significant way: his father, who had turned away from the Catholic Church during the Dreyfus Affair, was secular and anti-clerical, while his mother remained a devout Catholic. Their union was only possible through a series of compromises.[17] This aspect of their relationship often draws the attention of

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[13] Le Goff, 'L'appétit de l'histoire', 194-198.
[14] *Ibidem*, 198.
[15] *Ibidem*, 181-182, 200-202.
[16] *Ibidem*, 204-205, 222-223. The Parti Socialiste Unifié was a small left-wing socialist party founded in 1960. In 1974, the PSU merged with the social democratic party.
[17] When preparing for the church wedding, his father's confession was replaced by a candid conversation with a notably open-minded priest; the church wedding ceremony itself was reduced to its bare essentials; strict agreements were made regarding the upbringing of any future children; and Le Goff's father respected that his wife kept a 'devotional corner' in her room. Le Goff's account of his early and later

commentators. Perhaps it allowed Le Goff to view Christianity both from within and as an outsider.[18] Maybe this is one reason why, time and again, his work returns to the question of how powerful the real

The true impact of Christianity on medieval society, and the other forces at play alongside it, are worth considering. Even more important, perhaps, is that such a complex origin—where differences are not hidden but accepted—can foster a reflective mindset and an independent way of thinking.

Le Goff attended elementary school in his hometown of Toulon, then went on to high school in Marseille before joining the French Resistance in the Alps. After the war, he pursued history studies in Paris. Among the prominent medievalist scholars he learned from at the time were Charles-Edmond Perrin and Maurice Lombard. After spending a year teaching in Amiens, he continued his studies for several years in Oxford and Rome. In the late 1950s, a research position with Michel Mollat took him to Lille, which paved the way for his transition to a non-university research career in Paris. In 1960, he became a lecturer and staff member in the *Sixième section* of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*,[19] which, in 1962, became a position as *directeur d'études* (the equivalent of a full professor). This 'sixth section' brought together various historical fields with a distinctly interdisciplinary approach.

This appointment marked a pivotal moment in his professional life. At that time, the *Sixième section* was seen as an outlier in French academic circles—a true avant-garde, separate from the mainstream, but gradually earning its reputation from the sidelines.[20] One of its strengths was serving as a base and incubator for the journal Annales. With its somewhat separatist spirit, this group resembled earlier avant-garde movements, like the French Impressionists who organized their own forum with the *Salon des réfusés*, and Schönberg and his circle, who similarly created the *Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen* for private performances of their own works. This kind of separation phase is also common among many emancipatory movements. *Reculer pour mieux sauter*: sometimes you need to regroup and gain strength in a safe space before aiming for bigger challenges.

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experiences with Catholicism is nuanced. He views his mother as a victim of what Delumeau calls Christianity of fear, which left her less energetic and happy than she might have been. In contrast, he recalls encounters with priests striving to embody the Christian ideal, and remembers the nuns who cared for his mother in her old age (*Ibidem*, 180-194).

[18] According to Oexle, 'Das Andere, die Unterschiede, das Ganze', 141.

[19] A research institute where, unlike much university education, seminars were based on close reading of texts (hence the word pratique in its name). In 1975, following a reorganization, its name was changed to Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Le Goff and Heurgon, *Une vie pour l'histoire*, 167-175).

[20] Bourdieu, *Homo academicus*, 140-149, offers a brilliant analysis of this process. See also Raphael, *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre*, 157.

Le Goff's appointment came during the era when Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) was leading the research school. Braudel's work and teaching placed a strong focus on social and economic history. But by around 1960, the intellectual climate was beginning to shift, with the first signs of a more mental or cultural approach to history emerging. Le Goff's appointment was very much in line with this new direction.[21]

Over time, he decided not to write a traditional, hefty dissertation. For French academics who wanted a university career, this was usually a must. His choice was driven by a clear dislike of the university system.[22] By not pursuing a doctorate, he opened the door to an alternative career path.[23] The *Sixième section* became his professional home for good.

In 1969, Braudel stepped down from the editorial board of the journal *Annales*, which he had led for many years. Le Goff took his place, together with Ferro and Le Roy Ladurie. In 1972, Braudel left the *Sixième section*, and Le Goff stepped in as its head. From that point on, he became a leading voice of the 'Annales-movement'.

1. Early Works

Looking at Le Goff's body of work today, three major pieces stand out: *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* (1964), *La naissance du Purgatoire* (1981), and *Saint Louis* (1996). *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* is a sweeping portrait, where Le Goff depicts an entire society and culture across a vast stretch of time, from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance, and covering an expansive area—essentially all of Western Europe. In *La naissance du Purgatoire* he zeroes in on a single theme: the emergence of the concept of the afterlife. Again, he spans a wide historical and geographical range, tracing the idea from its pre-Christian roots in the ancient Near East all the way to Dante's celebrated epic. *Saint Louis* focuses on one individual—King Louis IX of France—but explores him in broad context: how different groups mythologized the king, his relationship with the feudal system, the monarchy, the Crusades, and more.

Each of these three works was groundbreaking when first published, yet they also carried a certain 'classic' quality, thanks to their highly synthesizing approach. What is more, many essays from collections like *Pour un autre Moyen Âge* and *L'imaginaire médiéval* are thematically connected to these

[21] Raphael, *Ibidem*, 158.
[22] Le Goff, 'L'appétit de l'histoire', pp. 207, 211 (where he refers to the Sorbonne as 'dusty'), 212, 218-219.
[23] Raphael, *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre*, 321; Le Goff, 'L'appétit de l'histoire', 218-219.

studies.[24] It is easy to see why these works so powerfully shape our overall understanding of Le Goff's entire legacy.

But that is a perspective gained only in hindsight. If you look back in time and follow this body of work from the very beginning, a different picture emerges: that of a young researcher finding their footing in medieval studies during the 1950s, developing a distinct outlook, and gradually shaping unique research topics and the methods best suited to explore them.

This journey begins with two concise books: *Marchands et banquiers du Moyen Âge*, published in 1956, and *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge* from 1957, as well as the 1956 article, 'Dépenses universitaires à Padoue au XVe siècle.'[25] These publications signal the transition from Le Goff's formative years to his active roles as a scholar and teacher.

Merchants and Bankers

Marchands et banquiers du Moyen Âge was written for the *Que sais-je?* series. It is a popular synthesis intended for a general audience.

In this book, Le Goff focuses on the 'second half' of the Middle Ages, starting from the twelfth century, a period marked by growing trade, industry, and rapid urbanization. He pays particular attention to prominent merchants, bankers, and entrepreneurs, but always portrays them within the wider social fabric, highlighting their interactions with lesser-known townspeople, the nobility, and the peasantry.

When it comes to geography, Le Goff aimed to cover all of Western Europe, as his bibliography shows, but the main focus is on Northern Italy and Flanders. This emphasis likely reflects the economic importance of those two regions during the Middle Ages, but suggest that the places where the author spent time early in his career were influential. For Italy, he draws on the works of the outstanding Italian social and economic historians of the era—Lopez, Luzzatto, and Sapori. Regarding Flanders, he relies on classic studies by Pirenne and Espinas. From Espinas, he gathers the material for a dramatic account of the plutocrat Sire Jehan Boinebroke from Douai, a powerful figure and exploiter who was feared even after his death (pp. 49-52).[26]

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[24] This is especially true for *La naissance du Purgatoire* and *Saint Louis*. The connection between the essays from the 1960s and early 1970s and *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* is, as mentioned, more complex.

[25] Le Goff, *Marchands et banquiers du Moyen Âge*, which I reference from the eighth edition published in 1993. Also, *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge*, here cited from the Paris 1972 edition. As well as, 'Dépenses universitaires à Padoue au XVe siècle.' For more about these works, see Le Goff, 'L'appétit de l'histoire', p. 215.

[26] In *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, pages 361-362, Le Goff takes a close look at this dark figure and discusses Espinas' work on him in detail.

The structure of *Marchands et banquiers* is clear, though at first glance the topics it covers are not particularly unexpected. The four chapters explore, in turn, the professional activities of merchants and bankers, their social and political significance, their religious and moral attitudes, and their cultural impact. But Le Goff adds his own distinct touches, which, in hindsight, foreshadow themes he would develop in his later works. Many ideas he would elabourate during the 1960s and 1970s are already hinted at in this book.

One subject he briefly mentions here, but only fully explores later, is the distinction between the early and late Middle Ages regarding the Church's views on . He identifies a traditional, agricultural, 'feudal' work ethic rooted in Old Testament values, which dominates the early Middle Ages and continues to resist change in later periods (pp. 73, 92-93). He also observes a Church ideology from the later Middle Ages that adapts to the new economic realities of trade (pp. 77, 80, 82).

In this process of ideological transformation, he assigns a key role to the segment of the clergy focused specifically on new urban audiences—the mendicant orders (p. 95). This topic, still only suggested here, is explored more thoroughly in his later publications.

Another fresh perspective Le Goff brings is his view that how people perceived and managed time varied depending on the cultural background of different social classes (pp. 74 and 105). In short, he contrasts a traditional sense of time with a mercantile one. This distinction mirrors the earlier discussion about differing attitudes toward work. Le Goff would go on to explore this idea further in the 1960s and 1970s.

Finally, the mindset characteristic of the great merchants comes to be described as a *mentalité* (pp. 82-85)—a banner under which historians from around 1960 would enrich their field with this new perspective.[27]

All these shifts in focus toward the psychological aspects of social history go hand in hand with broadening the range of sources considered. Along with the handbooks for medieval merchants already used by his predecessors (p. 104), Le Goff cites theological writings—including a text aimed at social practice, a confessor's manual (p. 81),[28] and literary portrayals of merchants (pp. 17, 37, 79, 112). Literature often expresses emotional responses to what it describes, making these texts valuable for historians interested not only in practical realities—like the economic actions of medieval merchants—but also

[27] When it comes to attributing a distinct group mentality to medieval merchants, Le Goff had a predecessor: Armando Sapori, who devoted a separate chapter titled 'Physionomie du marchand' in *Le marchand italien au Moyen Âge, XI-XXVII*, where he explored, one after another, the patriotism, faith, and culture of merchants.

[28] Later on, he wrote an article about attitudes toward work in these types of texts: Le Goff, 'Métier et profession d'après les manuels de confession du Moyen Age' (1964); see also p. 74-75 below.

in the perceptions and images those realities created or evoked.

In this context: the authors' views on commerce, profit, interest, and related topics, along with their judgments about those who made a living from them. How groundbreaking was all this in 1956? Looking back, I believe the originality of *Marchands et banquiers* mainly lies in the choices Le Goff made among the academic options available at the time, in how he combined the known elements, and in the direction he intuitively shaped them toward, even then.

Le Goff often revisited topics connected to the influence of merchants on medieval society and mentality, urban life, and what is sometimes called the commercial revolution. That subject could easily deserve a separate analysis, but I shall just mention a few references here. In *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* the city and merchants appear as recurring themes in various contexts. For the second part of *Histoire de la France urbaine*, published in 1980, he provided a beautiful synthesis, and in 1999, he contributed a lively piece on the medieval city to the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval*, edited by himself and Jean-Claude Schmitt, revisiting several themes characteristic of his work.[29]

University Finances: Text Edition and Commentary

That same year, alongside the book on merchants, Le Goff published 'Dépenses universitaires à Padoue au XVe siècle'.[30] This was his second earliest article.[31] He later included it in his collection *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*. The fact that, twenty years on, he still felt it deserved reprinting is telling. The article is closely linked to *Marchands et banquiers* and to the book *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge*, which is discussed next.

This publication features editions of two texts: one listing the exam costs a student in Padua had to pay, and the other detailing professional expenses for university-affiliated jurists, both from the fifteenth century, each introduced with explanatory commentary. This commentary follows lines that are explored in more depth in *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge*. In places, it even develops into a research agenda. This is very characteristic of Le Goff: as he works through one problem, he encounters many others and sets them aside for future investigation—either for himself or for the reader. The result is an

[29] Le Goff, *La civilisation* (1964) pp. 102-113, 359-369, 375-376. Also see, 'L'apogée de la France urbaine médiévale' (1980), and 'Ville' (1999). Related themes can also be found in his short book *La bourse et la vie* (1986).

[30] Le Goff, 'Dépenses universitaires' (1956).

[31] His first publication, released when he was 24, dealt with a similar topic: 'A Czech student at the University of Paris in the 14th century' (1948). This is an impressive, detailed study packed with fascinating ideas.

engaging and open-ended argument. It is also fascinating to read an early piece like this with his later work in mind: what starts here as a passing suggestion sometimes later becomes a systematic method or a fully developed research theme. Here are a few examples.

Discussing celebratory banquets held for academic promotions, he draws connections to traditions from Greco-Roman antiquity, highlights the guilds' drinking gatherings as symbols of group identity, and references the anthropologist Marcel Mauss's observation about the link between communal drinking and gift-giving among the Germanic peoples. Based on this, Le Goff suggests that when studying medieval teachers and students, it is important to take these cultural-anthropological factors into account (p. 147, note 1). In his later studies, he would continue to draw on this kind of cross-cultural comparative material.

Research into the meaning of the medieval Latin term magister, which covers everything from someone at the top of the social ladder to a foreman in a workshop, could, according to Le Goff, reveal how the status of intellectual professionals in the Middle Ages depended on two very different value systems: one old and 'feudal,' the other 'modern' (p. 150 note 14). The logic behind this kind of semantic research is that when the meaning of a word shifts, or when new words start showing up in texts, it can signal a shift in reality that writers of the time felt compelled to capture in some way. Le Goff would go on to use this approach frequently, for instance when he examined medieval Latin terms related to our modern concept of 'work.'[32] This method was already common in many fields of historical research, especially when studying institutions. Le Goff brought it into the field of the history of mentalities on a large scale.

In the debate about whether intellectual work—teaching, for example—should be paid, he assembles a rich collection of sources, including texts by Augustine and the canonists, quotes from books of penance, and references to literature on the status of those who produced knowledge and education in ancient Greece and Rome (p. 149). This theme reappears in *Les intellectuels*, as well as in his later investigations into the perception of labour, expanding the question to encompass all forms of work: the emergence of wage in a society not previously based on it.

Medieval intellectuals

Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge, published in 1957, was commissioned by the

[32] Later on, he will interpret the twelfth-century innovation *purgatorium*, derived from the adjective *purgatorius*, as a sign of the emergence of the religious idea of purgatory as a separate space between heaven and hell. (Le Goff, *La naissance du Purgatoire).*

publisher Seuil. These days, we are so accustomed to lavishly produced books that it is hard to imagine just how special a little volume like this was back in the lean years of the fifties. The typography is elegant, the illustrations are thoughtfully selected, and it feels good in your hands. Alain Boureau has explained how Seuil developed this concept and how Le Goff 's book fit perfectly into it.[33] The publisher, which had its roots in the resistance, aimed to distribute high-quality works in attractive paperback editions to a wide and engaged audience. Le Goff 's focus on intellectuals as players within the broader society resonated with the concerns of many French thinkers of the time. Existentialism and Marxism (and the Sartrean blend of both) emphasized the political responsibility of intellectuals; the events of the era—Boureau mentions the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hungarian uprising (1956)—demanded people take a stand. For the politically engaged Le Goff, writing a book about medieval intellectuals and their place in society was a compelling project.

Les intellectuels is an enjoyable book. The pleasure Le Goff took in writing it shines through. According to Le Goff, the medieval university was an urban phenomenon. From the twelfth century onward, professors and students formed an urban intelligentsia that stood in contrast to an older group of scholars—clerics educated in the schools of abbeys and cathedrals, living within agrarian and feudal structures: Abélard versus Bernard of Clairvaux. This setting gave rise to a somewhat independent youth and counterculture. With lively detail, Le Goff portrays the Goliards, wandering students who held rebellious views on religion, politics, authority, and sexuality (pp. 29-40).

The urban intellectual was a *homo faber*, a craftsman among other city artisans, equipped with his own tools: intellectual techniques and books;[34] written transmission of culture began to take precedence alongside the previously dominant oral tradition; a new kind of book started circulating—not the luxurious manuscripts of early medieval monasteries, but study books and lecture notes copied quickly and in large numbers (pp. 63-69, 95-97).[35]

The thirteenth century marked a period of consolidation: the university emerged as a distinct institution. University officials began to resemble guild members, complete with their own group rituals, a sense of identity, and a tendency toward monopolies. These pragmatic intellectuals operated within the urban marketplace, and their commodity was education. This led to a strong push for paid instruction, with students seen as the buyers. At the same time, an older perspective on knowledge and education persisted: all

[33] Boureau, 'Intellectuals in the Middle Ages', 145.
[34] This idea reappears in Le Goff, 'Quelle conscience' (1964).
[35] This theme will be explored further in later research on literacy; see Marco Mostert, 'What happened to literacy?'.

knowledge comes from God, it should not be bought or sold, and must be shared freely—but only within strict church boundaries.[36] Le Goff considers it crucial that scholasticism failed to develop its own theory of . Thomas Aquinas remained indebted to Aristotle, who saw primarily as the work of slaves. The devaluation of manual work made solidarity between intellectual and manual workers impossible and hindered the emergence of a paid intellectual class (p. 116).

According to Le Goff, from the thirteenth century on, the universities entered a decline both intellectually and morally: they became more dependent on church and secular authorities, less accessible to poor students, and showed a growing tendency toward hereditary academic positions. Unlike in earlier times, recruitment was increasingly limited to one's own nation or region. And—by the time of humanism—the university's focus shifted from cities to royal courts, marked by an aristocratic attitude and a waning involvement in education. These, in broad strokes, are the main points of Le Goff's book.

Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge is partly an expanded version of the previously discussed article on the University of Padua. Many topics that were briefly mentioned there—like the increasing exclusion of poor students (p. 152) and the rise of a university caste mainly focused on income (p. 156)—are revisited in the book as signs of decline in the late Middle Ages, contrasted with an earlier era marked by greater social openness.

Some commentators have praised the book as an innovative attempt to blend social history and intellectual history in its study of the medieval intelligentsia.[37] The concept that unites both these spheres is 'intellectual work': on the one hand, this refers to the social frameworks in which this group operated, and on the other, to the nature and substance of their professional activities. In the 1960s and 1970s, Le Goff would broaden this theme to explore wider perspectives on labour in general.

His 'ahistorical' approach to medieval teachers and students has sparked considerable interest. After all, he borrowed the term 'intellectual' from twentieth-century realities. This approach is methodologically similar in history to what cultural anthropology refers to as an *etic* perspective—where the researcher examines the subjects through concepts rooted in their own culture (in contrast to *emic* research, which seeks to uncover the 'native' concepts of the people being studied).

In my view, this kind of *etic* research has three main strengths. First, the researcher is not tied down by the concepts and categories

[36] Check out the excellent typology of reward systems in *Les intellectuels*, 104-108.
[37] Boureau, 'Intellectuals in the Middle Ages', refers to research on pages 147-151 that builds on Le Goff's arguments. Dunbabin, 'Jacques Le Goff and the intellectuals', 158, 164-165.

found in medieval sources, allowing for a clearer sense of what they want to find out. Second, it sharpens their awareness of the differences between the concepts they bring from their own era and those they discover in medieval materials. Third, *etic* research tends to use broad, abstract terms like 'gender', 'forms of communication', and 'state', which makes comparative research possible. This aligns with Marc Bloch's call for a specialized historical vocabulary. Bloch argued that without terms like 'feudalism', 'capitalism', and 'class', researchers are left using limited lexicons that vary across time and place, making comparison difficult.[38] Bloch did not claim, however, that this method is the only path to truth.

Le Goff takes this 'ahistorical' approach even further. He argues that the population of the twelfth-century proto-university was capable of building solidarity with other urban producers, but this potential was blocked by the pursuit of university group interests. There is a clear echo here of twentieth-century leftist thinking—the idea that workers and intellectuals, united, can fight for a better future for everyone. It is no coincidence that, in 1977, Le Goff closes the foreword of his essay collection *Pour un autre Moyen Âge* with a quote from Rimbaud that bridges the gap between manual and intellectual work: 'La main à plume vaut la main à charrue'.[39] Personally, I see no issue with approaching the past through questions shaped by our own moral and political convictions, as long as we remain open to information from these historical texts that may challenge our views.

What has later research revealed about these ideas? I do not claim the expertise needed to provide a comprehensive summary of current studies on medieval universities and related topics.[40] Instead, I shall mention two direct responses to Le Goff's book.

When considering whether the population of medieval universities can truly be called intellectuals—in the sense of people who make their living through intellectual work—Verger argues in a clear, thoughtful article that this only partially reflects reality. Many university officials depended financially on positions within the church and were intellectually limited by the boundaries of orthodox beliefs. In addition, their ties to family or clan influenced their actions, and, as Le Goff also notes, they were not immune to the temptations of power.[41]

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[38] Bloch, *Pleidooi voor de geschiedenis*, 154-169, 'De nomenclatuur'.
[39] Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*, 15.
[40] See De Ridder-Symoens (ed.), *A History of the University in Europe I, The Middle Ages*, and the bibliography in Verger, 'Université'.
[41] Verger, 'Université', 1180.

In a sharp and witty article, Dunbabin takes a more nuanced view of several of Le Goff's claims. She contends that there was no mutual influence between the urban environment and the university. In towns with a university, it was the students who set the tone.[42] The urban environment did not shape them; rather, they shaped the city around them. Dunbabin is also skeptical of Le Goff's assertion that the university, at least in its early years, was accessible to children from lower social backgrounds, including those of farmers. There were exceptions, but for the most part, student life was expensive, which meant they had to rely on support from their families.[43] Verger, on the other hand, maintains that medieval universities did offer opportunities for social mobility to the less privileged—though it is impossible to measure this—and, importantly, upheld the principle of individual intellectual merit, which was a significant innovation.[44]

Le Goff maintained a lasting fascination with intellectuals as a distinct professional group. In *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, he examines them within broader contexts, grouping them into sections with telling titles like 'L'évolution vers le réalisme et le rationalisme', 'L'esprit scolastique,' 'L'intériorisation et le moralisme,' and 'L'humanisme.'[44] Two articles from the 1960s are thematically linked to *Les intellectuels*: 'Les universités et les pouvoirs publics' (1965), a concise report for a conference, and 'Quelle conscience l'Université médiévale a-t-elle eue d'elle-même?' (1966), a riveting analysis where, through close examination of a handful of texts and key figures, he uncovers larger trends.[45]

His research on from that period is closely connected. Finally, in *La naissance du Purgatoire* and his later work on the *exempla*—as Dunbabin rightly points out—Le Goff brilliantly explored the role of theologians as mediators between church doctrine and laypeople, a fruitful theme that has inspired other scholars.[46]

The earliest works: a progress report

Le Goff was given the task of writing *Marchands et banquiers* and *Les intellectuels* at a very particular point in his career—a time that could almost

[42] Dunbabin, 'Jacques Le Goff and the intellectuals', 158-161.
[43] *Ibidem*, 161-164. Schwinges, 'Student education, student life', 202-211, cautiously concludes that a significant proportion of students came from urban backgrounds, particularly from families of wealthy merchants and craftsmen. He strongly emphasizes the social barriers within the student population.
[44] Verger, 'Université', 1177-1178.
[45] Le Goff, *La civilisation*, 421-431 and 447-451.
[46] Dunbabin, 'Jacques Le Goff and the intellectuals', 164-165.

be called a temporary lull.[47] He enjoyed teaching high school, but only did it for a year. He never aimed for an academic career, and found that doing only research did not suit him either.[48]

At that time, he had several projects in mind. One of them focused on researching the student body at medieval universities, which led to two published articles. Eventually, however, he moved on from this project—or rather, he outgrew it and it eventually became part of *Les intellectuels*, a more comprehensive synthesis. He considered writing a dissertation on intellectual work at urban schools and universities, but that idea evolved into a broader project: a study on labour as a whole.[49] Another major project was an ambitious research effort focused on the role of salt in history. This dated back to his time working with Michel Mollat in Lille. He took the project to Paris, published a lively article on it in 1961 in Annales and contributed again on the topic in 1968, but that was his final word on salt.[50] Based on available information, it appears he never held a seminar on the subject at *the Sixième section*.[51]In the end, salt and he simply were not a good fit. As we shall see, his focus shifted in the early 1960s to other themes: time and .

In the mid-1950s, no one could have predicted what was to come. Le Goff, just past thirty, seized the opportunities that came his way and wrote books on merchants and intellectuals. These works, solid, engaging, and well-crafted, surely met the expectations of those who commissioned them. Yet he managed to infuse each with his own perspective, making these early publications hint in many ways at the scholarly path he would later follow.

2. Attitudes Toward Time

Le Goff had already touched on the theme of time in *Marchands et banquiers*.[52] In 1960 and 1963, he published two groundbreaking articles on medieval perspectives on time.[53] Since then, this has become one of the most widely explored topics in the study of historical mentalities.

When Le Goff started his research, the history of ideas about interest and usury had already been mapped out by economic historians focused on the

[47] This is a suggestion from Maaike van Berkel.
[48] Le Goff, 'L'appétit de l'histoire', 212-215.
[49] *Ibidem*, 215.
[50] Le Goff, 'Une enquête sur le sel' (1961). Four earlier articles on this topic from 1958-1960 and the piece from 1968 are listed in the 'Bibliographie', Revel and Schmitt (eds.), *L'ogre-historien*, 339 and 341.
[51] For this, I rely on the summaries of topics from his seminars by Raphael, *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre*, note 58 on p. 349, and Schmitt, 'Le séminaire', 23-31.
[52] Le Goff, *Marchands et banquiers*, pp. 74, 105. See also 54.
[53] Le Goff, 'Au Moyen Âge: Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand' (1960). Idem, 'Le temps du travail dans la «crise» du XIVe siècle' (1963).

rise of capitalism. They interpreted the Church's stance on interest and usury as a kind of opposition to economic progress that would shape the future. Through his studies on commoners and intellectuals, Le Goff concluded that these groups gradually formed their own views on what constituted fair compensation for their professional activities. He then added that time played a crucial role in this: the time required to carry out certain work, and also the time a loan was outstanding, with interest serving as compensation to the lender for not having access to their money during that period.

According to Le Goff in 'Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand', there was already an ecclesiastical way of measuring time—in monasteries, to call monks and nuns to their religious duties, and in towns and villages, to summon the faithful to mass. Meanwhile, cities developed their own system for managing time. The ringing of city bells marked the start and end of the workday, especially in the cloth industry. Time itself became a source of conflict in the class struggle between the urban merchant elite and the workers (pp. 56-57). In his second article on this topic, Le Goff adds that the economic crisis of the fourteenth century only deepened this conflict.[54]

He was able to rely on a wealth of studies during his research on time as seen in the literature of Greco-Roman Antiquity, the Old and New Testaments, patristic writings, and medieval theology. Notably, in the 1960 piece, the 'dossier' concerning the clergy is far more extensive than that of the townspeople. From urban life, he gives just one—though very telling—example: the bell in Aire-sur-la-Lys (in Artois), which was rung to mark the working hours of textile labourers. As explained in a 1355 text, this was because the city was governed by the drapers, and it was essential for workers to come and go at fixed times.[55] In his 1963 publication on experiences of time, he draws on much more evidence from urban settings, all hailing from Flanders and northern France.[56] He likely became familiar with these during his stay in Lille.

In his first article, he seems to still be influenced by the weight of intellectual history, though he has already started to put its importance into perspective. In intellectual history, one studies ideas, systems of thought, and consciously formulated ideologies, but it is often left unclear just how widely these ideas were actually spread. Put another way, there is a tendency to overlook just how far-reaching, socially, the conclusions drawn from a body of texts—especially those written by theologians, philosophers, or 'great writers'—really are. Le Goff addresses this issue theoretically by turning to a

[54] Le Goff, 'Le temps du travail', 68-72.
[55] Le Goff, 'Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand', 56.
[56] Le Goff, 'Le temps du travail', 69-72.

model proposed by the sociologist Halbwachs.[57]

Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) was, in the early 1920s, part of the intellectual community in Strasbourg where the ideas that would shape the *Annales* movement were taking root. He stood out as a boundary-crossing thinker, sharing concepts from Durkheim and other sociologists with his historian friends—an original mind and an accomplished stylist.[58] Toward the end of World War II, he was deported by the German occupiers and died in Buchenwald. Halbwachs believed that when a society is made up of different social groups—classes, ranks, and so on—each group develops its own way of relating to time.[59] Building on this, Le Goff gradually expanded his research to include a broader social perspective.

There is a noticeable shift in tone between his first piece about the experience of time and the article he wrote on the subject in 1963. In 'Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand,' Le Goff draws many connections between his own thoughts on changing attitudes toward time and theories about quite different phenomena—for example, Francastel's theory on the rise of perspective in painting[60] and Max Weber's ideas about the development of the capitalist mindset.[61] When he discusses the increasing accuracy demanded of merchants in timekeeping, he links it to their growing geographic knowledge and refers to psychological studies suggesting that these two cognitive skills develop together in children.[62] Regarding ideas about time, he takes a broad chronological sweep, spanning from Antiquity all the way to Nietzsche,[63] and offers plenty of suggestions for further research.[64]

In the second piece, there is a stronger focus on medieval texts. Alongside theological writings, rules of conduct for monks are also quoted: regulations

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[57] Le Goff ('Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand', 59-60) quotes Halbwachs, 'La mémoire collective et temps'.

[58] A clear introduction is Duvignaud, 'Preface.' Recently, Patrick Geary drew on Halbwachs's ideas in *Phantoms of Remembrance*.

[59] The classic exposition on this is Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*.

[60] Le Goff, 'Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand', 57-58. In a much later article, Le Goff rightly added the trend toward stricter metric standardization in polyphonic music (Le Goff, 'Temps' (1999), 1118).

[61] 'Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand', 59 note 36, but with clear reservations. In his preface to the French translation of *Die protestanstiche Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* he argues among other things that the developments described by Weber actually took place several centuries earlier than Weber believed (Le Goff, 'Preface' (1990)). Considering how much importance he attaches to the commercial revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that comes as no surprise.

[62] *Ibidem*, note 32 on page 57.

[63] *Ibidem*, page 61.

[64] *Ibidem*, pages 60, 64–65.

regarding penalties for those who arrive late to the canonical hours.[65] As mentioned earlier, the scope of this issue has also been broadened to include the urban context. Le Goff, compared to his previous work, presents a more nuanced contrast between how the church and the city handled time. Monks had already adopted a precise time structure before city dwellers became concerned with it; in urban settings, church time and secular time coexisted peacefully: a clock marking church hours and another indicating work hours could hang side by side in the same tower. Le Goff introduces a geographical aspect as well: this new way of tracking time first appeared in the most urbanized regions, especially where the cloth industry was most advanced, such as in Flanders and northern Italy.[66]

The difference in tone between these two articles may be linked to the distinct journals for which they were written. Le Goff made his debut in the journal *Annales* with 'Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand,' a piece that showcased his extensive theoretical insight and knack for drawing unexpected, thought-provoking connections. His second article, 'Le temps du travail,' was more measured in its theoretical approach and was published in the more traditional journal *Le Moyen Âge*. More significant than any strategic considerations, in my view, is simply the contrast between the two works themselves. This alternation between ambitious, innovative concepts and careful, thorough research is a hallmark of Le Goff's method, continually yielding intriguing surprises.

Switching to a different style—this time one that emphasizes clarity and synthesis—he expresses his ideas in the chapters of *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, which specifically focus on the experience and perception of time.[67] Because this book was published in 1964, the chapters were likely written around the same time as his articles. It is clear that Le Goff has the skill to approach the same topic in remarkably diverse ways within a short timeframe.

According to him, unlike what Marc Bloch believed, medieval writers were not indifferent to the concept of time. Their pursuit of precision, however, was focused on aspects different from ours: broadly, on events described in the Bible and, within a given year, on key liturgical dates. Le Goff illustrates this point with carefully selected quotes from *chansons de geste* and from a popular twelfth-century theological work, the *Elucidarium*. He then explores three socially distinct ways of relating to time (*temps sociaux*): natural and agricultural, seigneurial, and religious or clerical orders of time. At

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[65] *Ibidem*, page 74. A key addition to the case: these documents, rooted in everyday practice, may reveal more about the monks' group mentality than theological writings do.

[66] For more on all of this, see Le Goff, 'Le temps du travail', p. 74.

[67] Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, 211–236.

the foundation of it all lies the rhythm of nature—the cycle of day and night (with Le Goff providing vivid examples of the feelings and beliefs tied to this) and the changing of the seasons, which in this predominantly agricultural society demanded an annual cycle of labour. During the early Middle Ages, this cycle also shaped the secular-aristocratic order of time: feudal armies would set out in spring, and aristocrats would collect produce from farmers at set times in the fall. Secular poetry often featured a split between summer and winter, each with its own emotional connotations of joy and sorrow. According to Le Goff, the clerical structuring of time was also deeply rooted in the seasons. Nearly all major church holidays would in that part of the time of year when there is less work to be done on the land.[68] Urbanization gradually brought about its own way of relating to time, alongside those three intertwined time orders. But this change was slow to come; by the time it took hold, cities had already been developing for centuries.

How groundbreaking were these writings on time? Looking back, it is clear they reaffirmed the usual chronological division of the Middle Ages into two halves, and typical social categories (peasants, nobility, clergy, townspeople), but did so by exploring an entirely new subject. In retrospect, it is also evident that something as thoroughly practical as the organization of time had to be closely tied to the different social customs and how those changed. We know this now—thanks to Le Goff's research.

There is a certain kinship between Le Goff's work on time and that of the Polish historian Witold Kula (1916-1988) on measures and weights. In 1970, Kula published his influential book on the subject.[69] The main idea of Kula's book centers on the struggle among different social groups for control over units of volume and weight. Le Goff himself pointed out the connection between his research and Kula's: defining units of time, and setting standards for volume and weight—how many hours should be worked, how much should be delivered—are all sources of power, and that is precisely why there is conflict over them.[70] Kula and Le Goff were friends. Le Goff describes him as a deeply thoughtful, independently minded Marxist. The two likely enjoyed some very stimulating conversations.

Le Goff's later reflections on time and how it was experienced can be found in his article 'Passé/présent' (1988), which he wrote for an Italian encyclopedia. He would return to this topic one more time, in the article

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[68] Le Goff leans a bit in his own favor here. It is well known that plowing sometimes began early in the year.

[69] Kula, *Miary i ludzie* ('People and Measures').

[70] Le Goff, *La civilisation*, 225 and Idem, 'Préface' (1977), 13. Regarding their friendship, see Le Goff, 'L'appétit de l'histoire', 217-218. I was unable to consult Le Goff, 'Witold Kula' (1990).

'Temps' for the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval* published in 1999. In this piece, he places greater emphasis on the church's role, highlighting how the division of the week—and especially the requirement of Sunday rest—shaped the perception of time. An intriguing addition, based on Flandrin's research, is the observation that the liturgical calendar included periods when sexual activity was prohibited.[71] In this context, one might also recall Le Goff's studies of beliefs about the afterlife, where the concept of time played a significant role. These ideas focused mainly on how theologians and ordinary believers saw differences between the experience of time on earth and in heaven, hell, or purgatory. Furthermore, it was believed that a soul's stay in purgatory was not endless; surviving relatives could, through prayers and pious donations, influence how long it lasted.[72]

A quick note on works by other scholars who have addressed this same theme and referenced Le Goff's research. Goerjewitsch, Martin, and Goetz each offered their own comprehensive reflections on how time was experienced in the Middle Ages.[73] Essentially, they follow the same chronological turning points (Christianization, urbanization) as Le Goff. Goerjewitsch, however, makes a significant addition to the research by exploring how people in medieval pagan Scandinavia experienced time. According to him, instead of a solar-year system, it was the succession of generations that provided the main framework for understanding time.[74]

I would like to highlight two articles about perceptions of time that build on Le Goff's research and, in my view, offer fundamentally new perspectives. The Italian historian Franceschi examined witness statements given before a Florentine court in the fifteenth century.[75] When witnesses were asked when a certain event happened, they tried to specify the day, month, and year, or they referred to significant events of that era and church holidays. City dwellers tended to use the first method more often than people from rural areas; those high in the urban hierarchy did so more than those in lower

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[71] Le Goff, 'Temps', 1116.

[72] Le Goff, *La naissance du Purgatoire, passim*, for example 307-310, 'Mutations des cadres mentaux: le nombre', 310-311, 'L'espace et le temps', 388-395, 'Le temps compté', 475-477. In summary 'Le temps du Purgatoire' (1984). Also see Le Goff, 'Le temps de l'*exemplum*' (1984) and the beautiful piece by Jean-Claude Schmitt, 'Temps, folklore et politique ay XIIe siècle', also from 1984.

[73] Gurjewitsch, *Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen*, 98-187, 'Was ist die Zeit?'; in this book Goerjewitsch frequently uses the division 'pagan Northern Europe - Christianized Western Europe' as a key variable. Martin, *Mentalités médiévales*, 155-174, with literature cited on xxix-xxx, provides a balanced summary of research in this field. Goetz, 'Mittelalter', connects this with medieval historiography.

[74] Gurjewitsch, *Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen*, 103-108.

[75] Franceschi, 'La mémoire des laboratories à Florence'.

positions, and men more than women. However, Franceschi concluded that the key factor was whether or not someone was used to working with written records.[76]

He also notes that merchants who were used to keeping records would sometimes admit they would have to look up the requested date in their account books. This makes me wonder if these literate individuals, when it came to remembering dates, were actually bicultural—meaning, as long as they relied on memory alone, they used the same methods as those who could not read or write. It was only when they had access to written tools that they could give calendar-specific dates. It is not so different today: without old planners or diaries, most of us cannot recall exact dates any better than those Florentine "literate" folks could.

This is, in more ways than one, an enlightening contribution to the research. First, it shows that in fifteenth-century Florence, there were different ways to keep track of time alongside the more official "system." Second, it reveals that literate people sometimes behaved, in this respect, much like those who were not. Third, it is methodologically important because it demonstrates that not only narrative sources and literary texts—the genres preferred by many historians of mentalities—but also legal and administrative records contain valuable information for this kind of study.

At the 1994 Cambridge conference celebrating Le Goff's seventieth birthday, Alexander Murray delivered a fascinating talk on the relationship between time and money. He asked whether, in the later Middle Ages, increasing commercialization went hand-in-hand with a heightened awareness of time.[77] Like Franceschi, he drew on witness statements. Using a carefully chosen selection of case files from France and Italy, he examined regions that ranged from nearly outside the cash economy, to transitional areas, to trading cities.

His findings suggest that the more commercialized a region or city was, the more likely its people were to use modern methods of dating events. This was especially clear in the shift from marking time by religious holidays to using calendar months within the year. While it is not a black-and-white divide, there is a clear statistical trend. With some nuance, this supports Le Goff's thesis.

Murray adds an intriguing insight: In rural communities, dating events by the feast days of certain saints often actually means dating them by market days. In those cases, religious and commercial ways of marking time—which Le Goff considered separate systems—end up overlapping.

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[76] See also Adamska's excellent article: 'The Kingdom of Poland versus the Teutonic Knights'.

[77] Murray, 'Time and Money'.

3. Perspectives on labour

Work has mainly been explored by historians with left-leaning, often Marxist views, largely within the context of the labour movement's history. Le Goff's approach stands out—he shifted the focus to mental attitudes, examining beliefs and representations related to work.

He began to consider it as a research topic during the 1950s, even before joining the *École pratique*. Further archival research might shed more light on how his ideas developed in this early period. For a while, he intended to write a dissertation on the subject, titled 'Images of Work in Medieval Western Europe'.[78] That plan never came to fruition, as he ultimately decided not to pursue a doctorate, as I mentioned before. Why, then, did he never write a comprehensive synthesis on this topic? Perhaps he felt his articles had already captured the essential points, or maybe other interests took precedence. It is a pity he never wrote that book. With his expertise and passion, he would have been the perfect person for it.

What we have is really just a fragment—a collection of remarkable articles. I shall try to give you a sense of them here. There are five articles in all, published between 1963 and 1971.[79] Additionally, I include a section from *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* which also fits here, discussing the medieval ideology of a society divided into three estates.[80]

While in *Marchands et banquiers*, *Les intellectuels* and the two articles on time, the focus is on the rupture brought about by urbanization (and all its consequences) and the subsequent era, Le Goff drew heavily on early medieval materials in his writings about labour. The same goes for the sections on the ideology of the *tres ordines* in *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*. Compared to his earlier work, the chronological scope he works with has expanded, now covering the entire Middle Ages.

Although the articles often overlap, each one centers on a distinct main theme. That is why I briefly summarize each article individually, following a chronological order.[81] First, regarding the early Middle Ages, topics include: perceptions of peasants; stages in the thinking about labour; the ideology of the three estates; the condemnation of certain professions due

[78] Le Goff, 'L'appétit de l'histoire', 215. Idem, 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites', 91 note 1. Idem, 'Note sur société tripartite', 88 note 22.

[79] Published in order: 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites' (1963); 'Métier et profession d'a[rès les manuels de confesseurs' (1964); 'Les paysans et le monde rural' (1966); 'Note sur société tripartite' (1968); 'Travail, techniques et artisans' (1971).

[80] Le Goff, *La civilisation*, 319-325, 'La société des trois ordres', 325-329, 'De la société tripartite aux «états du monde».'

[81] This will hopefully produce a clearer result than if I followed the order in which these pieces were published or the arrangement in *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*, which, in my view, feels a bit arbitrary.

to primitive taboos and Christian doctrines. For the later Middle Ages, the focus shifts to changes in the church's views on the world of work and the role of confessor manuals in this transformation.[82] Next, I mention Le Goff's later works on this subject and responses from other researchers to this part of his body of work, followed by my own commentary.

The perception of farmers

Le Goff opens his argument in 'Les paysans et le monde rural dans la littérature du haut Moyen Âge'[83] by highlighting a phenomenon that seems paradoxical at first glance: although early medieval society was largely based on agriculture and the land was nearly the sole source of livelihood and prosperity, the texts from the fifth to seventh centuries that he studied mention hardly any peasants. He attributes this to a threefold mental legacy: from Greek and Roman Antiquity, where much manual labour was carried out by slaves; from the so-called 'barbarian' warriors, who often lived off spoils and valued warfare above work; and from early Christianity, which held contemplation in higher esteem than practical activity.[84] As a result, labour—especially agricultural labour—was looked down upon. Though the independent farmer did not disappear entirely, most rural dwellers ended up in some form of dependence or lack of freedom. Finally, literature and visual art from this period became more abstract, less focused on social reality and on people themselves.

Yet, every now and then, peasants do appear in texts, albeit in disguise, as *pagani*, *pauperes* and *rustici*. Starting in the fifth century, *paganus* came to mean both 'peasant' and 'pagan.' The term *pauper* —a word loaded with different meanings—sometimes refers to a peasant, particularly when the context reveals that the person works the land. *Rustici* denotes those seen as ignorant or unlettered, but in some instances, it also refers to peasants. It is striking how often *paganus* and *rusticus* are used in connection with negative stereotypes, such as ugly, sinful, drunken, dissolute, and dangerous.

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[82] Each article can be assigned a main theme, except for 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites', which discusses both the early medieval condemnation of certain occupations and how attitudes shifted throughout the later Middle Ages.

[83] Le Goff, 'Les paysans et le monde rural' (1966).

[84] This article provides a brief overview of the threefold legacy; for a more thorough analysis, see Le Goff's 'Travail, techniques et artisans' (1971), pages 111-115. A notable addition concerning the 'barbarians' is his distinction between the 'native' populations within the European part of the Roman Empire (Iberian, Italic, and Celtic peoples) and the conquerors, mainly Germanic tribes.

Phases in early medieval thought about labour

In 'Travail, techniques et artisans dans les systèmes de valeur du haut Moyen Âge (5th–10th century)'[85] Le Goff identifies several distinct periods, each marked by the perception of labour as a challenge, at least within certain circles. These circumstances sparked written debate and reflection, providing us with valuable sources today. From the fifth to the eighth century, monastic communities questioned whether monks should engage in work, as seen in monastic rules and hagiographies. Moving into the eighth to the tenth centuries and the Carolingian Renaissance, labour gained a measure of esteem, which was reflected in legal texts, literature, and visual art. By the end of the ninth century, value systems were being clearly defined—including the concept of the *tres ordines*—and, later in the Middle Ages, social hierarchies were described as they existed in practice, with the status of professions becoming more significant than legal or religiously defined ordo categories.

During the first period, spanning the fifth to the eighth centuries, labour faded from view due to a combination of technical, economic, and social reasons: specialized trades nearly vanished, work was seen almost exclusively as farming, most free farmers and artisans disappeared, and neither the secular nor the religious elite engaged in manual labour. As a result, our sources barely mention labour at all.

Still, there were certain areas where work was viewed in a positive light. According to the monastic rules, monks were expected to work, mostly by copying manuscripts, but also, when needed, by tending the monastery garden or working the land. Blacksmiths who crafted weapons for the nobility, and goldsmiths who made jewelry and church treasures, were held in great esteem, as shown by their high compensation in customary law and notable mentions in hagiographies. Rare and valuable tools, like iron plowshares, received special protection. Lists describing compensation not only safeguarded the hands of warriors, but also those of craftsmen and slaves, though with smaller fines.

This marks the arrival of what Le Goff calls the 'Carolingian renaissance of labour.' The expansion and more intensive use of cultivated land are reflected in agreements between owners and users, which account for potential improvements and reclamation. On large estates, work becomes more regulated. Literature and art begin to pay greater attention to the world of work. At the same time, monks withdraw from many types of labour during this period. With the rise of the doctrine of the three 'orders' at the end of the ninth century—briefly mentioned here—Le Goff sees the beginning of a new phase in the way

[85] Le Goff, 'Travail, techniques et artisans' (1971).

labour is regarded.

The ideology of the tres ordines

For Le Goff, understanding early medieval attitudes toward work hinges on the ideology of the three social orders. He presents his perspective in the article 'Note sur société tripartite, idéologie monarchique et renouveau économique dans la chrétienté du IXe au XIIe siècle,' as well as in the sections 'La société des trois ordres' and 'De la société tripartite aux «états du monde»' in *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*.[86] These three orders, as is well known, were the clergy, the warriors, and the peasants. This framework appears in various texts from ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon England and early Capetian France. Le Goff sees it as the ideological confirmation of social changes that unfolded during the early Middle Ages: the creation of a distinct class of priests set apart from ordinary believers, and the rise of a layer of aristocratic professional fighters who stood above the mass of the population—the peasants. In Le Goff's view, those labeled as 'workers' in these texts do not represent all farmers but rather an elite—those who succeeded in increasing their income by cultivating new land.[87] He bases this interpretation on lexicographical studies of the terms *labor*, *laborare* and *laboratus*.[88] According to him, the focus on an agricultural elite in these texts matches the aristocratic nature of early medieval society. What's new, in his opinion, is that for the first time, this ideological model includes a group recognized for its economic importance alongside the clerical and secular elite. This points to a growing appreciation for labour.

The texts that discuss the *tres ordines* also carry additional ideological weight. Nearly all of these texts originate from clerical authors. In doing so, they advocate for the supremacy of the clerical class over the secular elite. Furthermore, according to Le Goff, there is a clear link between certain expressions of this ideology and efforts to establish a stronger monarchy, with the king serving as both a keeper of the peace and an arbiter above the three social orders, who are expected to cooperate under his leadership.

Finally, he argues that the medieval structure of the three estates can be traced back to an Indo-European origin. His inspiration comes from the

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[86] Le Goff, 'Note sur société tripartite' (1968) and Idem, *La civilisation*, 319-329.
[87] Le Goff, 'Note sur société tripartite', 85-88. Idem, *La civilisation*, 324. He notes that the development of the meaning of 'third estate', referring to all workers in rural and urban settings, occurred later.
[88] Le Goff, 'Note sur société tripartite', 87 note 20, especially referencing Niermeyer, 'En marge du nouveau Ducange'.

research of several Indo-European scholars, especially Georges Dumézil (1898–1986), who explored this ideology across numerous language communities within the Indo-European family, stretching from India to Ireland. Dumézil linked all the various forms of this ideology to a hypothetical, reconstructed prehistoric set of beliefs. To my knowledge, the first to cautiously suggest—in a footnote—a connection between Dumézil's findings and the medieval versions of this ideology was Marcel David. David's own research into the three estates was tied to his search for images of labour throughout Western history, much like Le Goff's work. Le Goff references David's suggestion and expands on it further.[89]

According to Le Goff, the ideology of the *tres ordines* remained dominant until the twelfth century. Initially, there were efforts to include merchants within the three-estate framework, but eventually new classifications emerged, recognizing distinct professional groups. 'The urban workshop became the melting pot where the ideology of a tripartite society dissolved and a new image—the emergence of professional classes—took shape.'[90]

Permitted and forbidden professions

'Métiers licites et métiers illicites' stands out as Le Goff's only essay on labour that covers the entire Middle Ages.[91] This piece offers the clearest view of Le Goff's overall perspective, so I shall summarize its contents in detail. Here, Le Goff draws from a vast collection of statements by clerical writers about different professions. He organizes this material using a few key concepts: first, ancient taboos; second, additions related to core Christian sins and certain dogmas; and third, he believes a process of change affected this early medieval 'system' during the latter half of the Middle Ages.

He identifies several primary taboos: those concerning blood (which caused butchers, executioners, surgeons, and barbers to be looked down upon or condemned; clergy also regarded warriors with some disdain), the taboo of impurity (affecting, for example, fullers, cooks, and textile workers), and the taboo on money (reflecting resistance from a traditional, mostly agrarian economy against the growing money economy, directed at merchants, moneylenders, and anyone who sold their labour for wages). The church adopted these taboos. Additionally, as an

[89] David, 'Les «laboratores» jusqu'au renouveau économique', 110 and note 22, cited by Le Goff, 'Note sur société tripartite', 85 note 16. David later focused on the history of labour and workers in subsequent periods.
[90] 'Le chantier urbain est le creuset où se dissout la société tripartite et où s'élabore la nouvelle image', Le Goff, *La civilisation*, 327.
[91] 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites' (1963).

heir to Greco-Roman antiquity, it held a suspicious attitude toward non-agrarian occupations.

Additionally, the church extends its condemnations based on the seven deadly sins. For example, due to *luxuria*—the encouragement of *conspicuous consumption*—innkeepers, tavern owners, and brothel keepers are denounced; for *avaritia* (greed), it is merchants and lawyers; for gluttony, cooks; for pride and greed, soldiers; and for sloth, beggars.

Making a profit is considered to be at odds with Christian doctrine, as it shows a preoccupation with worldly possessions. Usury is also condemned, since it conflicts with the Christian ideal of brotherhood among all believers. Finally, earning money from non-creative professions is frowned upon. The reasoning is that humans are made in the image of the Creator. Farmers and craftsmen are entitled to rewards because they create or transform something, but those in non-creative trades, such as merchants, are not. This reflects a pre-capitalist view of work and ethics.

As cities continue to grow and work becomes more specialized, the value placed on different professions is reconsidered. Scholasticism becomes an important tool in this process. Now, a distinction is made between jobs that are always considered sinful and those that are only sometimes associated with sin. The number of inherently wrong professions drops sharply. According to religious writers, only jugglers, prostitutes, and (in the opinion of Berthold of Regensburg) vagrants remain excluded from eternal salvation. For those professions that can lead to sin in certain situations, a system of specific rules develops. For example, certain jobs are now forbidden only for specific groups—like clerics, who are not allowed to teach medicine.

As individual conscience gains importance, old taboos begin to fade. From now on, good intentions are seen as a mitigating factor—for instance, someone making weapons to defend their own people. There is growing recognition that some jobs serve the common good, and work itself is viewed more positively as the effort required to produce something. Professions once condemned—like singers, merchants, and sometimes even prostitutes—start to gain acceptance.

According to some Christian thinkers, all professions now offer a path to salvation. Le Goff explains this transformation as a result of the sweeping social changes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. At first, the dominant attitude was agricultural, military, and elitist; many occupations were looked down upon because their practitioners were unfree or sold their labour and independence. But in the later Middle Ages, new professions began striving for greater social status, using religion as a key tool. Eventually, all trades managed to secure a place in heaven—and therefore on earth—by choosing one or more patron saints to represent them.

At first, workers may have united against the two old elites, but

eventually, they became divided. As the city population split into 'upper' and 'lower' classes, two distinct types of guilds emerged. From then on, manual labour came to be looked down upon. Old taboos played a role in this new disdain for such work, with butchers being a prime example. The church, in turn, cannot control these new forms of social exclusion. It offers no direction to this process; it simply follows along.

If I understand Le Goff correctly, in the closing remarks of this article he argues that clerical perceptions of labour are more a result than a cause. Attitudes toward labour are shaped more by social factors than by mental ones.[92]

Crafts and professions in medieval confessor manuals

'Métier et profession d'après les manuels de confesseurs du Moyen Age' takes a closer look at how the Church's perspective on work evolved during the later Middle Ages.[93] According to Le Goff—who follows the path set by theologian Chenu[94] —Christianity had the potential to offer the urban world of work a fitting religious framework, but it first had to overcome its longstanding resistance. As the Church and the world of labour put pressure on each other, they both changed.

Le Goff considers three developments to be crucial. First, in the twelfth century, religious experience became more personal. This shift is most evident in the changing practice of confession. The old 'tariff system,' where every sin had a fixed penance, was replaced by inquiries into the intentions behind confessed actions. As a result, the thirteenth century saw the rise of a new genre: guides for confessors.

Second, a theology of work began to emerge. Once again, Le Goff draws on Chenu for guidance.[95] The new religious orders held different views on labour than the Benedictines. A spirituality of work developed, along with a theology that saw labour not as penance, but as a path to salvation. God worked when He created the world, and Adam worked in Paradise before the Fall—work was not yet a curse, but a blessing.

Thirdly, the practice of confession itself began to shift, in connection with the two earlier developments. After the annual confession was established in 1215, confessors found themselves dealing with moral dilemmas from people's professional lives—and they often lacked the necessary expertise. Members of the new religious orders stepped in to fill this gap, creating

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[92] Le Goff, 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites', 107.
[93] Le Goff, 'Métier et profession' (1964).
[94] Chenu, *Pour une théologie du travail*, cited by Le Goff, *Ibidem*, 166 note 7.
[95] Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle*.

manuals for confessors. With their university education and city life experience—unlike their predecessors from older orders—they were well equipped for this role.

Confession was no longer limited to universal human sins; now, wrongdoings connected to specific professions were addressed as well. As a result, the manuals replaced old social categories with classifications that better matched the emerging urban society. For the authors of these works, money had ceased to be taboo: financial compensation was considered legitimate, so long as it was earned through real effort and work.

Le Goff frequently refers back to his earlier studies on attitudes toward work, but also to his research on how people relate to time, and to conclusions he drew in *Marchands et banquiers* and *Les intellectuels* regarding merchants and intellectuals.[96] I will return to the connections he brings to light here in my conclusions.

Finally, I want to highlight a difference between this article and the one published the year before, 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites dans l'Occident médiéval.' In that earlier piece, Le Goff seemed to assign the church a mostly passive role, adapting only under pressure from new social and economic conditions. Here, however, he portrays the church as actively participating in the process of change. Both perspectives are defensible, and it is possible to combine them. What stands out is that Le Goff allowed these views to coexist without connecting them, even when he included both essays in his collection. His later work clearly shows he favored the stance where the church takes an active part. Was the closing section of 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites' one of Le Goff's many improvisations—a spontaneous expression of the moment and nothing more? Or does it hint at an underlying tension between a predominantly 'mentalist' and a more materialist interpretation of history?

Just as I did with the earlier themes, I shall now provide, as promised, an overview of Le Goff's later work on attitudes toward labour, along with research by others that directly relates to this part of his oeuvre. This will be followed by a summary of his articles on the subject, after which I shall offer some critical remarks and a few suggestions for future research.

Labour has always been a central topic for Le Goff, and he returned to it time and again.[97] *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* does not offer a synthesis on

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[96] Le Goff, 'Métier et profession', 178-180.

[97] For completeness, I mention an article about Francis (Le Goff, 'Les categories sociales' (1967, but only published in 1973), on labour: see page 120. This article was later included in Le Goff's book *Saint François d'Assise* (1999), cited here from Idem, *Francis of Assisi*, 95-136; see also 149-151, 'Labour'.
Later publications by Le Goff about the *tres ordines* are listed on pages 93-94.

this topic—likely because, in the early 1960s, he was still in the midst of researching it.[98] Still, even after he moved on from the project, the subject clearly remained close to his heart, and he often accepted invitations to contribute on the matter. He wrote comprehensive articles on labour in 1972, 1978, 1989, 1990, and 1999.[99] The final piece in this series, 'Travail' in the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval*, offers a clear summary of his earlier research, enriched with fresh insights from himself and others.

Response to Le Goff 's research on views about work

A quick note before we begin. The discussion about one particular aspect of Le Goff's research—his exploration of the *tres ordines* ideology—can be found in the appendix.[100] There are two reasons for this. First, the debate has grown so extensive that even a brief summary would disrupt the flow of this article. Second, since Le Goff built on Dumézil's ideas, it is necessary to consider arguments about the Indo-European phase of the three-estates ideology, which would take us far from our main topic: attitudes toward work in medieval Western Europe. For now, I would like to state that, in my view, the *tres ordines* ideology—by Le Goff and others—has been given more weight than it deserves.

I find myself questioning the accuracy of some statements made about this ideology. I suspect that the ideas Le Goff introduced in other works on labour, like 'Les paysans et Ie monde rural dans la littérature du haut Moyen Age' and 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites dans l'Occident médiéval,' may ultimately prove more fruitful over time.

As far as I know (aside from the debate around the *tres ordines*), there has been little research into medieval attitudes toward labour that directly builds on Le Goff's work.

The chapter on wealth and labour in *Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen*[101] by Aaron Goerjewitsj (born 1924) follows a path uniquely its own, rarely intersecting with Le Goff's work. Goerjewitsj references just one of Le Goff's articles, citing it from the East German collection where it was originally published.[102] This might seem surprising, given the later warm and lively exchange between these two medievalists. The reason is that

[98] In that book, he also discussed themes related to attitudes toward and conceptions of labour, such as material aspects of life (pages 249-318) and forms of class struggle (367-382).

[99] See the bibliography in Revel and Schmitt (eds.), *L'ogre-historien*.

[100] See Appendix.

[101] Gurjewitsch, *Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen*, 247-326.

[102] *Ibidem*, 300 note 79; see also 307 note 97, which cites *La civilisation*.

Goerjewitsj's book first appeared in Russian in 1972, when much of Western academic literature was not accessible to Russian scholars. Le Goff did not compile his writings on labour until 1977.

Freedman references Le Goff several times in his wonderful book, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*; he seems to regard Le Goff as a predecessor and perhaps even as a source of inspiration.[103]

In the collection edited by Robertson and Uebel, *The Middle Ages at Work*, Le Goff is mentioned only twice.[104]

Finally, I would like to highlight an anthropology-focused course on labour in pre-industrial Europe from Fern Universität Hagen[105] as well as a solid, concise bibliography on labour found in the fascinating collection edited by Dinzelbacher, Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte.[106]

Le Goff's writings on labour: a characterization and a contribution to the debate

The findings from Le Goff's research into attitudes toward work reinforce the conventional division of medieval history into an 'early' and 'later' period, all based on a fresh area of study. In this way, his work mirrors his research on perceptions of time. Using this new lens, he further refined the chronological split in 'Travail techniques et artisans dans les systèmes de valeurs du haut Moyen Âge,' dividing the early Middle Ages into more specific phases, each shaped, he argued, by its own distinct approach to labour.

This research highlights the importance of social differences. Le Goff emphasizes that members of various social classes and professions played a key role in shaping and sustaining ideas about work. Once again, it becomes clear that medieval society was far from uniform—rather, it was layered, often marked by internal struggles, and more dynamic than previously assumed.

Revisiting these articles, I was once again struck by the richness of ideas, the quality and depth of the supporting evidence, and the genuine appeal that reflects the way Le Goff expressed his research findings. While each of the five articles on labour delves into a distinct topic, the underlying unity of the project he envisioned—and partially brought to life—is unmistakable.

In terms of ideas, Le Goff drew significant inspiration from the work of

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[103] Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, Index.

[104] Robertson and Uebel (eds.), *The Middle Ages at Work*, 8 and 145.

[105] Eriksson, Kuchenbuch et al., *Arbeit im vorindustriellen Europa*. I have not had the chance to review this publication yet. One can expect to see Le Goff's influence here; see also Kuchenbuch, 'Zwischen Lupe und Fernblick', 276–277 and 289.

[106] Dinzelbacher (ed.), *Europäische Mentaslitätsgeschichte*, 348-349. Dinzelbacher compiled this bibliography; the article 'Mittelalter' in the section 'Arbeit und Fest' (1993), 336-347, is authored by Le Goff.

theologian and historian of medieval theology, Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895–1990). Le Goff and Chenu met frequently in the 1950s, engaging in lively exchanges of ideas. In a respectful reflection on Chenu's body of work, Le Goff acknowledged the deep influence Chenu had on his own scholarship. He specifically highlights Chenu's argument that the theology of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a dramatic and positive reevaluation of work.[107] This concept became a fundamental part of Le Goff's perspective on how attitudes toward labour evolved—and it would remain so in his later writings on the subject.[108] I will return to the relationship between Chenu and Le Goff in the concluding paragraph of this article.

Alongside Chenu's ideas, Le Goff also drew on findings from peers working across a broad spectrum of research fields and time periods, including those before and after the Middle Ages. He also incorporated insights from archaeologists, art historians, literary scholars, linguists, and anthropologists.

For his research into attitudes toward work, he compiled an extensive collection: theological treatises, sermons, hagiographic texts and other narrative sources, charters, secular and ecclesiastical legal texts (including *capitularia*, records of customary law and synodal statutes), monastic rules, confessor manuals, poetry, illustrations, and archaeological artifacts.

That is quite a lot—so much, in fact, that it is unlikely anyone could fully assess the results of Le Goff's research. To do so, one would need to read everything he cites and preferably even more, to see if sources he did not review would lead to the same conclusions. Moreover, as mentioned, very little follow-up research has been done on attitudes toward work since Le Goff. Still, interested scholars do have some opportunities to form a reasonably informed opinion about his work—even if based on less knowledge—and to contribute ideas about future research on perceptions of labour.

First and foremost, lexicographical and semantic research deserves attention. Le Goff always devoted much time to this area. It is also a central focus in his articles on labour. His reflections on the meanings of terms like *paganus*, *pauper*, *rusticus* and *laborator* are notable examples. When he carried out this research, in the 1960s and early 1970s, dictionaries and indices in source editions were the only tools available. The rise of digital technology has since allowed for much more thorough lexicography.[109]

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[107] Le Goff, 'Le père Chenu', 376.

[108] See, for instance, Le Goff, 'Travail' (1999).

[109] An early instance is found in Genicot's review of *La naissance du Purgatoire* within his article 'L'Occident du Xe au XIIe siècle', 420–426. There, he used what was then a new digital catalog of texts written in present-day Belgium to check how often the words *purgatorius* and *purgatorium* appeared—an essential point for Le Goff's

Secondly, it is possible to make meaningful contributions to the study of attitudes toward work with a smaller, yet solid, collection of sources. Paul Freedman's book on perceptions of peasants in the Middle Ages is a good example of this.[110] Freedman's focus is narrower than Le Goff's; he explores just a single occupational group—but it is a very important one—and he approaches it systematically: he gathered a wealth of sources and examined them from a variety of perspectives.

A third approach is to engage in more abstract thinking. For example, one might suggest examining the issues discussed by Le Goff from new perspectives, introducing different topics into the conversation, or seeking out alternative sources, and so on.

In the following section, I will primarily focus on this third approach. I offer some remarks on certain viewpoints presented by Le Goff—sometimes critically—and propose a few ideas to broaden the scope of the discussion. Along the way, I will draw on examples from my own research into medieval group cultures.

Primitive taboos. This is one of the key concepts Le Goff applies in 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites dans l'Occident médiéval' to his extensive collection of texts spanning the entire Middle Ages. According to this framework, the early medieval church, when judging and especially condemning various professions, incorporated a number of fundamental taboos—specifically those concerning blood, impurity, and money. These originally pre-Christian prohibitions were then combined by the church with its existing criteria: the list of cardinal sins and Christian doctrines. Le Goff claims these taboos are ancient, rooted in primitive societies, and believes they represent a basic element of medieval mentality.[111] It is a brilliant idea, but it does raise some questions. Does Le Goff assume that all primitive societies shared the same taboos? And more importantly, how old were the taboos on blood, impurity, and money by the time the early medieval church incorporated them into its system? The taboo on money, for instance, cannot predate the advent of a monetary economy. The notion of 'primitivity' suggests a condition untouched by time—a kind of perpetual antiquity that, in the so-called Third World, only ended with the arrival of westerners, and in medieval Western Europe, with the commercial revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Ten years after the publication of 'Métiers licites et métiers licites,' Le Goff would, in an article in which he strongly advocated for introducing cultural anthropology into historical research, rightly caution fellow historians against being

argument.

[110] Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*.

[111] Le Goff, 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites', 93–95.

captivated by seemingly timeless structures![112]

How did ideological influence actually work? Le Goff frequently argues that certain groups, as they gained economic strength, began to put pressure on the prevailing ideology and mindset, leading to real changes. From the ninth century onward, he notes, texts on the ideology of the *tres ordines* show that their authors took into account the growing importance of the category that made up the third ordo in this ideology.[113] He also claims that shifts in perspectives on labour within twelfth- and thirteenth-century theology would have been impossible without the compelling presence of a city population growing economically, socially, and religiously.[114]

This approach is inspired by Marxism. One of the strengths of Marxist theory is its focus on investigating societies as a whole. Researchers with a Marxist perspective believe that social groups or classes are interconnected. They see the relationships between these groups as openly or subtly antagonistic. Conflicts, in their view, are key moments that reveal much about social reality. Such situations include demonstrations, strikes, and revolutions, but also ideological battles. This is precisely what Le Goff addresses when he discusses rising social groups that increasingly challenge the dominant views on labour up to that point.

I do find this approach fruitful, but I would like to understand more about the processes through which one social group exerted pressure that led to ideological changes in another. Where should we look for the 'transfer points' for these ideas, those micro-environments where members of different social groups actually engaged with one another? In my view, Le Goff has convincingly described the urban settings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries where such exchanges took place. Members of the new orders were repeatedly confronted with everyday social realities. The practice of confession, for instance, created countless situations where clergy interacted with artisans and merchants.[115] But how did this work among the elite who wrote the texts expressing the ideology of the *tres ordines*? Of course, monasteries and episcopal palaces were not closed worlds, and I have no doubt that the intellectual elite came into contact with outside influences. Still, I wonder how and in what specific situations those influences actually made an impact.

We should also reconsider the influence that flowed in the opposite direction—from the clergy to the lay people. It is often hard to determine just how significant or far-reaching that influence truly was. While we can usually

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[112] Le Goff, 'L'historien et l'homme quotidien' (1972), 346–348.
[113] Le Goff, 'Travail, techniques et artisans', 125.
[114] Le Goff, 'Métier et profession', 168 ff.
[115] Le Goff, 'Métier et profession', 175–177.

discover what the clergy hoped to pass on to the laity, it is much less clear whether they actually succeeded. Occasionally, we get a lucky break. During my research into group cultures in the Low Countries, I came across several instances where laypeople used religious arguments. For example, the weavers of Sint Truiden, who were humiliated by their city council and fellow citizens, invoked the example set by the early Christians, who supported themselves honestly through manual labour. In their view, they were far more honorable than the corrupt lords and judges around them.[116] Yet, such testimonies are rare. That means we often have to be cautious and not let ourselves be misled by the rhetoric of our medieval sources.

Periodization. As mentioned, Le Goff 's findings about changing attitudes toward work reinforce the familiar division of the Middle Ages into two periods, though with a new research focus. Interestingly, this conclusion feels a bit unsatisfying—we gain more knowledge about something we already knew—yet it has that sense of 'the obvious' that, as physicist Robbert Dijkgraaf recently pointed out, is often a hallmark of scientific truth.[117] Still, further research could refine this chronological framework even more. Le Goff has already begun to do so in his article 'Travail, techniques and artisans'.

Multiple mindsets and their associated values coexisted. Le Goff is keenly aware that people across different spheres had perspectives on work that differed from those of the clergy and provides examples of this. However, he believes that these did not result in consciously developed and systematically articulated value systems.[118] According to him, these values remained implicit until historians reconstructed them through their research. I wonder if the distinction between systematic and implicit value systems is really that significant. After all, value systems are often left unspoken. Norms and values are usually instilled through socialization—by daily practice, role modeling, and consequences—rather than direct explanation. They become what Bourdieu calls habitus: a set of internalized routines that feel natural and compelling, but—as he explicitly states—are not consciously reflected upon. So, structure in the formal sense is absent.

Looking beyond the church, there are plenty of examples of how professions were judged according to moral standards other than those of the clergy. Le Goff points out that the respect enjoyed by blacksmiths and goldsmiths was a legacy from Germanic tradition.[119] And There is more. The taboo on blood—which he cites as a reason for the clergy's disdain toward

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116 Künzel, *Beelden en zelfbeelden*, 162–164.

117 From the television program Zomergasten, August 7, 2005.

118 Le Goff, 'Travail, techniques and artisans', 109.

119 Le Goff, *Ibidem*, 113 and 120, see also 116-117.

warriors—did not apply in epic poetry. The troubadour Bertrand de Born, for example, eagerly awaited spring so he could return to fighting and raiding.[120] Aristocrats built a positive sense of self on their assertive, sometimes aggressive nature—an attitude that was actually necessary in their line of work—even though religious writers condemned this as *superbia*, or sinful pride.[121] Another striking contrast was found in the contempt, noted by Le Goff, for those who worked on behalf of people who did not work themselves.[122] The well-known late medieval verse, 'When Adam plowed and Eve spun, where then was the nobleman?' is a vivid illustration of this attitude.[123]

All this shows that, alongside the church's value hierarchies, there were also common judgments about professions that did not stem from clerical standards. It seems these opinions were shaped by the values most cherished within particular trades or social groups.

That is why it might be worthwhile to try out a model similar to the one Halbwachs developed for thinking about time. One could imagine that each occupation or social class had its own unique view of what work meant. This opens up a host of research questions: Did these perspectives come from shared core values? Did people value work done by other groups the same way they valued their own work, or not? And how did working groups see those who did not work—and vice versa?

Tension and diversity within a group mentality. One of the main points in Freedman's book *Images of the Medieval Peasant* is that according to the Church all Christians are equal, yet many clerical writers argue that farmers are less valuable than others for various reasons: everyone is equal, but not really. Freedman believes this contradiction is a constant source of tension—not just between clergy and peasants, but also within the mindset of clerical groups themselves.[124] I find this perspective on group mentalities fascinating, and it could easily apply to other social layers as well. Instead of focusing on groups that are socially and mentally uniform, this approach highlights the internal conflicts that arise from clashing values. These contradictions breed instability, serving as catalysts for both dynamism and change.

Le Goff also built inner contradictions into his framework, calling it ambivalence toward labour and the 'inheritances' from ancient, 'barbarian',

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[120] Bloch, *La société féodale*, 409, 413.
[121] Künzel, *Beelden en zelfbeelden*, 105-106, 177.
[122] Le Goff, 'Métiers licites', 105.
[123] Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 211-212.
[124] Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, *passim*, for example 2-3.

and Jewish cultures. Each of these cultures had both positive and negative views on work, which influenced medieval Western European society.[125] From what I gather, Le Goff treats these 'inheritances' as reservoirs from which different elements were drawn over time. For a while, a negative image—like the struggling Adam after the Fall—might dominate, then a positive one, such as Adam in Paradise who worked alongside God. These selections would be made sequentially *after* one another. Freedman, on the other hand, sees various images of peasants and their work coexisting simultaneously. Of course, one view does not necessarily exclude the other.

Within the church's mindset, There is another distinction to notice when it comes to how work is valued. This mentality was not always—nor necessarily—uniform. At times, it reflected layers that seemed to correspond with the different genres pursued by the clergy. For example, early medieval theological texts often judged merchants harshly because they did not produce their goods themselves, yet still profited from them. Still, in narratives from that same period, trade is described without any sign of disapproval.[126]

'Autonomous' attitudes not captured in written records. These and the next suggestion aim to bypass the one-sidedness of many written sources. Archaeological evidence showing the long-term use of the three-field system in a specific village points to a lasting tradition of organizing labour. That suggests the community had deeply ingrained norms about work and consequences for breaking those norms. The more independent a group was, the less likely it is that anything about them was written down. It is been rightly noted that free farmers are underrepresented in early medieval records. Archaeology can help fill in those gaps. In fact, Le Goff specifically advocated for archaeological research, since it sheds light on a culture that extended far beyond the narrow world of the *literati*.[127]

Unspoken appreciation for labour. Le Goff and others point correctly point out that, in the early Middle Ages, farmers rarely held much status among the spiritual or secular elite. However, when land changed hands during that period, it was often transferred along with the people living on and cultivating it. This does not necessarily point to respect for those individuals, or even the work they did, but it does show that the elite considered them—together with the land itself—as a necessary part of production. Even if this did not amount to appreciation for labour, it did imply an acknowledgment that labour was essential. There are likely more of these unspoken, yet telling, pieces of

[125] Le Goff, 'Travail, techniques et artisans,' 111-115, 'L'ambiguïté des héritages'.
[126] Künzel, *Beelden en zelfbeelden*, 81-83.
[127] Le Goff, 'Métier et profession', 163.

evidence of how work was valued in that era.

4. Final Thoughts

Le Goff at Work

In my view, Le Goff is first and foremost a highly practical researcher, someone with true craftsmanship. He gathers the sources he needs with skill and efficiency, and he analyzes texts with an evident sense of enjoyment.

From the outset, he starts shaping the material he's going to cover into a design, a kind of blueprint for the piece.[128] You can really see this underlying structure in the article 'Travail, techniques et artisans dans les systèmes de valeur du haut Moyen Âge' (1971): it is organized into sections, subsections, and even smaller divisions, all marked with Roman numerals, Arabic numbers, capital letters, lowercase letters, and subheadings. When setting up this structure, Le Goff allows himself to improvise. His process is marked by spontaneity, sometimes even a sense of urgency. In the article just referenced, some topics are only noted as keywords. The upside is that you get a glimpse into how he sketches his outlines. That same spontaneity sometimes comes through in the finished product too: some articles end up as a blend of research plans, syntheses, and case studies.

The further details also often give off an improvised feel. For example, in a lengthy footnote in the article 'Note sur société tripartite, idéologie monarchique et renouveau économique dans la Chrétienté du IXe au XIIe siècle,' he brings together material about the relationship between monarchy and the 'third component' of the Indo-European system of three functions—agriculture and economic prosperity. He draws in, one after another, elements from Greek and Roman mythology, symbols from the Scythians and some Slavic peoples, a hagiographic text from France, and ethnographic material from a book by Frazer, before circling back to the actual economic conditions in which, according to him, the ideology of the *tres ordines* flourished in eleventh-century Capetian France, citing Marc Bloch's Les caractères originaux de la France rurale.[129] These kinds of associative trains of thought reach out in all directions, trying to bring as many phenomena as possible into the model or stretch the model's validity as far as it will go. Sometimes, I think such sketches stand out as the most fertile part of Le Goff's body of work.

This kind of unstructured approach, where the author allows traces of their exploration—complete with all its unfinished and open aspects—to remain visible, is rare in historical scholarship (at least in published works;

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[128] Personal comment.

[129] Le Goff, 'Note sur société tripartite', note 24, p. 89.

behind the scenes, we allow ourselves more freedom). Convention dictates that our publications should be finished, or at least appear so. This can lead to thoughtful, carefully tested, and clearly expressed work. Yet, it can also result in rhetorical flourishes that hide the gaps, and a polished presentation that discourages readers from questioning or engaging critically. The appeal of the sketch-like, the unfinished, lies in its invitation to continue, to debate, and to pursue further research. That is why Le Goff's essays on labour (and on some other topics) are so well-suited for seminars. The back-and-forth between designing and testing, between synthesis and detailed investigation, as he practices, can be woven into the training of researchers: first, learning to think boldly, then reining it in thoughtfully, and finally, trying to see the bigger picture again.[130]

This energetic practitioner is also someone who reflects on his research. He keeps his distance from the philosophy of history, but firmly believes that it is useful and necessary to think about what he is doing. He approaches methodology—aside from a few programmatic writings—in a practical way, during the research itself. He often includes his theoretical reflections in footnotes or aside comments, justifying his choices without letting them slow down the flow of his argument.

Beneath this apparent looseness lies something entirely different: a deep consistency in the bigger picture. The various studies discussed here are tightly interconnected. Their inner logic is so strong that one might view them as a single, continuous line of research.

Sources of Inspiration

Le Goff's research practice is fueled by ideas. Among the sources of inspiration that have accompanied him over many years, he counts Marxism, Braudel's concept of the *longue durée*, and cultural anthropology. That is how he described it in 1977, in the preface to his essay collection *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*.[131] During the 1950s and 1960s, it was Marxism and the notion of the longue durée that most strongly influenced him. Le Goff's enduring inspirations also include the thinking of Marc Bloch (1886–1944), to whom he returned throughout his life, as well as later Annales historians. Among them, besides Fernand Braudel and his long-term perspective, he singles out

[130] This idea arose from a conversation with Thomas Meijers. In a similar spirit, Le Goff spoke about the educational value of 'wild thinking' in 'Le père Chenu et la société médiévale' (1997), p. 374. There, he recounts how he sometimes encouraged his students to live with a hypothesis for a while, even if it had not yet found support in the texts, with a mix of baldness and critical thinking.

[131] Le Goff, 'Préface' (1977), p. 9.

Maurice Lombard (1904–1965) as the one who opened his eyes to phenomena unfolding across vast geographical spaces.[132]

Each project brings its own unique sources of inspiration. For every study, he gathers the 'intellectual tools' he believes he will need: ideas from Henri Pirenne for research into merchant culture and mindset, insights from Halbwach for exploring perceptions of time, and concepts from Chenu and Dumézil for examining how labour is depicted.

That is quite the diverse crew: a historian, a sociologist, a theologian/ historian, and an Indo-Europeanist. And those are just the key figures. Le Goff is, by conviction, interdisciplinary. He brings together concepts and insights from all areas of science and fuses them into tools for historical research. 'I'm a tinkerer,' he once said about himself.[133] He has a knack for spotting when an idea can be put to good use, sometimes after a bit of tweaking or reworking. And he does not just jump on the bandwagon of trendy eclecticism: he chooses ideas and concepts from other disciplines to serve his own research goals—not the other way around.

Marxism, Christianity, and the History of Mentalities

During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, France's political, religious, and intellectual climate was deeply shaped by two major forces: Marxism and Christianity. It was in this environment that the study of mentalities took root and evolved.

There was plenty of debate and reflection at the time about the relationship between the history of mentalities and Marxism. Looking back, it seems the core issue was not so much whether Marxist theory could adequately analyze cultural and mental phenomena. After all, the concepts of 'ideology' and 'superstructure' provided a broad framework for that. What really proved challenging was the causal structure built into the Marxist model, where—despite all the caveats—it was ultimately the base that determined the superstructure. This perspective also influenced Marxist historical research in practice, resulting in a strong focus on economic and social factors, while cultural and mental aspects received much less attention.

In this context, the concept of 'mentality' offered a solution. It created space for exploring various cultural and mental phenomena that had previously gone unnoticed. This appealed not only to scholars with a Marxist background, but also to non-Marxist historians who were weary of the implicit materialism that characterized much post-World War II research—many of

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[132] Le Goff, 'Préface', p. 13. Also see: 'L'appétit de l'histoire', pp. 211, 216.

[133] Personal communication. He referred to the term bricolage, which Lévi-Strauss used to characterize 'primitive thinking.'

them felt a sense of relief.

The big breakthrough was that everyone who became the focus of research was now recognized as having the right to think and feel. As I once heard Ludo Milis say, the history of mentalities is about 'everyday people.' Some even called it 'history with a human face.'[134] This sense of democracy and humanity is not just a scholarly achievement, but a moral one as well.[135]

Marxist scholars who ventured into the study of mentalities, yet still wanted to stick—at least somewhat—to the base-superstructure division, ran into some theoretical hurdles. Should mentalities be placed within the superstructure? Should a distinction be made between ideology and mentality? And, like other parts of the superstructure, were mentalities supposed to be

Were they entirely subject to the forces of the base, or were they granted a degree of autonomy? Did adopting the perspective of the history of mentalities mean that the traditional concepts of base and superstructure had to be abandoned? Because many French—and also Italian and English—historians who studied mentalities came from a Marxist background, these questions were intensely debated, discussed, and written about throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Le Goff also explored these issues. We already saw that in the preface to *Pour un autre Moyen Âge* in 1977, he called Marxism one of his main sources of inspiration. His most direct statement on the subject appears in his autobiographical essay 'L'appétit de l'histoire' from 1987. There, he writes that Marxism influenced him for a time, but he always rejected the strict division between base and superstructure. What he did appreciate in Marx was the interdisciplinary approach. He continues to believe that conflicts between social groups—though not the only driving force in history—play a significant role. However, these conflicts arise just as much, if not more, within the realm of culture as they do in material or political spheres.[136] These kinds of 'cultural' conflicts became a major focus for him, both in his research on attitudes toward time and labour, and in much of his later work.

Aside from the previously quoted passage, as far as I know, he only mentions Marxism in passing.[137] At times, he considers 'mentality' to be part of

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[134] I am not sure who came up with this phrase. I have heard both Ludo Milis and Willem Frijhoff use it. For those who might not know: 'history with a human face' is a play on 'socialism with a human face'; Alexander Dubček, leader of the Prague Spring (1968), used this term to describe his vision of socialism, in contrast to Stalinism.

[135] This became clearer to me after a conversation with Geert Souwer.

[136] LeGoff, 'L'appétit de l'histoire', pp. 220–221. The original passage reads: 'Et je continue de croire, sans en faire le moteur exclusif de l'histoire, à l'importance du conflit entre groupes sociaux tant et sinon plus au niveau culturel qu'au niveau matériel et politique.'

[137] You might find more about this topic in his work. I just made notes of what stood out to me.

the superstructure that shifts alongside a changing base, for example in 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites dans l'Occident médiéval'.[138] In his article on social categories in Franciscus and his biographers, he refers to language and mentality as structures within the superstructure, suggesting these may or may not adapt to shifts in social relations.[139] Here, he grants more independence to certain elements of the 'superstructure.' In 'Travail, techniques et artisans dans les systemes de valeurs du haut Moyen Âge,' he writes about the pressure exerted by working people, 'which puts the [at that moment dominant] ideology and mentality under strain.'[140] Based on this, it seems ideology and mentality are very closely linked for him, but not exactly the same.

All things considered, Le Goff never developed a comprehensive theoretical framework on Marxism. He makes statements reflecting a certain theoretical leaning, but nothing more. His perspective also shifts from time to time. I think Le Goff is simply too pragmatic to devote much effort to this subject, and I cannot fault him for that. Besides, it is important not to overstate Marxism's influence on him. 'The understanding of Marxism among French historians of my generation was limited,' he once remarked.[141] It might be more accurate to speak of a Marxist inspiration that leaves room for other viewpoints. In that sense, he is akin to English historians who, to varying degrees, have been part of what is called 'cultural Marxism' and the group around the journal *Past and Present* (with some overlap), including figures like Raymond Williams, Rodney Hilton, Keith Thomas, Edward Thompson, and Eric Hobsbawm.

And then There is that other powerful force at work in the religious, political, and the intellectual spheres: Christianity in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s held significant influence. So how did the emerging field of mentalities history relate to that context? Traditionally, the community of medievalists—which is my focus here—has always been religiously diverse, made up mainly of Catholics, Protestants, and atheists or agnostics. Religious research was generally left to Christian scholars. But as the history of mentalities gained ground, the lines began to shift. People who did not identify with a faith also started exploring religious topics, which brought together researchers of all backgrounds in this arena.[142] This fostered a renewed dialogue among the various religious groups within medieval studies, leading to a broader research focus inspired by the history of mentalities: moving from 'Church

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[138] See earlier, note 73.
[139] Le Goff, 'Le vocabulaire des categories sociales' (1973), 96.
[140] Le Goff, 'Travail, technique et artisans' (1971), 125.
[141] Personal communication.
[142] Religious differences played a role in the debate about the concept of folk culture. See the literature cited in note 8.

history' to a more expansive 'religious history'.[143] Simons notes in his overview of how Annales historians' ideas were received in Belgium and the Netherlands that the study of medieval religion in the Netherlands became less apologetic as confessional boundaries faded, sparking greater interest in non-orthodox and non-Christian religious forms.[144] I believe this trend, to some degree, can be seen in other Western European countries as well. The divide between Christian and non-Christian approaches to medieval religious history has lost much of its edge.

Le Goff played a valuable intermediary role in this process. Perhaps his complex religious background taught him early on to navigate a diverse environment, which prepared him to build bridges in the politically and religiously fragmented French academic world after World War II. It would be fascinating for someone familiar with the church landscape in France at that time to further explore Le Goff's connections with various Catholic scholars—and, in a broader sense, the relationships between atheists/agnostics and Christians among historians of mentalities. I shall limit myself to a brief case study: the relationship between Le Goff and theologian-theologian historian Marie-Dominique Chenu. Their story illustrates just how intricate the religious, political, and intellectual climate was for those who pioneered the history of mentalities in the 1950s and 60s.

Chenu was one of the leading figures in a renewal movement within the Catholic Church that began shortly before World War II. He belonged to a circle of intellectuals who sought to introduce two interconnected reforms: one theological and one social. On the theological front, they aimed to break through the stagnation caused by the rigid elevation of Thomas Aquinas's work and its dogmatized interpretation.[145] They pointed out that the legacy of medieval theology was far richer and more diverse than their traditionalist contemporaries were willing to admit. Chenu developed this perspective in his book La théologie au douzième siècle (1957). He read the journal *Annales*, understood the ideas of the historians who contributed to it, and incorporated their concepts into his own work.[146] He succeeded in linking the history of theology with social history.

Additionally, and this is the social aspect, Chenu and his kindred spirits, motivated by concern over the increasing secularization of French society—especially among workers. Chenu agreed with Marx's critique of industrial capitalism and, like Marx, found the living conditions of the working class

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[143] Frijhoff, 'From «histoire de l'Église» to «histoire religieuse»'.

[144] Simons, 'The Annales in the Low Countries', 118.

[145] I am grateful to Peter Raedts for providing this information about Chenu's theological position and for inspiring conversations about the connection Chenu and his contemporaries made between theological and social renewal.

[146] Le Goff, 'Le père Chenu' (1997), 372-373.

unacceptable. However, he rejected Marx's atheism. Chenu believed the church needed to reinvent itself in the industrial age, just as it had during the commercial revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. His aim was to establish a new Christian social ethic, placing human labour at the heart of its values.[147] Chenu's ideas sometimes brought him into conflict with the Curia. He played a significant role during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). As the reform movement lost momentum, his influence on church policy waned, but he remained respected as a scholar.[148]

Le Goff began reading Chenu's work in 1951 and had regular personal contact with him between 1954 and 1957, during the period when Le Goff was preparing his first publications. In *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge* he referenced Chenu's book on twelfth-century theology several times.[149] For his part, Chenu quoted Le Goff's *Marchands et banquiers* with approval in that book.[150] There was clear cross-pollination of ideas. Le Goff, who was moving toward a more psychological approach to history, and Chenu, whose research into medieval theology and push for church renewal sought to steer faith toward society, met each other halfway and collaborated for a time.

As I already mentioned, in 1997 Le Goff wrote a piece reflecting on Chenu's wide-ranging and inspiring influence on his own work, including Chenu's belief that the theology of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries led to a positive reevaluation of labour.[151] In his articles exploring this shift, Le Goff frequently referenced *La théologie au douzième siècle* and *Pour une théologie du travail*, citing them more than once.[152] Sometimes, these discussions concern the interpretation of specific theological texts, but more often they focus on Chenu's perspective on how medieval theology evolved in response to the changing urban society of that era.

That sums up Le Goff's relationship with both Marxism and Christianity.

After discussing the scientific, political, and religious influences on Le Goff, I want to return once more to his body of work. As I have highlighted several times, what stands out most is the steady consistency over the years: each of his studies connects closely with the others. Le Goff himself beautifully

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[147] Chenu, *Pour une théologie du travail*. On Marx and Marxism there, pp. 36, 40, 48, and repeatedly on 58-69, 82.

[148] For more on Chenu, see the issue dedicated to him in the *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 81 (July 1997), which includes contributions by Le Goff, 'Le père Chenu', as well as Cholvy, Hilaire et al., *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaire*, with a name index for Chenu. Peter Raedts pointed this out to me.

[149] Le Goff, *Les intellectuels*, 49 57, 97.

[150] Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle*, 241.

[151] Le Goff, 'Le père Chenu', 376.

[152] My notes: Le Goff, 'Métiers licites' (1963), 103; also, 'Métier et profession' (1964), 166, 169, 172, 174. For ideas Le Goff borrowed from Chenu, see above 74, 77, and 85.

described this interconnectedness in the closing pages of his article, 'Métier et profession d'après les manuels de confesseurs'.[153]

After analyzing the major shift in the church's views on work during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, he arrives at this conclusion: almost no professions were excluded anymore, and old taboos faded away—this is one of the key themes in his article 'Métiers licites et métiers illicites'. Most notably, the taboo surrounding money lost its hold; here, Le Goff refers back to his remarks in *Marchands et banquiers* and in *Les intellectuels*. A new understanding of labour emerges. Instead of work being performed out of obligation or for honour, it becomes a commodity, an activity for which payment may be requested. He draws a connection to his research on how time was treated. Now, even time itself can be 'sold'; charging interest on loaned money is permitted—this is one of the key conclusions from 'Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand'.

In broad strokes, this sums up Le Goff's view of how ideas about work evolved, tying in his thoughts on shifting attitudes toward merchants and intellectuals, as well as changing perspectives on time itself.

Many of the ideas Le Goff would later develop in his articles about people's relationship to time and attitudes toward labour had already been hinted at in *Marchands et banquiers* and *Les intellectuels*. His citations from these works show that he had already read many medieval texts, which he would later incorporate into his research on time and labour and into *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*. So, by the mid-1950s or even earlier, he was already carrying with him the basic collection of ideas and tools he would need to bring these concepts to life.

During the 1960s, while still deeply involved in his research on labour, he embarked on a new project exploring the relationships between clerical, aristocratic, and popular cultures. Through this, in a way that closely mirrored his perspective on conflicts over time and labour in medieval society, he uncovered cultural conflicts at a broader level. But that is a story for another time.

Appendix: The Debate about the Three 'Orders'

As previously mentioned, here is an overview of the debate surrounding that part of Le Goff's work which addresses the ideology of the *tres ordines*.[154] This aspect of his research into attitudes toward labour has been the subject of extensive discussion—especially in France—and is now widely recognized. I will review the major arguments raised in this discussion, reconsider them,

[153] Le Goff, 'Métier et profession', 178-180.

[154] See above, note 76. My overview of Le Goff's publications on this topic from the 1960s can be found on pages 71–72.

and add a few thoughts of my own.

First of all, for us medievalists, the ideology of the three orders is appealing because early medieval society appears to have been divided, in broad terms, into clergy, nobility, and peasants. According to Le Goff, this would be a straightforward depiction of a simple society, which was later replaced by more complex models for more complex times. Even non-medievalists find this clarity attractive. In his thought-provoking book *Statusangst*, Alain de Botton sees the three estates ideology as characteristic of a static, pre-industrial society.[155] But ideologies are always carried by certain groups. This raises the question—or rather, we must ask—whether this ideology was truly embraced by all layers of society. Marcel David, who was the first to write about this subject, already pointed out that the three estates ideology has ecclesiastical origins, and rightly wondered to what extent this doctrine was actually accepted by laypeople.[156]

Secondly, if the theory about the Indo-European roots of the medieval doctrine of the three estates holds true, then this ideology would have been a significant pre-Christian element within early medieval political culture. Le Goff was right to highlight this perspective. It would then need to be part of any discussion on how Christian our Western Middle Ages truly were. But how certain is this Indo-European continuity? The once assumed Germanic continuity in the Middle Ages was fiercely debated and remains uncertain to this day. So how much more should that skepticism apply to Indo-European continuity, which would have spanned an even greater stretch of time? And if such continuity did exist, what exactly persisted? Was it truly an ideology? Or was it merely a formula that took on different meanings and emotions depending on the social and cultural context? Or was it nothing more than a cliché, brought out only for specific occasions?

This brings us to Le Goff's source of inspiration: Dumézil's theory of the 'society of three functions' (*société tripartite*). In numerous writings, Dumézil claimed that the threefold division already existed in the Indo-European phase—supposedly before the separation of the individual languages—and that it became part of the heritage of many peoples who spoke Indo-European languages.[157] His theory has been highly influential, yet it has also faced much criticism. The result is a maze where anyone without expert guidance is sure to get lost. That is why, in this case, I rely on advice from linguist Ton

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[155] De Botton, *Statusangst*, pp. 77–80.

[156] David, 'Les «laboratores»', p. 114.

[157] A list of Dumézil's most important works is provided in Schmitt, 'Dumézilsche Dreifunktionentheorie,' p. 280. The dating of the Indo-European period varies widely, ranging from the seventh to the third millennium BCE. The fourth millennium is generally considered a reasonable estimate.

Goeman.[158]

Major criticism of Dumézil's theory was raised by the Indo-Europeanist Gonda: the references to the three functions in the Sanskrit texts—which Dumézil relied on as key evidence—are literary in nature; they are rhetorical formulas, not descriptions of an actual social structure.[159] Schmitt, in his article on Dumézil's theory in the *Reallexikon für germanische Altertumskunde*, argued that an Indo-European tripartite division could only have existed as a system of three functions—that is, specific types of activities (in this case, ritual, military, and economic) regularly carried out by certain people—not as three distinct social classes each uniquely tied to those functions.[160]

Furthermore, Dumézil assumed that Sanskrit was the Indo-European language closest to the hypothetical original parent language. However, recent research has cast doubt on this idea: Goeman and Hogerheijde describe Dumézil's starting point as a parti pris rooted in the 'classical view of the relationship among Indo-European languages.'[161] Today, a different perspective is gaining ground. In this newer view, Germanic is seen as having many more archaic features than previously thought and is placed closer to the ancestral Indo-European tongue on the language family tree, which in turn diminishes the special significance once attributed to Sanskrit and its texts.[162].

Thirdly: even if the grand Indo-European framework put forth by Dumézil and others were to remain intact, it would still only provide *circumstantial evidence* for any subsidiary hypotheses derived from it that are limited to entities, confined in time and space, like the Western European Middle Ages. Ideally, every sub-hypothesis should be tested for its own strength. If the construction fails to withstand criticism, the early

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[158] We were colleagues at the Meertens Institute for a long time and often shared information. The references cited here come from Goeman Hogerheijde, *Tonnere, foudre, éclair*, p. 36 note 49 and p. 37 note 50. For this publication, Goeman and his then-colleague Huib Hogerheijde researched the terms for 'lightning' and 'thunder' in all European languages and dialects, which led them to take a stance on Dumézil's theory. I recently consulted Ton Goeman again on this. Naturally, I am responsible for the use I made of this information.

[159] Gonda, *Triads of the Veda.* I noticed that Gonda also states that cosmic triads in the *Veda* are much more common than social ones (see p. 196). Schmitt, 'Dumézilsche Dreifunktionentheorie,' also believes that very few of the threefold divisions found in Sanskrit texts actually relate to social groups.

[160] Schmitt, 'Dumézilsche Dreifunktionentheorie.' See also Schmid, 'Beiträge zur Diskussion,' p. 224.

[161] Goeman and Hogerheijde, *Tonnere, foudre, éclair*, p. 37 note 50.

[162] Beekes, *Comparative Indo-European Linguistics*. I wonder if perhaps the fact that among the Germanic peoples (and those whose languages evolved from Germanic), trifunctionality in a social context did not occur (Schmitt, 'Dumézilsche Dreifunktionentheorie', 277) should be given more weight—contrary to Dumézil's theory—should be considered.

medieval evidence bears an even greater burden of proof. And that evidence is limited.[163] I estimate that, even taking into account variations that do not strictly fit the *tres ordines* template, the total comes to just a few dozen texts. The core of the early medieval file consists of only six texts.

It should also be noted that the *tres ordines* framework was not the only attempt to capture early medieval society in an ideological mold. Oexle collected a variety of formulations from other classification systems.[164]

Fourth: Le Goff has repeatedly examined the ideology behind the *tres ordines*. When it comes to the appreciation of labour—which is my focus here—two questions always arise: whether the term *laboratores* referred to all workers or only an elite among them, and whether the appearance of labourers as the third group in the three orders ideology indicates that this category was increasingly valued.

In both *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* and the article 'Note sur société tripartite, idéologie monarchique et renouveau économique dans la Chrétienté du IXe au XIIe siècle' (1968), Le Goff views the *laboratores* as a respected agrarian elite. Curiously, in 'Métier et profession d'après les manuels de confesseurs du Moyen Age', published in the same year (1964) as *La civilisation*, he argues that within the three orders framework, *laboratores* were characterized as a despised underclass, subordinate to the two elites, the *oratores* and the *bellatores*.[165] This position appears only in this work[166] and he seems to have quietly abandoned it later. In 'Travail, techniques et artisans dans les systèmes de valeur du haut Moyen Age' (1971), Le Goff mentions both his own interpretation of *laboratores*—as an elite among farmers—and Marcel David's view, which includes all peasants and, later, urban workers.[167] Still, he maintains that the presence of *laboratores* in this scheme signals the growing importance of working people and the increasing influence they exerted on medieval ideology and mentality.

In 1980, Le Goff revisited this topic once again, this time responding to Duby's 1978 book *Les trois ordres*. In that work, Duby placed significant emphasis on the hierarchical nature of this ideology. When it came to the peasants, his main concern was to reinforce their inevitable subordination to the two elite classes.[168] Le Goff maintains that there is greater textual support for his 'elitist' and more positive interpretation of *laboratores* than Duby

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[163] Bert Demyttenaere pointed this out to me quite some time ago.
[164] Oexle, 'Die funktionale Dreiteilung', pp. 9–13, 34 note 206.
[165] Le Goff, 'Occupation and Profession', 166.
[166] Perhaps because, in that article, he focused on the differences between the Early and Late Middle Ages, his perspective from earlier publications—which did not fit that contrast—temporarily slipped from view?
[167] Le Goff, 'Travail, techniques et artisans', pp. 124–125.
[168] Duby, *Les trois ordres*, *passim*, see for example 69–71 and 80–81.

acknowledges.[169] That is certainly possible. However, it remains a fact that one of the key witnesses for the three orders, Adalbero of Laon, refers to the third group as *servi*, or serfs. For that reason, I wonder if it might be wiser to move away from the idea that all medieval texts describing three groups or social functions are always expressing the same thing—and, as a result, to reconsider the notion that this was a unified and long-dominant ideology.

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