

What's Work? Humanistic Approaches to Understanding Work

Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

Oct. 30-31, 2025

The Fritz-Hüser-Institut für Literatur und Kultur der Arbeitswelt (Dortmund, Germany) and the German and English Departments of Georgetown University, D.C., in cooperation with the Humanities Initiative at Georgetown University, are organizing a conference that will explore the specific knowledge that the humanities provide of an understanding of work.

While social sciences are primarily concerned with structural aspects of work, they rarely focus on its human dimensions. Apart from studies that work with oral history or storytelling methods and narrative interviews in sociology, the social sciences do not take into account subjective narratives of work. The approach of the humanities, and in particular of literary and cultural studies, differs significantly. To understand structural patterns as well as human experience, the humanities deeply engage with the meanings and consequences of work through interpretation of varied artifacts like narratives, novels, poems, films, sculpture and painting, photography, performance, and other artistic expressions. In addition, the humanities can approach narratives of work at the intersection of social, political, medical, psychological and economic perspectives as well, as a linguistic and discursive phenomenon.

We invite proposals for 20-minute presentations on culturally specific and on cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches to explore the diverse potential of the humanities contributing to researching and understanding work: on the poetry, music or photography of work, on performance and visibility and work, and on narratives of work and deindustrialization in a global context.

Confirmed speakers at the conference include **Maximilian Bergengrün** (Universität Würzburg, Germany) on the notion of "The Joys of work" (*Arbeitslust*) in the 19th century; **Jasper Bernes** (UC Berkeley) on the inventor of the pictogram, Gerd Arntz, and his work with the Viennese economist and graphic designer Otto Neurath; **Sandor Hites** (Research Center for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences) on intellectual labor as patriotic self-sacrifice in nineteenth-century Hungary; **Sonali Perera** (Hunter College/CUNY) on linking American and Caribbean literature of work with the Global South; and **Sarah Ann Wells** (University of Wisconsin) on laboring images and cinema and the collective today.

Please send 250-word proposal and a short CV (max. 3 pages) no later than May 1, 2025 to Emilia Endler (ee308@georgetown.edu). We will inform people by June 1, 2025 at the latest of their acceptance. If you have questions, please contact any of the three organizers, Iuditha Balint (ibalint@stadttdo.de), Sherry Linkon (Sherry.Linkon@georgetown.edu), or Peter C. Pfeiffer (Peter.Pfeiffer@georgetown.edu).