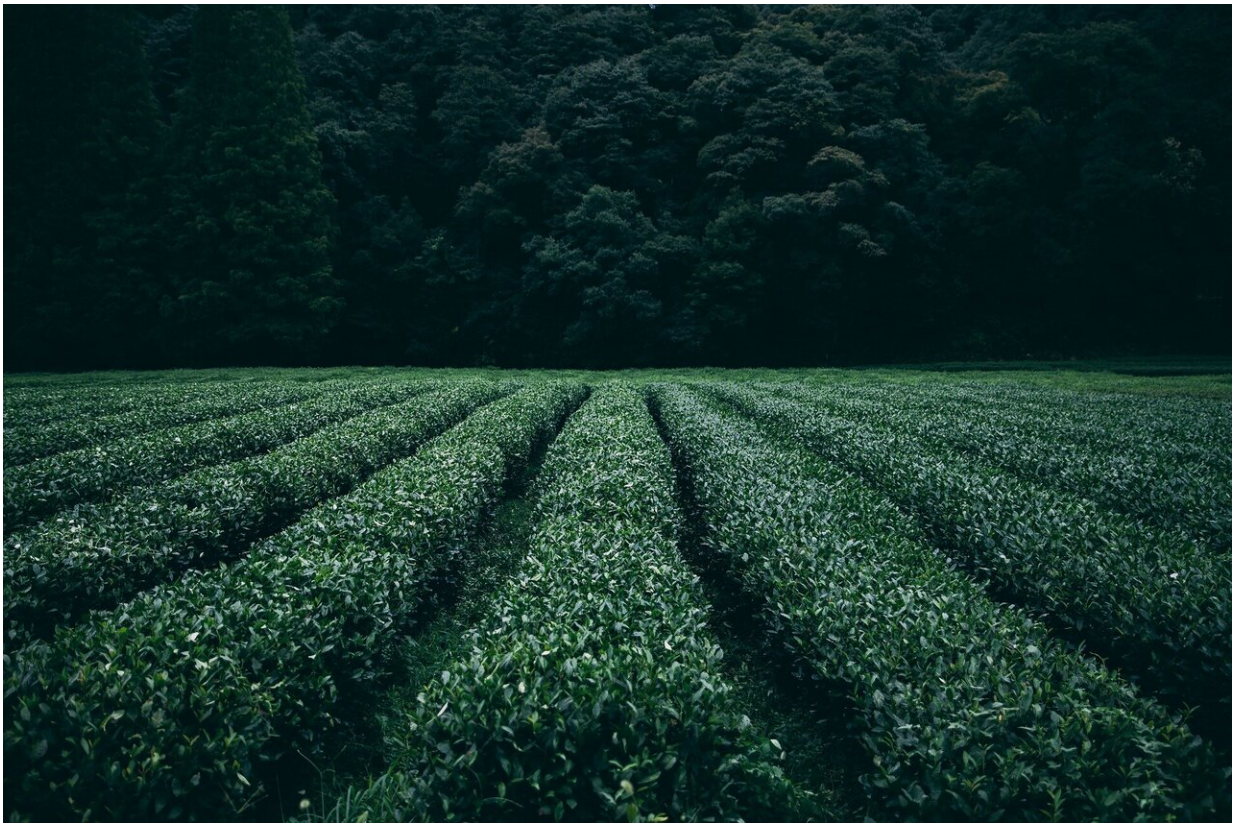


Arduous farm labor in the past means longer working hours today

April 14 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

A new study in *The Economic Journal* finds that societies with a history of farming crops heavily reliant on labor effort prefer harder work and longer hours.

Researchers used data from the European Social Survey, conducted every two years, from 2002 to 2014. The survey records individual-level information on a number of background characteristics, social attitudes, and human values. Researchers focused predominantly on three measures of work effort: the total number of hours respondents report normally working per week in their main jobs, their desired weekly work hours, and the difference between actual and contracted weekly work hours.

The study shows that differences in measures of work effort across European regions can be explained by variation in those regions' suitability for labor intensive crops. Researchers measured varying labor intensity in the production of different crops, in conditions of traditional agriculture. Using information from studies of the US Department of Agriculture and a Prussian agricultural census, researchers estimated the marginal returns to labor in the production of different crops, finding high labor returns for potatoes, and low returns for cereal crops like oats, barley and wheat. European regions with a higher suitability for crops reliant on labor effort, consistently scored higher in terms of hours worked.

Researchers additionally studied how preferences for hard work come to persist in a [society](#) over time. They found that significant aspects of work ethic are transmitted from parents to children, leading to more prominent results in native-born respondents of native-born parents. They also found that the work ethic is stronger in societies that have been reliant on agriculture for longer. High work ethic is correlated with lower preferences for redistribution, suggesting a feedback between culture and institutions that perpetuates cultural preferences.

Ultimately researchers concluded that labor effort with high marginal returns in [agricultural production](#) provides an incentive for investment in a [preference](#) for work. Other things equal, societies that cultivate crops

more dependent on [labor](#) effort work more hours. Preferences for longer working hours, and more effort put in during those hours, can then persist through cultural transmission and institutional feedback mechanisms, even after societies have transitioned away from agriculture.

"The laborious nature of rice cultivation has been theorized to have an impact on the work ethic of those societies that have historically depended on it", says author Vasiliki Fouka. "This research shows systematically that this is true for a variety of [crops](#), across the regions of Europe. In areas where hard work paid off, our ancestors engraved a work ethic in our culture that survives until today."

More information: Vasiliki Fouka et al, Agricultural Returns to Labour and the Origins of Work ethics*, *The Economic Journal* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/ej/ueaa029](https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/ueaa029)

Provided by Oxford University Press

Citation: Arduous farm labor in the past means longer working hours today (2020, April 14) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-arduous-farm-labor-longer-hours.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.