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Work and the Human Condition

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The Place of Work

Work is the uniquely human activity that adds a measure of permanence and artifact upon the futility of mortal life. Therefore, in order to be human and distinct from animal existence, we must do more than simply survive – we must engage in a life of work to give us purpose, and we must participate within societies to define the conditions of life. (Arendt 8, 9) Artifice (the product of work) is at the core of the human condition, as Arndt puts it: *The impact of the world's reality upon human existence is felt and received as a conditioning force*. My position on the place of work today will examine three historical influences: 1) the work of politics 2) the work of recording history 3) the Industrial Revolution. These influences are instrumental in defining the type of work we do today.

In the experience of the polis, action and speech separated, and the emphasis shifted from action to speech. Speech became a means of persuasion rather than just a human way of answering. Therefore, to be political, to live in a polis, meant to decide everything through words of persuasion more so than the action of sharing ideas and reasoning. Sense of freedom through escape from necessity came through the public exchange of views and the sharing of individual needs through communal obligation. The political state of liberating from necessity of life for the freedom of the world becomes the monopoly of government when humans become less subject to necessity,

attaining their basic needs through the societal structure. (Lecture: 10-6-08) The condition of work changes the state of man and as individuals become more influential through speech, they aspire to elevated political stature.

The shift from a pure form of action in the ancient polis where citizens seek goodness and virtue to the use of speech for persuasion of others is the shift to emotivism. (MacIntyre) Citizens now predominantly look to the Government and politicians for self serving “fixes” to every social woe rather than demanding that the politicians are ethical and look out for the best interests of the larger society - earth and all humans. The condition of action, the political world, directly influences the work that we do and currently, not necessarily for the betterment of human kind. Illustrating this point: we launch humans into space, split atoms, cure diseases, etc – but we can’t develop a renewable fuel source? Perhaps the politicians who are influenced by the oil barons place enough obstruction in the way that the work of developing alternative fuel sources does not have the will behind it to move forward.

Many people view recorded history as no more than an official record of the passage of time - understanding that versions of events such as Columbus landing in America differ between European and Native authors, but not considering the full influence of the individual writer’s perceptions. Sir George Cark proclaimed that history is subjective and events are interpretations more so than facts. Human’s affect on their own condition through the work of recorded history brought the activity of transforming from the traditional concept of truth as revelation to the modern era’s pragmatic assertion that man can only know what he makes himself. (Carr 17)

The truths that we choose to accept - history, religion, philosophy and politics - do influence our existence and the artifacts we strive for. The modern popular view holds that science and human intelligence is the higher power. This represents a fundamental shift from the middle ages through the mid eighteenth century and so, our work reflects this human perspective. No longer do we labor within the familial center to achieve existence and simple pleasures – we work for human permanence and greatness. One potential danger of this condition is, as Arendt warns, that we lose our way – we design, create and build our way out of work and become a world of workers without any work to do.

In the beginning, enclosing land was not necessary and people did not own the land because all things of the earth belonged to man as a whole. As much as anyone can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils, he may acquire it as property. However, anything beyond what he can use before it spoils is more than his share, and belongs to the others. Then man agreed to disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth through the use of money. Gold and silver was assigned value by consent of man and could be hoarded without spoiling. Now men could fairly possess more land than he himself can use, by receiving land in exchange for his surplus gold and silver. (Locke 31, 46 and 50)

The radical labor parties of the Industrial Revolution touted labor as the creation of all wealth and proclaimed labor the bedrock of society, the original source of all things useful. (Rogers 214) Populists sought to increase their wealth through, among other initiatives, the fruits of labor and by increased currency issue, free coinage and a graduated income tax. These values were contrary to the radical view that “all profit is

robbery” and “dividends are the canned muscles of other men.” (Rogers 219)

Fundamental socialists did not follow radical rhetoric closely mainly because the radical movements had no capacity for society’s weak and infirmed. Charity was seen by radicals as the pauperization of the poor – that providing the poor with any benefit sapped their desire for labor and perpetuated impoverishment. (Rogers 225)

The changes in society and work discussed by Locke and Rogers were perhaps the greatest transformation of human relations in societies since the beginning of time. No longer is there a sense of equality, that each Man performs his duty of labor to support his existence. The creation of surplus through improved labor practices generates wealth and disposable income at all levels – competing agendas among Men for individual pursuits. The transformation of industrialization caused many unintended consequences and conflicts – divisions and alienation - that may not be fully worked out today. Work, more than ever before, becomes associated with the individual worker – a source of identity.

Labor, work and action are relative terms and exist at varying degrees depending on the vantage of the human. Humans seek the same things in life, regardless of station – faith, opportunity, happiness and recognition – and these conditions are sought through truths and virtue. The core of the human condition is more wrapped around work than ever before while labor and action are slipping away. At the same time, politics, history and the human work experience influence the type and conditions of work we do. More than ever before in human history, it is important that we think deeply about what we are doing and choose our truths carefully.