

What is the place of work within the human condition today?

In a recent lecture Stephen gave, he said a little bit about how modern politics are not action. In this paper I would like to expand on this, and show how it affects work today. Hannah Arendt makes some key definitions in her book *The Human Condition* that I will be using to describe what I believe to be the place of work in the human condition today in the beginning of the twenty-first century. First of all work defines what position a person holds within society. That being said I think that the positions of action and work have changed similarly, in the modern political sphere, to the change of work (producing an artifact in the world) into labor ( a repetitive movement necessary for life) (\*see Arendt *The Human Condition* ch3-7) Arendt talks about happening in the Industrial Revolution.

Politics in modern society have become an exchange. Not an exchange of beliefs and ideas, but rather an exchange of goods for a service. In an ideal society politics should be an active exchange of beliefs and ideals thoroughly discussed in order to make a set of rules for society. The act of discussing, thinking and participating in an exchange of ideas is what Arendt defined as action. Politicians however, are paid to entertain, to join a contest based on how much money they put into it and their own quality as a speaker captivating crowds. I say this because it no longer seems to matter what either candidate says. Both sides are to a large extent predetermined by their membership in one of the two major parties. Politicians generally must be in one of these two parties to have any chance of winning large scale elections, primarily because these parties provide candidates financial backing, as well as popular credence to their campaigns. In order to

maintain office the members of these parties sell themselves to their constituencies in order to regain office, but in the meantime, in order to maintain the wealth it takes to run, the politicians must also make deals and connections with lobbyists who bring the interests of business into the exchange market. This changes what politicians are aimed at. Instead of sharing ideas and beliefs the world of politics becomes a world of competing belief systems, warring over which side gets to make it's policies the new standard. In this way politics ceases to be action, as Arendt states

“Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. It is the indeed no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object. This happens whenever human togetherness is lost, that is, when people are only for or against other people, as for instance in modern warfare, where men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side against the enemy. In these instances, which of course have always existed, speech becomes indeed ‘mere talk’ simply one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda; here words reveal nothing, disclosure comes only from the deed itself,”p.180 *The Human Condition*

The change from politics being action to work is made most apparent by the propaganda that is present, whether the example is a commercial for the presidential campaign, or any other political add. It is plain today that the political sphere is not sharing ideas toward the betterment of the people, but competing ideas that are simply a means to an end for whoever a specific politician represents. The competition is held so that a person or group might create something lasting in the world, a law, to be used by whoever has provided that group with their place in office. In this way politicians work in order to create a lasting artifact in the world, and are workers in the Arendtian sense.

So, what does this mean, and why does it matter? Well, at this point it's necessary that to look at MacIntyre.

“Hence on the modern view the justification of the virtues depends upon some prior justification of rules and principles; and if the latter become radically problematic, as they have, so also must the former. Suppose however that in articulating the problems of morality the ordering of evaluative concepts has been misconceived by the spokesmen of modernity and more particularly of liberalism; suppose that we need to attend to virtues in the first place in order to understand the function and authority of rules,”p.119  
*MacIntyre*

Given the earlier example about the war-like nature of politics now, it becomes apparent that the function and authority of rules is not being based upon a shared sense of morality, or virtues that should be the topic of debate in the political sphere, but instead is based upon needs and wants expressed by lobbyists and pundits.

Conceivably this would create problems between the masses being controlled by these laws and the political bureaucracy enforcing them. And indeed it does occasionally, *The Milagro Beanfield War* as well as *Animal Dreams* are excellent examples of this. In both cases political entities were representing the specific interests of a company in order to produce profit, but were to the detriment of the communities surrounding them. In both cases the water rights of the communities were taken away in order to protect a company. In *The Milagro Beanfield War* it was about producing food, and keeping land from being wasted and turned into a resort community. In *Animal Dreams* it was to divert water from the community in order to not have to spend more money on cleaning the water for the community. In these cases the community is able to defend their rights and there is some semblance of justice in the end. In many cases though there is no definitive action taken by the people being affected. Why is this? I believe it is because the everyday person is too distracted with the labor or work that they have to do in order to be involved in the action it takes to fight against this political system. When a person has to work in order to

survive, today's standards being 20-40 hours a week, there isn't enough time or energy left to be a person that is involved in the action and discourse it takes to fight against a political system. These people become what Arendt calls *animal laborans* "whose social life is worldless and herdlike and who therefore is incapable of building or inhabiting a public, worldly realm," p. 160 *The Human Condition*. It is not that these people are mindless or less than human, but simply that the nature of their labor robs them of having the opportunity to act in the world, therefore perpetuating the lack of action in modern society.

In conclusion, the sphere in our society which should be reserved for action and discourse has become an avenue for work and production. In this way the rules that we make for society are no longer based upon the shared ideas and beliefs of representative people from the society, but upon the needs and wants of different groups who lobby and represent special interests towards the people our society elects. The problems this brings up should be of importance to all of society's members, but the nature of our society forces people to put so much into their individual work that the energy for everyone to demand change does not exist. Work therefore has become the defining feature of modern society as it makes concrete the different socio-economic roles people inhabit.