

### SPRING QUARTER POSITION PAPER

Based upon the texts which we have read so far in *Work and the Human Condition*, it is my belief that in this era of history, the position of work within human life and the human condition is one of confusion and uncertainty – a position which negatively affects anyone who attempts to undertake work – and that furthermore, this confusion has been caused to a significant extent by the advent of the wage system and the division of labor. To support this claim, I will refer primarily to three texts: *The Human Condition* by Hannah Arendt, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America* by Daniel T. Rodgers, and the *Selected Writings* of Karl Marx, edited by Lawrence H. Simon.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt divides human activity into three categories: labor, work, and action, and gives them definitions as they relate to her writing. Expressed as simply as possible, labor is repetitive activity without clear starting or ending points which is undertaken for the sake of biological survival and may produce short-lived physical objects such as food items; work is activity that adds to the human artifice by creating more permanent and durable physical items which serve purposes for Man and which traditionally involved a great deal of personal skill and craftsmanship; and action is more or less political or social activity, heavily dependent on speech, and which takes place between people without the intermediary of any physical object or medium. (Arendt, p.7)

All of the texts that I have mentioned essentially make the claim that the division of labor and the wage system have undermined the integrity of work by blurring the distinction between “work” and “labor” as they are defined by Arendt. The division of

labor is the practice, crucial to industrialization and mass production, of dividing the fabrication of physical objects into a great number of small, quick, and easily repeated tasks (thus greatly increasing the speed and quantity of production). The wage system is rather self-explanatory, being the practice of providing monetary reward for the completion of tasks, those tasks often (and almost exclusively, for my purposes here) being some form of divided labor.

Arendt's form of this claim is that mass production's emphasis on endless repetition of small tasks makes it more like labor - "...the repetition and the endlessness of the process itself put the unmistakable mark of laboring upon it." (Arendt, p.125) – and that likewise, the breaking up of tasks and the emphasis on speed, repetition, and quantity remove the potential for any art or craftsmanship from the practice of adding to the human artifice. Marx and Engels make a very similar statement in *The Communist Manifesto*: "Owing to the extensive use of machinery and the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him." (Marx, p.164)

Although fraught with ideology and rather questionable as to true intent, Marx's writing here does make a significant point, echoed in the other texts, namely that the mechanization of production and, more importantly, the associated figurative mechanization of the worker, has had a destructive effect both on the practice and nature of work itself and on those who undertake work. Marx's assertion that the division of labor has the effect of turning work into a commodity and the worker essentially into a slave is also not unique: In *The Work Ethic in Industrial America*, Rodgers makes note of

the controversy in the United States caused by the wage system and the division of labor at roughly the same times as Marx wrote the *Manifesto*. There, the discontent caused by the new industrial methods took on a unique national character, for those methods seemed to clash with American ideals of independence and personal freedom, both political and economic: “It was the thought of a man who spent his whole life working for others that troubled Northerners and seemed so little different from slavery. In the first instance, wage working of this sort jarred, like slavery, against the principle of democracy. The Jeffersonian conviction that political liberty was safe only where no man was economically beholden to any other died hard in America...”

Although many fewer of us work in industrial settings today than in the historical eras mentioned by the above texts, some of the central tenets of their arguments remain valid. Regardless of its nature, almost all work (in our usual way of thinking of it) is done for a wage, and a wage has become necessary to procure those things necessary for survival, such as food and shelter. Thus, many of us accept the jobs we do at least in part as a bid for subsistence, which explains the fear and anxiety caused by the prospect of losing one’s employment. Furthermore, with the growth of the wage system, craftsmanship has further diminished, as well as the skills necessary for self-sufficiency and survival outside of the dominant economic system. Indeed, “work”, as Arendt defines it, has in large part been relegated to purely non-professional settings; only those who are paid specifically for their creative talents and abilities can be said, in Arendt’s view, to truly be doing “work,” (Arendt, p.127) although at one time creativity and originality of thought, and durability of product, were once the very hallmarks of work.

Such developments can at times indeed make phrases like “the march of progress” seem dubious at best.