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Work and the Human Condition

Position Paper

Alienation as the Result of the Industrial Revolution: Wage  
Labor

Humans are conditioned by what they come into contact with; as a result the work one does conditions and affects one's outlook on life. According to Arendt "Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. This is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned beings." As conditioned beings we are taught to work in certain ways. This way of work has changed and evolved over the past two hundred years or so. Work as we know it isn't quite what work was in the past. Work has gotten to the point where one has a job and not a life work. Labor is replacing work. As a result the laborer has become alienated from one's work. (Arendt 9)

Work started to change drastically in the industrial revolution. In the "pre-industrial" era a worker was a craftsman, a farmer, or a merchant and, and so on. These

workers had ownership of their work and what they made. One would benefit from the labor that he put into the product. Then a significant change occurred that took away the skills need to be a craftsmen and made him into a wage laborer. Over time barley anyone can craft a product; one only can construct their piece. For example before the industrial revolution a chair maker could build a chair entirety, but after the industrial revolution one could only make a piece of it such as the leg. Rodgers commented "What happened to work values when work if self was radically remade?" (Rodgers xii)

Nobody knew what to think of wage labor and the affects of it when it first started, would it be a good thing or a bad thing. Most must have been confused about what to do, stay with my little shop and stick it out with the chance of becoming bankrupt by the mass production, or go work long hard hours at the factory." In the middle of the nineteenth century, at the threshold of industrialization, was not a single conviction but a complex of ideas with roots and branches." One thing we do know it that it changed work as we know it now. (Rodgers 7)

Once wage labor was underway, mass production replaced the quality of the craftsmen's work, with quaintly. This type of wage labored work replaced the idea of work, and is how we identify work in the today's society. It would seem to me it

occurred to workers early on that wage labor was dreadful. Rodgers mentions "A parallel between slavery and wage employment was more than a simple play on words for mid-nineteenth-century Americans." Wage labor was like slavery to the labors, the work ten or twelve hour shift minimal breaks, low wages, and bad and unsafe conditions.

Marx feels strongly about alienation, he explains "the worker becomes a cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The increase in values of the world of things is directly proportional to the decrease in value of the human world. Labor not only produces commodities. It also produces itself and the worker as a commodity, and indeed in the same proportion as it produces commodities in general." The laborer never sees the end product of the labor they put in. Worst yet with the minimal wages, laborers could not consume the product that they put their labor into. In other words the ownership of the product is the factory owners, and the finished product is now worth more than the workers put into it. This unbalanced payment of labor is alienation. This leaves the work a commodity, a slave to the factory; which is what Rodgers and Marx agree upon. (Marx 59)

In today society wage labor is all we know. Most of the people working in wage labor don't stop to think of what other

way work could be. Trying to make a paycheck on minimal wages is hard enough. In a since we sell our lives to the big factories' and cooperation's that run our country. Take for example Boeing. Boeing is one of the biggest employers in our area. They employee all types of workers from the businessmen to the laborers, and it is considered to be on of the fairer employers around. But as a result of the industrial revolution and the mass production ideals left behind from it, the company still alienates workers from their product. Most of those employees can't consume the product there labor is making (and most don't want to). The worker is conditioned by the work one is doing it becomes there life but not their life work.

Work cited

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Rodgers, Daniel. The Work Ethic in Industrial America: 1850-1920. Chicago: UP Chicago, 1978.

Simon, Lawrence, eds. Karl Marx Selected Writings. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Company, 1994.