

## AP4CTE AP Seminar: Building a Dynamic Workforce

### *Research Strategies for Innovating and Problem-solving Across Career Paths*

#### Module 3

### *The Human Condition*

Hannah Arendt

## III. LABOR

### *17. A Consumers' Society*

It is frequently said that we live in a consumers' society, and since, as we saw, labor and consumption are but two stages of the same process, imposed upon man by the necessity of life, this is only another way of saying that we live in a society of laborers. This society did not come about through the emancipation of the laboring classes but by the emancipation of the laboring activity itself, which preceded by centuries the political emancipation of laborers. The point is not that for the first time in history laborers were admitted and given equal rights in the public realm, but that we have almost succeeded in leveling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance. Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of "making a living"; such is the verdict of society, and the number of people, especially in the professions who might challenge it, has decreased rapidly. The only exception society is willing to grant is the artist, who, strictly speaking, is the only "worker" left in a laboring society. The same trend to level down all serious activities to the status of making a living is manifest in present-day labor theories, which almost unanimously define labor as the opposite of play. As a result, all serious activities, irrespective of their fruits, are called labor, and every activity which is not necessary either for the life of the individual or for the life process of society is subsumed under playfulness.<sup>75</sup> In these theories, which by echoing the current estimate of a laboring society on the theoretical level sharpen it and drive it

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<sup>75</sup> Although this labor-play category appears at first glance to be so general as to be meaningless, it is characteristic in another respect; the real opposite underlying it is the opposition of necessity and freedom, and it is indeed remarkable to see how plausible it is for modern thinking to consider playfulness to be the source of freedom. Aside from this generalization, the modern idealizations of labor may be said to fall roughly into the following categories: (1) Labor is a means to attain a higher end. This is generally the Catholic position, which has the great merit of not being able to escape from reality altogether, so that the intimate connections between labor and life and between labor and pain are usually at least mentioned. One outstanding representative is Jacques Leclercq of Louvain, especially his discussion of labor and property in *Leçons de droit naturel* (1946), Vol. IV, Part 2. (2) Labor is an act of shaping in which "a given structure is transformed into another, higher structure." This is the central thesis of the famous work by Otto Lipmann, *Grundriss der Arbeitswissenschaft* (1926). (3) Labor in a laboring society is pure pleasure or "can be made fully as satisfying as leisure-time activities" (see Glen W Cleeton, *Making Work Human* [1949]). This position is taken today by Corrado Gini in his *Economica Lavorista* (1954), who considers the United States to be a "laboring society" (*società lavorista*) where "Labor is a pleasure and where all men want to labor." (For a summary of his position in German see *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft*, CIX [1953] and CX [1954].) This theory, incidentally, is less new than it seems. It was first formulated by F. Nitti ("Le travail humain et ses lois," *Revue internationale de sociologie* [1895]), who even then maintained that the "idea that labor is painful is a psychological rather than a physiological fact," so that pain will disappear in a society where everybody works. (4) Labor, finally, is man's confirmation of himself against nature, which is brought under his domination through labor. This is the assumption which underlies—explicitly or implicitly—the new, especially French trend of a humanism of labor. Its best-known representative is Georges Friedmann.

After all these theories and academic discussions, it is rather refreshing to learn that a large majority of workers, if asked "why does man work?" answer simply "in order to be able to live" or "to make money" (see Helmut Schelsky, *Arbeiterjugend Gestern und Heute* [1955], whose publications are remarkably free of prejudices and idealizations).

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into its inherent extreme, not even the “work” of the artist is left; it is dissolved into play and has lost its worldly meaning. The playfulness of the artist is felt to fulfil the same function in the laboring life process of society as the playing of tennis or the pursuit of a hobby fulfils in the life of the individual. The emancipation of labor has not resulted in an equality of this activity with the other activities of the *vita activa*, but in its almost undisputed predominance. From the standpoint of “making a living,” every activity unconnected with labor becomes a “hobby.”<sup>76</sup>

In order to dispel the plausibility of this self-interpretation of modern man, it may be well to remember that all civilizations prior to our own would rather have agreed with Plato that the “art of earning money” (*technē mistharnētikē*) is entirely unconnected with the actual content even of such arts as medicine, navigation, or architecture, which were attended by monetary rewards. It was in order to explain this monetary reward, which obviously is of an altogether different nature from health, the object of medicine, or the erection of buildings, the object of architecture, that Plato introduced one more art to accompany them all. This additional art is by no means understood as the element of labor in the otherwise free arts, but, on the contrary, the one art through which the “artist,” the professional worker, as we would say, keeps himself free from the necessity of labor.<sup>77</sup> This art is in the same category with the art required of the master of a household who must know how to exert authority and use violence in his rule over slaves. Its aim is to remain free from having “to make a living,” and the aims of the other arts are even farther removed from this elementary necessity.

The emancipation of labor and the concomitant emancipation of the laboring classes from oppression and exploitation certainly meant progress in the direction of non-violence. It is much less certain that it was also progress in the direction of freedom. No man exerted violence, except the violence used in torture, can match the natural force with which necessity itself compels. It is for this reason that the Greeks derived their word for torture from *necessity*, calling it *anagkai*, and not from *bia*, used for violence as exerted by man over man, just as this is the reason for the historical fact that throughout occidental antiquity torture, the “necessity no man can withstand,” could be applied only to slaves who were subject to necessity anyhow.<sup>78</sup> It was the arts of violence, the arts of war, piracy, and ultimately absolute rule, which brought the defeated into the services of the victors and thereby held necessity in abeyance for the longer period of recorded

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<sup>76</sup> The role of the hobby in modern labor society is quite striking and may be the root of experience in the labor-play theories. What is especially noteworthy in this context is that Marx, who had no inkling of this development, expected that in his utopian, laborless society all activities would be performed in a manner which very closely resembles the manner of hobby activities.

<sup>77</sup> *Republic* 346. Therefore, “the art of acquisition wards off poverty as medicine wards off disease” (*Gorgias* 478). Since payment for their services was voluntary (Loening, *op. cit.*), the liberal professions must indeed have attained a remarkable perfection in the “art of making money.”

<sup>78</sup> The current modern explanation of this custom which was characteristic of the whole of Greek and Latin antiquity—that its origin is to be found in “the belief that the slave is unable to tell the truth except on the rack” (Barrow, *op. cit.*, p. 31)—is quite erroneous. The belief, on the contrary, is that nobody can invent a lie under torture: “On croyait recueillir la voix même de la nature dans les cris de la douleur. Plus la douleur pénétrait avant, plus intime et plus vrai sembla être ce témoignage de la chair et du sang” (Wallon, *op. cit.*, I, 325). Ancient psychology was much more aware than we are of the element of freedom, of free invention, in telling lies. The ‘necessities’ of torture were supposed to destroy this freedom and therefore could not be applied to free citizens.

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history.<sup>79</sup> The modern age, much more markedly than Christianity, has brought about—together with its glorification of labor—a tremendous degradation in the estimation of these arts and a less great but not less important actual decrease in the use of the instruments of violence in human affairs generally.<sup>80</sup> The elevation of labor and the necessity inherent in the laboring metabolism with nature appear to be intimately connected with the downgrading of all activities which either spring directly from violence, as the use of force in human relations, or harbor an element of violence within themselves, which, as we shall see, is the case for all workmanship. It is as though the growing elimination of violence throughout the modern age almost automatically opened the doors for the re-entry of necessity on its most elementary level. What already happened once in our history, in the centuries of the declining Roman Empire, may be happening again. Even then, labor became an occupation of the free classes, “only to bring to them the obligations of the servile classes.”<sup>81</sup>

The danger that the modern age’s emancipation of labor will not only fail to usher in an age of freedom for all but will result, on the contrary, in forcing all mankind for the first time under the yoke of necessity, was already clearly perceived by Marx when he insisted that the aim of a revolution could not possibly be the already-accomplished emancipation of the laboring classes, but must consist in the emancipation of man from labor. At first glance, this aim seems utopian, and the only strictly utopian element in Marx’s teachings.<sup>82</sup> Emancipation from labor, in Marx’s own terms, is emancipation from necessity, and this would ultimately mean emancipation from consumption as well, that is, from the metabolism with nature which is the very condition of human life.<sup>83</sup> Yet the developments of the last decade, and especially the possibilities opened

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<sup>79</sup> The older of the Greek words for slaves, *douloi* and *dmōes*, still signify the defeated enemy. About wars and the sale of prisoners of war was the chief source of slavery in antiquity, see W. L. Westermann, “Sklaverei,” in Pauly-Wissowa.

<sup>80</sup> Today, because of the new developments of instruments of war and destruction, we are likely to overlook this rather important trend in the modern age. As a matter of fact, the nineteenth century was one of the most peaceful centuries in history.

<sup>81</sup> Wallon, *op. cit.*, III, 265. Wallon shows brilliantly how the late Stoic generalization that all men are slaves rested on the development of the Roman Empire, where the old freedom was gradually abolished by the imperial government, so that eventually nobody was free and everybody had his master. The turning point is when first Caligula and then Trajan consented to being called *dominus*, a word formerly used only for the master of the household. The so-called slave morality of late antiquity and its assumption that no real difference existed between the life of a slave and that of a free man had a very realistic background. Now the slave could indeed tell his master: Nobody is free, everybody has a master. In the words of Wallon: “Les comandemnés aux mines ont pour confrères, à tout autre travail faisant l’objet d’une corporation particulière” (p. 216). “C’est le droit de l’escalavage qui gouverne maintenant le citoyen; et nous avons retrouvé toute la législation propre aux esclaves dans les règlements qui concernent sa personne, sa famille ou ses biens” (pp. 219-20).

<sup>82</sup> The classless and stateless society of Marx is not utopian. Quite apart from the fact that modern developments have an unmistakable tendency to do away with class distinctions in society and to replace government by that “administration of things” which according to Engels was to be the hallmark of socialist society, these ideals in Marx himself were obviously conceived in accordance with Athenian democracy, except that in communist society the privileges of the free citizens were to be extended to all.

<sup>83</sup> It is perhaps no exaggeration to say the Simone Weil’s *La condition ouvrière* (1951) is the only book in the huge literature on the labor question which deals with the problem without prejudice and sentimentality. She chose as the motto for her diary, relating from day to day her experiences in a factory, the line from Homer: *poll’ aekadzomenē, kraterē d’ epikeiset’ anagkē* (“much against your own will, since necessity lies more mightily upon you”), and concludes that the hope for an eventual liberation from labor and necessity is the only utopian element

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up through the further development of automation, give us reason to wonder whether the utopia of yesterday will not turn into the reality of tomorrow, so that eventually only the effort of consumption will be left of “the toil and trouble” inherent in the biological cycle of whose more human life is bound.

However, not even this utopia could change the essential worldly futility of the life process. The two stages through which the ever-recurrent cycle of biological life must pass, the stages of labor and consumption, may change their proportion even to the point where nearly all human “labor power” is spent in consuming with the concomitant serious social problem of leisure, that is, essentially the problem of how to provide enough opportunity for daily exhaustion to keep the capacity for consumption intact.<sup>84</sup> Painless and effortless consumption would not change but would only increase the devouring character of biological life until a mankind altogether “liberated” from the shackles of pain and effort would be free to “consume” the whole world and to reproduce daily all things it wished to consume. How many things would appear and disappear daily and hourly in the life process of such a society would at best be immaterial for the world, if the world and its thing-character could withstand the reckless dynamism of a wholly motorized life process at all. The danger of future automation is less the much deplored mechanization and artificialization of natural life than that, its artificiality notwithstanding, all human productivity would be sucked into an enormously intensified life process and would follow automatically, without pain or effort, its ever-recurrent natural cycle. The rhythm of machines would magnify and intensify the natural rhythm of life enormously, but it would not change, only make more deadly, life’s chief character with respect to the world, which is to wear down durability.

It is a long way from the gradual decrease of working hours, which has progressed steadily for nearly a century, to this utopia. The progress, moreover, has been rather overrated, because it was measured against the quite exceptionally inhuman conditions of exploitation prevailing during the early stages of capitalism. If we think in somewhat longer periods, the total yearly amount of individual free time enjoyed at present appears less an achievement of modernity than a belated approximation to normality.<sup>85</sup> In this as in other respects, the specter of

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of Marxism and at the same time the actual motor of all Marx-inspired revolutionary labor movements. It is the “opium of the people” which Marx has believed religion to be.

<sup>84</sup> This leisure needless to save, is not at all the same, as current opinion has it, as the *skholē* of antiquity, which was not a phenomenon of consumption, “conspicuous” or not, and did not come about through the emergence of “spare time” saved from laboring, but was on the contrary a conscious “abstention from” all activities connected with mere being alive, the consuming activity no less than the laboring. The touchstone of this *skholē*, as distinguished from the modern ideal of leisure, is the well-known and frequently described frugality of Greek life in the classical period. Thus it is characteristic that the maritime trade, which more than anything else was responsible for wealth in Athens, was felt to be suspect, so that Plato, following Hesiod, recommended the foundation of new city-states far away from the sea.

<sup>85</sup> During the Middle Ages, it is estimated that one hardly worked more than half of the days of the year. Official holidays numbers 141 days (see Levasseur, *op. cit.*, p. 329; see also Liesse, *Le Travail* [1899], p. 253, for the number of working days in France before the Revolution). The monstrous extension of the working day is characteristic of the beginning of the industrial revolution, when the laborers had to compete with newly introduced machines. Before that, the length of the working day amounted to eleven or twelve hours in fifteenth-century England and to ten hours in the seventeenth (see H. Herkner, “Arbeitszeit,” in *Handwörterbuch für die Staatswissenschaft* [1923], I, 889 ff.). In brief, “les travailleurs ont connu, pendant la première moitié du 19e siècle, des conditions d’existences pire que celles subies auparavant par les plus infortunés” (Édouard Dolléans, *Histoire du travail en*

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a true consumers' society is more alarming as an ideal of present-day society than as an already existing reality. The ideal is not new; it was clearly indicated in the unquestioned assumption of classical political economy that the ultimate goal of the *vita activa* is growing wealth, abundance, and the "happiness of the greatest number." And what else, finally, is this ideal of modern society but the age-old dream of the poor and destitute, which can have a charm of its own so long as it is a dream, but turns into a fool's paradise as soon as it is realized.

The hope that inspired Marx and the best men of the various workers' movements—that free time eventually will emancipate men from necessity and make the *animal laborans* productive—rests on the illusion of a mechanistic philosophy which assumes that labor power, like any other energy, can never be lost, so that if it is not spent and exhausted in the drudgery of life it will automatically nourish other, "higher," activities. The guiding model of this hope in Marx was doubtless the Athens of Pericles which, in the future, with the help of the vastly increased productivity of human labor, would need no slaves to sustain itself but would become a reality for all. A hundred years after Marx we know the fallacy of this reasoning; the spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites. That these appetites become more sophisticated, so that consumption is no longer restricted to the necessities but, on the contrary, mainly concentrates on the superfluities of life, does not change the character of this society, but harbors the grave danger that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption.

The rather uncomfortable truth of the matter is that the triumph the modern world has achieved over necessity is due to the emancipation of labor, that is, to the fact that the *animal laborans* was permitted to occupy the public realm; and yet, as long as the *animal laborans* remains in possession of it, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open. The outcome is what is euphemistically called mass culture, and its deep-rooted trouble is a universal unhappiness, due on one side to the troubled balance between laboring and consumption and, on the other, to the persistent demands of the *animal laborans* to obtain a happiness which can be achieved only where life's processes of exhaustion and regeneration, of pain and release from pain, strike a perfect balance. The universal demand for happiness and the widespread unhappiness in our society (and these are but two sides of the same coin) are among the most persuasive signs that we have begun to live in a labor society which lacks enough laboring to keep it contented. For only the *animal laborans*, and neither the craftsman nor the man of action, has ever demanded to be "happy" or thought that mortal men could be happy.

One of the obvious danger signs that we may be on our way to bring into existence the ideal of the *animal laborans* is the extent to which our whole economy has become a waste economy, in which things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world, if the process itself is not to come to a sudden catastrophic end. But if the ideal were already in existence and we were truly nothing but members of a consumers' society, we would no longer live in a world at all but simply be driven by a process in whose ever-

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France [1953]). The extent of progress achieved in our time is generally overrated, since we measure it against a very "dark age" indeed. It may, for instance, be that the life expectancy of the most highly civilized countries today corresponds only to the life expectancy in certain centuries of antiquity. We do not know, of course, but a reflection upon the age of death in the biographies of famous people invites this suspicion.

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recurring cycles things appear and disappear, manifest themselves and vanish, never to last long enough to surround the life process in their midst.

The world, the man-made home erected on earth and made of the material which earthly nature delivers into human hands, consists not of things that are consumed but of things that are used. If nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human *life*, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth. Nature seen through the eyes of the *animal laborans* is the great provider of all “good things,” which belong equally to all her children, who “take [them] out of [her] hands” and “mix with” them in labor and consumption.<sup>86</sup> The same nature seen through the eyes of *homo faber*, the builder of the world, “furnishes only the almost worthless materials as in themselves,” whose whole value lies in the work performed upon them.<sup>87</sup> Without taking things out of nature’s hands and consuming them, and without defending himself against the natural processes of growth and decay, the *animal laborans* could never survive. But without being at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human.

The easier that life has become in a consumers’ or laborers’ society, the more difficult it will be to remain aware of the urges of necessity by which it is driven, even when pain and effort, the outward manifestations of necessity, are hardly noticeable at all. The danger is that such a society, dazzled by the abundance of its growing fertility and caught in the smooth functioning of a never-ending process, would no longer be able to recognize its own futility—the futility of a life which “does not fix or realize itself in any permanent subject which endures after [its] labour is past.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Locke, *op. cit.*, sec 28.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, sect. 43.

<sup>88</sup> Adam Smith, *op. cit.*, I, 295.

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#### IV. WORK

##### 22. *The Exchange Market*

Marx—in one of many asides which testify to his eminent historical sense—once remarked that Benjamin Franklin’s definition of man as a toolmaker is as characteristic of “Yankeedom,” that is, of the modern age, as the definition of man as a political animal was for antiquity.<sup>25</sup> The truth of this remark lies in the fact that the modern age was an intent on excluding political man, that is, man who acts and speaks, from its public realm as antiquity was on excluding *homo faber*. In both instances the exclusion was not a matter of course, as was the exclusion of laborers and the propertyless classes until their emancipation in the nineteenth century. The modern age was of course perfectly aware that the political realm was not always and need not necessarily be a mere function of “society,” destined to protect the productive, social sides of human nature through governmental administration; but it regarded everything beyond the enforcement of law and order as “idle talk” and “vain-glory.” The human capacity on which it based its claim of the natural innate productivity of society was the unquestionable productivity of *homo faber*. Conversely, antiquity knew full well types of human communities in which not the citizen of the *polis* and not the *res publica* as such established and determined the content of the public realm, but where the public life of the ordinary man was restricted to “working for the people” at large, that is, to being a *dēmiourgos*, a worker for the people as distinguished from an *oiketēs*, a household laborer and therefore a slave.<sup>26</sup> The hallmark of these non-political communities was that their public place, the *agora*, was not a meeting place of citizens, but a market place where craftsmen could show and exchange their products. In Greece, moreover, it was the ever-frustrated ambition of all tyrants to discourage the citizens from worrying about public affairs, from idling their time away in unproductive *agoreuein* and *politeuesthai*, and to transform the *agora* into an assemblage of shops like the bazaars of oriental despotism. What characterized these market places, and later characterized the medieval cities’ trade and craft districts, was that the display of goods for sale was accompanied by a display of their production. “Conspicuous production” (if we may vary Veblen’s term) is, in fact, no less a trait of a society of producers than “conspicuous consumption” is a characteristic of a laborers’ society.

Unlike the *animal laborans*, whose social life is worldless and herdlike and who therefore is incapable of building or inhabiting a public, worldly realm, *homo faber* is fully capable of having a public realm of his own, even though it may not be a political realm, properly speaking. His public realm is the exchange market, where he can show the products of his hand and receive the esteem which is due him. This inclination to showmanship is closely connected with and probably no less deeply rooted than the “propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for

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<sup>25</sup> *Capital* (Modern Library ed.), p. 358, n. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Early medieval history, and particularly the history of the craft guilds, offers a good illustration of the inherent truth in the ancient understanding of laborer as household inmates, as against craftsmen, who were considered workers for the people at large. For the “appearance [of the guilds] marks the second stage in the history of industry, the transition from the family system to the artisan or guild system. In the former there was no class of artisans properly so called...because all the needs of a family or other domestic groups...were satisfied by the labours of the members of the group itself” (W.J. Ashley, *An Introduction to English Economic History and Theory* [1931], p. 76).

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another,” which, according to Adam Smith, distinguishes man from animal.<sup>27</sup> The point is that *homo faber*, the builder of the world and the producer of things, can find his proper relationship to other people only by exchanging his products with theirs, because these products themselves are always produced in isolation. The privacy which the early modern age demanded as the supreme right of each member of society was actually the guaranty of isolation, without which no work can be produced. Not the onlookers and spectators on the medieval market places, where the craftsman in his isolation was exposed to the light of the public, but only the rise of the social realm, where the others are not content with beholding, judging, and admiring but wish to be admitted to the company of the craftsman and to participate as equals in the work process, threatened the “splendid isolation” of the worker and eventually undermined the very notions of competence and excellence. This isolation from others is the necessary life condition for every mastership which consists in being alone with the “idea,” the mental image of the thing to be. This mastership, unlike political forms of domination, is primarily a mastery of things and material and not of people. The latter, in fact, is quite secondary to the activity of craftsmanship, and the words “worker” and “master”—*ouvrier* and *maître*—were originally used synonymously.<sup>28</sup>

The only company that grows out of workmanship directly is in the needs of the master for assistants or in his wish to educate others in his craft. But the distinction between his skill and the unskilled help is temporary, like the distinction between adults and children. There can be hardly anything more alien or even more destructive to workmanship than teamwork, which actually is only a variety of the division of labor and presupposes the “breakdown of operations into their simple constituent motions.”<sup>29</sup> The team, the multiheaded subject of all production carried out according to the principle of division of labor, possesses the same togetherness as the parts which form the whole, and each attempt of isolation on the part of the members of the team would be fatal to the production itself. But it is not only this togetherness which the master and workman lacks while actively engaged in production; the specifically political forms of being together with others, acting in concert and speaking with each other, are completely outside the range of his productivity. Only when he stops working and his product is finished can he abandon his isolation.

Historically, the last public realm, the last meeting place which is at least connected with the activity of *homo faber*, is the exchange market on which his products are displayed. The commercial society, characteristic of the earlier stages of the modern age or the beginnings of manufacturing capitalism, sprang from his “conspicuous production” with its concomitant hunger for universal possibilities of truck and barter, and its end came with the rise of labor and

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<sup>27</sup> He adds rather emphatically: “Nobody ever saw a dog make a fair and deliberate exchange of one bone for another with another dog” (*Wealth of Nations* [Everyman’s ed.], I, 12).

<sup>28</sup> E. Levasseur, *Histoire des classes ouvrières et de l’industrie en France avant 1789* (1900): “Les mots maître et ouvrier étaient encore pris comme synonymes au 14<sup>e</sup> siècle” (p. 5623, n. 2), whereas “au 15<sup>e</sup> siècle... la maîtrise est devenue un titre auquel il n’est permis à quiconque ouvrait, faisait ouvrage, maître ou valet” (p. 309). In the workshops themselves and outside them in social life, there was no great distinction between the master or the owner of the shop and the workers (p. 313). (See also Pierre Brizon, *Histoire du travail et des travailleurs* [4<sup>th</sup> ed.; 1926], pp. 39 ff.)

<sup>29</sup> Charles R. Walker and Robert H. Guest, *The Man on the Assembly Line* (1952), p. 10. Adam Smith’s famous description of this principle in pin-making (*op. cit.*, I, 4 ff.) shows clearly how machine work was preceded by the division of labor and derives its principle from it.



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the labor society which replaced conspicuous production and its pride with “conspicuous consumption” and its concomitant vanity.

The people who met on the exchange market, to be sure, were no longer the fabricators themselves, and they did not meet as persons but as owners of commodities and exchange values, as Marx abundantly pointed out. In a society where exchange of products has become the chief public activity, even the laborers, because they are confronted with “money or commodity owners,” become proprietors, “owners of their labor power.” It is only at this point that Marx’s famous self-alienation, the degradation of men into commodities, sets in, and this degradation is characteristic of labor’s situation in a manufacturing society which judges men not as persons but as producers, according to the quality of their products. A laboring society, on the contrary, judges men according to the functions they perform in the labor process; while labor power in the eyes of *homo faber* is only the means to produce the necessarily higher end, that is, either a use object or an object for exchange, laboring society bestows upon labor power the same higher value it reserves for the machine. In other words, this society is only seemingly more “humane,” although it is true that under its conditions the price of human labor rises to such an extent that it may seem to be more valued and more valuable than any given material or matter; in fact, it only foreshadows something even more “valuable,” namely, the smoother functioning of the machine whose tremendous power of processing first standardizes and then devaluates all things into consumer goods.

Commercial society, or capitalism in its earlier stages when it was still possessed by a fiercely competitive and acquisitive spirit, is still ruled by the standards of *homo faber*. When *homo faber* comes out of his isolation, he appears as a merchant and trader and establishes the exchange market in this capacity. This market must exist prior to the rise of a manufacturing class, which then produces exclusively for the market, that is, produces exchange objects rather than use things. In this process from isolated craftsmanship to manufacturing for the exchange market, the finished end product changes its quality somewhat but not altogether. Durability, which alone determines if a thing can exist as a thing and endure in the world as a distinct entity, remains the supreme criterion. Although it no longer makes a thing fit for use but rather fit to “be stored up beforehand” for future exchange.<sup>30</sup>

This is the change in quality reflected in the current distinction between use and exchange value, whereby the latter is related to the former as the merchant and trader is related to the fabricator and manufacturer. In so far as *homo faber* fabricates use objects, he not only produces them in the privacy of isolation but also for the privacy of usage, from which they emerge and appear in the public realm when they become commodities in the exchange market. It has frequently been remarked and unfortunately as frequently been forgotten that value, being “an idea of proportion between the possession of one thing and the possession of another in the conception of man,”<sup>31</sup> “always means value in exchange.”<sup>32</sup> For it is only in the exchange market, where everything can be exchanged for something else, that all things, whether they are products of labor or work, consumer goods or use objects, necessary for the life of the body or the convenience of living or the life of the mind, become “values.” This value consists solely in

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<sup>30</sup> Adam Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 241.

<sup>31</sup> This definition was given by the Italian economist Abbey Galiani. I quote from Hannah R. Sewall, *The Theory of Value before Adam Smith* (1901) (“Publications of the American Economic Association,” ed Ser., Vol. II, No. 3), p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (1920), I, 8.

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the esteem of the public realm where the things appear as commodities, and it is neither labor, nor work, nor capital, nor profit, nor material, which bestows such value upon an object, but only and exclusively neglected. Value is the quality a thing can never possess in privacy but acquires automatically the moment it appears in public. This “marketable value,” as Locke very clearly pointed out, has nothing to do with “the intrinsic natural worth of anything”<sup>33</sup> which is an objective quality of the thing itself, “outside the will of the individual purchaser or seller; something attached to the thing itself, existing whether he liked it or not, and that he ought to recognize.”<sup>34</sup> This intrinsic worth of a thing can be changed only through the change of the thing itself—thus one ruins the worth of a table by depriving it of one of its legs—whereas “the marketable value” of a commodity is altered by “the alteration of some proportion which that commodity bears to something else.”<sup>35</sup>

Values, in other words, in distinction from things or deed or ideas, are never the products of a specific human activity, but come into being whenever any such products are drawn into the ever-changing relativity of exchange between the members of society. Nobody, as Marx rightly insisted, seen “in his isolation produces values,” and nobody, he could have added, in his isolation cares about them; things or ideas or moral ideals “become values only in their social relationship.”<sup>36</sup>

The confusion in classical economics,<sup>37</sup> and the worse confusion arising from the use of the term “value” in philosophy, were originally caused by the fact that the older word “worth,” which we still find in Locke, was supplanted by the seemingly more scientific terms, “use value.” Marx, too, accepted this terminology and, in line with his repugnance to the public realm, saw quite consistently in the change from use value to exchange value the original sin of capitalism. But against these sins of a commercial society, where indeed the exchange market is the most important public place and where therefore every thing becomes an exchangeable value, a commodity, Marx did not summon up the “intrinsic” objective worth of the thing in itself. In its stead he put the function things have in the consuming life process of men which knows neither objective and intrinsic worth nor subjective and socially determined value. In the socialist equal distribution of all goods to all who labor, every tangible thing dissolves into a mere function in the regeneration process of life and labor power.

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<sup>33</sup> “Considerations upon the Lowering of Interest and Raising the Value of Money,” *Collected Works* (1801), II, 21.

<sup>34</sup> W. J. Ashley (*op. cit.*, p. 140) remarks that “the fundamental difference between the medieval and modern point of view ... is that, with us, value is something entirely subjective; it is what each individual cares to give for a thing. With Aquinas it was something objective.” This is true only to an extent, for “the first thing upon which the medieval teachers insist is that value is not determined by the intrinsic excellence of the thing itself, because, if it were, a fly would be more valuable than a pearl as being intrinsically more excellent” (George O’Brien, *An Essay on Medieval Economic Teaching* [1920], p. 109). The discrepancy is resolved if one introduces Locke’s distinction between “worth” and “value,” calling the former *valor naturalis* and the latter *pretium* and also *valor*. This distinction exists, of course, in all but the most primitive societies, but in the modern age the former disappears more and more in favor of the latter. (For medieval teaching, see also Slater, “Value in Theology and Political Economy,” *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* [September, 1901].)

<sup>35</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, sec. 22.

<sup>36</sup> *Das Kapital*, III, 689 (*Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, Part II [Zürich, 1933]).

<sup>37</sup> The clearest illustration of the confusion is Ricardo’s theory of value especially his desperate belief in an absolute value. (The interpretations in Gunnar Myrdal, *The Political Elements in the Development of Economic Theory* [1953], p. 66 ff., and Walter A. Weisskopf, *The Psychology of Economics* [1955], ch. 3, are excellent.)

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However, this verbal confusion tells only one part of the story. The reason for Marx's stubborn retention of the term "use value," as well as for the numerous futile attempts to find some objective source—such as labor, or land, or profit—for the birth of values, was that nobody found it easy to accept the simple fact that no "absolute value" exists in the exchange market, which is the proper sphere for values, and that to look for it resembled nothing so much as the attempt to square the circle. The much deplored devaluation of all things, that is, the loss of all intrinsic worth, begins with their transformation into values or commodities, for from this moment on they exist only in relation to some other thing which can be acquired in their stead. Universal relativity, that a thing exists only in relation to other things, and loss of intrinsic worth, that nothing any longer possesses an "objective" value independent of the ever-changing estimations of supply and demand, are inherent in the very concept of value itself.<sup>38</sup> The reason why this development, which seems inevitable in a commercial society, became a deep source of uneasiness and eventually constituted the chief problem of the new science of economics was not even relativity as such, but rather the fact that *homo faber*, whose whole activity is determined by the constant use of yardsticks, measurements, rules, and standards, could not bear the loss of "absolute" standards or yardsticks. For money, which obviously serves as the common denominator for the variety of things so that they can be exchanged for each other, by no means possesses the independent and objective existence, transcending all uses and surviving all manipulation, that the yardstick or any other measurement possesses with regard to the things it is supposed to measure and to the men who handle them.

It is this loss of standards and universal rules, without which no world could ever be erected by man, that Plato already perceived in the Protagorean proposal to establish man, the fabricator of things, and the use he makes of them, as their supreme measure. This shows how closely the relativity of the exchange market is connected with the instrumentality arising out of the world of the craftsman and the experience of fabrication. The former, indeed, develops without break and consistently from the latter. Plato's reply, however—not man, a "god is the measure of all things"—would be an empty, moralizing gesture if it were really true, as the modern age assumed, that instrumentality under the disguise of usefulness rules the realm of the finished world as exclusively as it rules the activity through which the world and all things it contains came into being.

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<sup>38</sup> The truth of Ashley's remark, which we quoted above (n. 34), lies in the fact that the Middle Ages did not know the exchange market, properly speaking. To the medieval teachers the value of a thing was either determined by its worth or by the objective needs of men—as for instance in Buridan: *valor rerum aestimatur secundum humanam indigentiam*—and the "just price" was normally the result of the common estimate, except that "on account of the varied and corrupt desires of man, it becomes expedient that the medium should be fixed according to the judgment of some wise men" (Gerson *De contractibus* i. 9, quoted from O'Brien, *op. cit.*, pp. 104 ff.). In the absence of an exchange market, it was inconceivable that the value of one thing should consist solely in its relationship or proportion to another thing. The question, therefore, is not so much whether value is objective or subjective, but whether it can be absolute or indicates only the relationship between things.

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## VI. THE VITA ACTIVA AND THE MODERN AGE

*Er hat den archimedischen Punkt defunden, hat ihn aber gegen sich ausgenutzt, offenbar hat er ihn nur unter dieser Bedingung finden dürfen.*

(He found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition.)

FRANZ KAFKA

### 35. World Alienation

Three great events stand at the threshold of the modern age and determine its character: the discovery of America and the ensuing exploration of the whole earth; the Reformation, which by expropriating ecclesiastical and monastic possessions started the two-fold process of individual expropriation and the accumulation of social wealth; the invention of the telescope and the development of a new science that considers the nature of the earth from the viewpoint of the universe. These cannot be called modern events as we know them since the French Revolution, and although they cannot be explained by any chain of causality, because no event can, they are still happening in an unbroken continuity, in which precedents exist and predecessors can be named. None of them exhibits the peculiar character of an explosion of undercurrents which, having gathered their force in the dark, suddenly erupt. The names we connect to them, Galileo Galilei and Martin Luther and the great seafarers, explorers, and adventurers in the age of discovery, still belong to a premodern world. Moreover, the strange pathos of novelty, the almost violent insistence of nearly all the great authors, scientists, and philosophers since the seventeenth century that they saw things never seen before, thought thoughts never thought before, can be found in none of them, not even in Galileo.<sup>1</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> The term *scienza nuova* seems to occur for the first time in the work of the sixteenth-century Italian mathematician Niccolò Tartaglia, who designed the new science of ballistics which he claimed to have discovered because he was the first to apply geometrical reasoning to the motion of projectiles. (I owe this information to Professor Alexandre Koyré.) Of greater relevance in our context is that Galileo, in the *Sidereus Nuncius* (1610), insists on the “absolute novelty” of his discoveries, but this certainly is a far cry from Hobbes’s claim that political philosophy was “no older than my own book *De Cive*” (*English Works*, ed. Molesworth [1839], I, ix) or Descartes’ conviction that no philosopher before him had succeeded in philosophy (“Lettre au traducteur pouvant servir de preface” for *Les principes de la philosophie*). From the seventeenth century on, the insistence on absolute novelty and the rejection of the whole tradition became commonplace. Karl Jaspers (*Descartes und die Philosophie* [2d ed.; 1948], pp. 61 ff.) stresses the difference between Renaissance philosophy, where “Drang nach Geltung der originalen Persönlichkeit... das Neusein als Auszeichnung verlangte,” and modern science, where “sich das Wort ‘neu’ als sachliches Wetpraedikat verbreitet.” In the same context, he shows how different in significance the claim to novelty is in science and philosophy. Descartes certainly presented his philosophy as a scientist may present a new scientific discovery. Thus, he writes as follows about his “considerations”: “Je ne mérite point plus de gloire de les avoir trouvées, que ferait un passant d’avoir reconstruit par Bonheur à ses pieds quelque riche trésor, que la diligence de plusieurs aurait inutilement cherché longtemps auparavant” (*La recherche de la vérité* [Pléiade ed.], p. 669).

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precursors are not revolutionists, and their motives and intentions are still securely rooted in tradition.

In the eyes of their contemporaries, the most spectacular of these events must have been the discoveries of unheard-of continents and undreamed-of oceans; the most disturbing might have been the Reformation's irremediable split of Western Christianity, with its inherent challenge to orthodoxy as such and its immediate threat to the tranquility of men's souls; certainly the least noticed was the addition of a new implement to man's already large arsenal of tools, useless except to look at the stars, even though it was the first purely scientific instrument ever devised. However, if we could measure the momentum of history as we measure natural processes, we might find that what originally had the least noticeable impact, man's first tentative steps toward the discovery of the universe, has constantly increased in momentousness as well as speed until it has eclipsed not only the enlargement of the earth's surface, which found its final limitation only in the limitations of the globe itself, but also the still apparently limitless economic accumulation process.

But these are mere speculations. As a matter of fact, the discovery of the earth, the mapping of her lands and the chartering of her waters, took many centuries and has only now begun to come to an end. Only now has man taken full possession of his mortal dwelling place and gathered the infinite horizons, which were temptingly and forbiddingly open to all previous ages, into a globe whose majestic outlines and detailed surface he knows as he knows the lines in the palm of his hand. Precisely when the immensity of available space on earth was discovered, the famous shrinkage of the globe began, until eventually in our world (which, through the result of the modern age, is by no means identical with the modern age's world) each man is as much an inhabitant of the earth as he is an inhabitant of his country. Men now live in an earth-wide continuous whole where even the notion of distance, still inherent in the most perfectly unbroken contiguity of parts, has yielded before the onslaught of speed. Speed has conquered space; and though this conquering process finds its limit at the unconquerable boundary of the simultaneous presence of one body at two different places, it has made distance meaningless, for no significant part of the human life—years, months, or even weeks—is any longer necessary to reach any point on the earth.

Nothing, to be sure, could have been more alien to the purpose of the explorers and circumnavigators of the early modern age than this closing-in process; they went to enlarge the earth, not shrink her into a ball, and when they submitted to the call of the distant, they had no intention of abolishing distance. Only the wisdom of hindsight sees the obvious, that nothing can remain immense if it can be measured, that every survey brings together distant parts and therefore establishes closeness where distance ruled before. Thus the maps and navigation charts of the early stages of the modern age anticipated the technical inventions through which all earthly space has become small and close at hand. Prior to the shrinkage of space and the abolition of distance through railroads, steamships, and airplanes, there is the infinitely greater and more effective shrinkage which comes about through the surveying capacity of the human mind, whose use of numbers, symbols, and models can condense and scale earthly physical distance down to the size of the human body's natural sense and understanding. Before we knew how to circle the earth, how to circumscribe the sphere of human habitation in days and hours, we had brought the globe into our living rooms to be touched by our hands and swirled before your eyes.

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There is another aspect of this matter which, as we shall see, will be of greater importance in our context. It is in the nature of the human surveying capacity that it can function only if man disentangles himself from all involvement in and concern with the close at hand and withdraws himself to a distance from everything near him. The greater the distance between himself and his surroundings, world or earth, the more he will be able to survey and to measure and the less will worldly, earth-bound space be left to him. The fact that the decisive shrinkage of the earth was the consequence of the invention of the airplane, that is, of leaving the surface of the earth altogether, is like a symbol for the general phenomenon that any decrease of terrestrial between man and earth, of alienating man from his immediate earthly surroundings.

The fact that the Reformation, an altogether different event, eventually confronts us with a similar phenomenon of alienation, which Max Weber even identified even identified, under the name of “innerworldly asceticism,” as the innermost spring of the new capitalist mentality, may be one of the many coincidences that make it so difficult for the historian not to believe in ghosts, demons, and *Zeitgeists*. What is so striking and disturbing is the similarity in utmost divergence. For this innerworldly alienation has nothing to do, either in intent or content, with the alienation from the earth inherent in the discovery and taking possession of the earth. Moreover, the innerworldly alienation whose historical factuality Max Weber demonstrated in his famous essay is not only present in the new morality that grew out of Luther’s and Calvin’s attempts to restore the uncompromising otherworldliness of the Christian faith; it is equally present, albeit on an altogether different level in the expropriation of the peasantry, which was the unforeseen consequence of the expropriation of church property, and, as such, the greatest single factor in the breakdown of the feudal system.<sup>2</sup> It is, of course, idle to speculate on what the course of our economy would have been without this event, whose impact propelled Western mankind into a development in which all property was destroyed in the process of its appropriation, all things devoured in the process of their production, and the stability of the world undermined in a constant process of change. Yet, such speculations are meaningful to the extent that they remind us that history is a story of events and not of forces or ideas with predictable courses. They are idle and even dangerous when used as arguments against reality and when meant to point to positive potentialities and alternatives, because their number is not only indefinite by definition but they also lack the tangible unexpectedness of the event, and compensate for it by mere plausibility. Thus, they remain sheer phantoms no matter in how pedestrian a manner they may be presented.

In order not to underestimate the momentum this process has reached after centuries of almost unhindered development, it may be well to reflect on the so-called “economic miracle” of postwar Germany, a miracle only if seen in an outdated frame of reference. The German example shows very clearly that under modern conditions the expropriation of people, the destruction of objects, and the devastation of cities will turn out to be a radical stimulant for a process, not of mere recovery, but of quicker and more efficient accumulations of wealth—if only the country is

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny the greatness of Max Weber’s discovery of the enormous power that comes from an otherworldliness directed toward the world (see “Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism” in *Religionssoziologie* [1920], Vol. I). Weber finds the Protestant work ethos preceded by certain traits of monastic ethics, and one can indeed see a first germ of these attitudes in Augustine’s famous distinction between *uti* and *frui*, between the things of this world which one may use but not enjoy and those of the world to come which may be enjoyed for their own sake. The increase in power of man over the things of this world springs in either case from the distance which man puts between himself and the world, that is, from world alienation.

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modern enough to respond in terms of the production process. In Germany, outright destruction took the place of the relentless process of depreciation of all worldly things, which is the hallmark of the waste economy in which we now live. The result is almost the same: a booming prosperity which, as postwar Germany illustrates, feeds not on the abundance of material goods or on anything stable and given but on the process of production and consumption itself. Under modern conditions, not destruction but conservation spells ruin because the very durability of conserved objects is the greatest impediment to the turnover process, whose constant gain in speed is the only constancy left wherever it has taken hold.<sup>3</sup>

We saw before that property, as distinguished from wealth and appropriation, indicates the privately owned share of a common world and therefore is the most elementary political condition for man's worldliness. By the same token, expropriation and world alienation coincide, and the modern age, very much against the intentions of all the actors in the play, began by alienating certain strata of the population from the world. We tend to overlook the central importance of this alienation for the modern age because we usually stress its secular character and identify the term secularity with worldliness. Yet secularization as a tangible historical event means no more than separation of Church and State, of religion and politics, and this, from a religious viewpoint, implies a return to the early Christian attitude of "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's" rather than a loss of faith and transcendence or a new and emphatic interest in the things of this world.

Modern loss of faith is not religious in origin—it cannot be traced to the Reformation and Counter Reformation, the two great religious movements of the modern age—and its scope is by no means restricted to the religious sphere. Moreover, even if we admitted that the modern age began with a sudden, inexplicable eclipse of transcendence, of belief in a hereafter, it would by no means follow that this loss threw man back upon the world. The historical evidence, on the contrary, shows that modern men were not thrown back upon this world but upon themselves. One of the most persistent trends in modern philosophy since Descartes and perhaps its most original contribution to philosophy has been an exclusive concern with the self, as distinguished from the soul or person or man in general, an attempt to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experiences between man and himself. The greatness of Max Weber's discovery about the origins of capitalism lay precisely in his demonstration that an enormous, strictly mundane activity is possible without any care for or enjoyment of the world whatever, an activity whose deepest motivation, on the contrary, is worry and care about the self. World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought,<sup>4</sup> has been the hallmark of the modern age.

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<sup>3</sup> The reason most frequently given for the surprising recovery of Germany—that she did not have to carry the burden of a military budget—is inconclusive on two accounts: first, Germany had to pay for a number of years the costs of occupation, which amounted to a sum almost equal to a full-fledged military budget, and second, war production is held in other economies to be the greatest single factor in the postwar prosperity. Moreover, the point I wish to make could be equally well illustrated by the common and yet quite uncanny phenomenon that prosperity is closely connected with the "useless" production of means of destruction, of goods produced to be wasted either by using them up in destruction or—and this is the more common case—by destroying them because they soon become obsolete.

<sup>4</sup> There are several indications in the writings of the young Marx that he was not altogether unaware of the implications of world alienation in capitalist economy. Thus, in the early article of 1842, "Debatten über das Holzdiebstahls-gesetz" (see *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* [Berlin, 1932], Part 1, Vol. I, pp. 266 ff.), he criticizes a law

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Expropriation, the deprivation for certain groups of their place in the world and their naked exposure to the exigencies of life, created both the original accumulation of wealth and the possibility of transforming this wealth into capital through labor. These together constituted the conditions for the rise of a capitalist economy. That this development started by expropriation and fed upon it, would result in an enormous increase in human productivity was manifest from the beginning, centuries before the industrial revolution. The new laboring class, which literally lived from hand to mouth, stood not only directly under the compelling urgency of life's necessity<sup>5</sup> but was at the same time alienated from all cares and worries which did not immediately follow from the life process itself. What was liberated in the early stages of the first free laboring class in history was the force inherent in "labor power," that is, in the sheer natural abundance of the biological process, which like all natural forces—of procreation no less than of laboring—provides for a generous surplus over and beyond the reproduction of young to balance the old. What distinguishes this development at the beginning of the modern age from similar occurrences in the past is that expropriation and wealth accumulation did not simply result in new property or lead to a new redistribution of wealth, but were fed back into the process to generate further expropriation, greater productivity, and more appropriation.

In other words, the liberation of labor power as a natural process did not remain restricted to certain classes of society, and appropriation did not come to an end with the satisfaction of wants and desires; capital accumulation, therefore, did not lead to the stagnation we know so well from rich empires prior to the modern age, but spread throughout the society and initiated a steadily increasing flow of wealth. But this process, which indeed is the "live process of society," as Marx used to call it, and whose wealth-producing capacity can be compared only with the fertility of natural processes where the creation of one man and one woman would suffice to produce by multiplication any given number of human beings, remains bound to the principle of world alienation from which is sprang; the process can continue only provided that no worldly durability and stability is permitted to interfere, only as long as all worldly things, all end products of the production process, are fed back into it at an ever-increasing speed. In other words, the process of wealth accumulation, as we know it, stimulated by the life process and in

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against theft not only because the formal opposition of owner and thief leaves "human needs" out of account—the fact that the thief who uses the wood needs it more urgently than the owner who sells it—and therefore dehumanizes men by equating wood-user and wood-seller as wood proprietors, but also that the wood itself is deprived of its nature. A law which regards men only as property-owners considers things only as properties and properties only as exchange objects, not as use things. That things are denatured when they are useful for exchange was probably suggested to Marx by Aristotle, who pointed out that though a shoe may be wanted for either usage or exchange, it is against the nature of a shoe to be exchanged, "for a shoe is not made to be an object of barter" (*Politics* 1257a8). (Incidentally the influence of Aristotle on the style of Marx's thought seems to me almost as characteristic and decisive as the influence of Hegel's philosophy.) However, such occasional considerations play a minor role in his work, which remained firmly rooted in the modern age's extreme subjectivism. In his ideal society, where men will produce as human beings, world alienation is even more present than it was before; for then they will be able to objectify (*vergegenständlichen*) their individuality, their peculiarity, to confirm and actualize their true being: "Unsere Produktionen wären ebensoviele Spiegel, woraus unser Wesen sich engegen leuchtete" ("Aus den Excerptheften" [1844-45], in *Gesamtausgabe*, Part 1, Vol. III, pp. 546-47).

<sup>5</sup> This of course is markedly different from present condition, where the day laborer has already become a weekly wage-earner; in a probably not very distant future the guaranteed annual wage will do away with these early conditions altogether.



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turn stimulating human life, is possible only if the world and the very worldliness of man are sacrificed.

The first stage of this alienation was marked by its cruelty, the misery and material wretchedness is meant for a steadily increasing number of “laboring poor,” whom expropriation deprived of the twofold protection of family and property, that is, of a family-owned private share in the world, which until the modern age had housed the individual life process and the laboring activity subject to its necessities. The second stage was reached when society became the subject of the new life process, as the family had been its subject before. Membership in a social class replaced the protection previously offered by membership in a family, and social solidarity became a very efficient substitute of the earlier, natural solidarity ruling the family unit. Moreover, society as a whole, the “collective subject” of the life process, by no means remained an intangible entity, the “communist fiction” needed by classical economics; just as the family unit had been identified with a privately owned piece of the world, its property, society was identified with a tangible, albeit collectively owned, piece of property, the territory of the nation-state, which until its decline in the twentieth century offered all classes a substitute for the privately owned home of which the class of the poor had been deprived.

The organic theories of nationalism, especially in its Central European version, all rest on an identification of the nation and the relationships between its members with the family and family relationships. Because society becomes the substitute for the family, “blood and soil” is supposed to rule the relationships between its members; homogeneity of population and its rootedness in the soil of a given territory become the requisites for the nation-state everywhere. However, while this development undoubtedly mitigated cruelty and misery, it hardly influenced the process of expropriation and world alienation, since collective ownership, strictly speaking, is a contradiction in terms.

The decline of the European nation-state system; the economic and geographic shrinkage of the earth, so that prosperity and depression tend to become world-wide phenomena; the transformation of mankind, which until our own time was an abstract notion or a guiding principle for humanists only, into a really existing entity whose members at the most distant points of the globe need less time to meet than the members of a nation needed a generation ago—these mark the beginnings of the last stage in this development. Just as the family and its property were replaced by class membership and national territory, so mankind now begins to replace nationally bound societies, and the earth replaces the limited state territory. But whatever the future may bring, the process of world alienation, stated by expropriation and characterized by an ever-increasing progress in wealth, can only assume even more radical proportions if it is permitted to follow its own inherent law. For men cannot become citizens of the world as they are citizens of their countries, and social men cannot own collectively as family and household men own their private property. The rise of society brought about the simultaneous decline of the public as well as the private realm. But the eclipse of a common public world, so crucial to the formation of the lonely mass man and so dangerous in the formation of the wordless mentality of modern ideological mass movements, began with the much more tangible loss of a privately owned share in the world.”

*Hannah Arendt was an influential political philosopher in twentieth-century Germany; she was forced to leave in 1933, fleeing Nazi-occupied territory for Paris and then the United States. Her second major work from which the above selections are taken, was published in 1958 and details her existential concept of “vita activa” or the “active life” where work, citizenship, and political action provide human purpose beyond mere existence.*