

LABOR PROCESS AS A POLITICAL PROBLEM: MARX'S FORGOTTEN THEORY OF EXPLOITATION

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Abstract

This paper identifies Marx's theorizing vis-à-vis four main sources of modern thinking on work and politics: Weber, Arendt, Polanyi and Foucault. The central question will be the following: how Marx differed in his claim to theorize work as an essentially political act and the bearer of the activity as an essentially political actor? The answer to this question, I will argue, lays in his distinct understanding of work under capitalism as a different mode of being and relentless effort to historicize it. For Marx, the capitalist mode of production has rendered self-realization impossible as it moved exploitation as a key relationship to the center of all relationships. I will claim that Weber's economic sociology and the industrial sociology of North America in the 1920s represent the first major rupture in terms of disentangling the two. I will then argue that Arendt and Polanyi eliminated work (Arendt) and then exploitation (Polanyi) from social theory. Perhaps ironically, it was Foucault who re-established the link between the two (work and politics) in his later studies on neoliberalism. However reminiscent of Marx's project, Foucault's theory diverges from his in one significant way: the omission of exploitation. This explains the absence of a concept akin to labor process in Foucault's late work.

Keywords: Labor process, Exploitation, Social theory, Politics of work

Siyasi Bir Sorun Olarak Emek Süreci: Marx'ın Unutulmuş Sömürü Kuramı

Öz

Bu makale Marx'ın çalışma ve politika üzerine görüşlerini modern düşüncenin dört önemli kaynağı ile kıyaslayarak tartışmaktadır: Weber, Arendt, Polanyi and Foucault. Ana soru Marx'ın çalışma olgusunu özü itibarıyla politik bir edim ve bu edimin sahibini de politik bir ,ktör olarak kuramsallaştırırken diğer düşünürlerden nasıl ayırdığıdır. Bu soruya yanıt verirken Marx'ın temel farkının

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kapitalist üretim tarzı içinde kapitalizmin farklı bir varoluş durumu olduğunu iddia etmesi ve ısrarla bu olguyu tarihselleştirmeye çalışması olduğu kanıtlanmaya çalışılacaktır. Marx'a göre kapitalist üretim tarzı işçinin kendini gerçekleştirmesini olanaksız kılmış ve bunu yaparken anahtar bir ilişki biçimi olarak sömürüyü tüm ilişkilerin merkezine taşımıştır. Weber'in ekonomik sosyolojisi ve endüstri sosyolojisinin 1920'ler Kuzey Amerika'sındaki çıkışının bu yaklaşımdan ilk büyük kopuşu temsil ettiği tartışılacaktır. Ardından Arendt ve Polanyi'nin önce çalışmayı (Arendt) sonra sömürüyü (Polanyi) sosyal kuramdan çıkardığını göstermeye çalışacağım. Belki de ironik bir şekilde bu ikisi arasındaki kopan ilişkiyi yeniden kuran kişinin hayatının son döneminde neoliberalizme odaklanan çalışmalarıyla Foucault olduğunu savunacağım. Ancak her ne kadar Marx'ın projesini kısmen hatırlatsa da, Foucault'nun kuramı bir yönüyle Marx'tan ayrılmaktadır: sömürünün yok sayılması. Bu eksik Foucault'da neden emek süreci gibi bir kavram olmadığını da açıklamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Emek süreci, Sömürü, Sosyal kuram, Çalışmanın siyaseti

Introduction

“Work, in today’s society, is a mystery” is how John Bellamy Foster begins his introduction to the 25th year anniversary edition of Harry Braverman’s colossal *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, which was the most decisive effort to revitalize Marx’s long-forgotten concept of labor process (Braverman, 1974, p. ix). Ideological mystifications and concealments are the main reasons why such mystery prevails in modern world, according to Foster, and despite its overwhelming presence in our lives and centuries of thinking over its nature, work still appears in a blurry and perhaps uncanny fashion to many of us.

One of the main reasons for such prevalence of mystery, this paper will argue, is that the place of work in our social and political lives has never been a topic of consensus. Modern perceptions of work, I will then argue, are dominated by ideas/thinkers who persistently disengaged work from its political character. It has consistently been relegated to a realm of life that is not political, but only related to politics in tangential or derivative ways. Marx devoted his political and intellectual career to prove otherwise, however his persistence fell on deaf ears as the following lines of thought, Marxist or non-Marxist, ignored the link if not completely dismissed it. To explain the split between Marx and others, one needs to shed light on Marx’s relentless emphasis on *exploitation* as a political process. Labor process as a conceptual tool emerges from Marx’s effort in theorizing work under modern capitalism.

Marx's critiques considered work as a natural component of one's social life and seldom developed a conceptual framework around exploitation and consistently under-theorized it. The main reason behind such undertheorizing was the belief in exploitation as a matter of excess that only occasionally appeared. It was not a constitutive element of labor process under all circumstances under capitalism, but mostly abuse of workers that occur when labor/ers are weak for certain reasons. Marx, on the other hand, did not see any process of work without exploitation under capitalism, thus saw it as not only the main source of economic unsustainability but also political instability. He thus developed a theory of work under capitalism, historicized it and put exploitation, a process he devoted himself to explain in all details in *Capital*, at the center.

This paper will identify Marx's theorizing vis-à-vis four main sources of modern thinking on work and politics: Weber, Arendt, Polanyi and Foucault. The central question will be how Marx differed in his claim to theorize work as an essentially political act and the bearer of the activity as an essentially political actor? The answer to this question, I will argue, lays in his distinct understanding of work under capitalism as a different mode of *being* and relentless effort to historicize it. For Marx, the capitalist mode of production has rendered self-realization impossible as it moved exploitation as a key relationship to the center of all relationships. I will claim that Weber's economic sociology and the industrial sociology of North America in the 1920s represent the first major rupture in terms of disentangling the two. I will then argue that Arendt and Polanyi eliminated work (Arendt) and then exploitation (Polanyi) from social theory. Perhaps ironically, it was Foucault who re-established the link between the two (work and politics) in his later studies on neoliberalism. However reminiscent of Marx's project, Foucault's theory diverges from his in one significant way: the omission of exploitation. This explains the absence of a concept akin to labor process in Foucault's late work.

Marx's Unrecognized Theory of Work and Exploitation

Political and cultural status of work has changed drastically over time from the Ancient systems of slavery to European systems of serfdom and semi-slavery and modernity. Labor, more importantly the necessity to work, had been despised and seen lower as an activity compared to engaging in politics, artistic and artisanal activities, and even leisure. It started to change, at least in certain contexts, with the rise of capitalist modernity as laboring activity came to be perceived as an activity of emancipation through, among others, generating surplus. In fact, the main activity that leads to emancipation if not the only one. Laboring as a transformative activity became a moment of possibility to transcend the social and political system (Sayers, 2007).

Marx was the first significant figure who invited us to reflect systematically on the labor process and its political meaning. In his youth, he developed a critique of earlier thinkers—such as Hegel, Smith, Ricardo, French physiocrats—who reflected on the problem of work under capitalism however, according to Marx, without assigning any central political significance to it. Hegel thought that individual's interaction with others in the civil society was a necessary condition for his/her self-realization, however unrestricted civil society is problematic because of its tendency to create extreme poverty and *rabble* on the one hand, extreme wealth for the few on the other. Thus, he argued, the State —embodied by the modern rational bureaucracy—could reconcile the conflict of the civil society (Hegel, 1991, pp. 266, 75). Marx disagreed with him since he thought states and bureaucracies are integral part of the problems of the modes of production; not only capitalist mode of production but also the previous ones. Rather than ontologically dividing the two, Marx argued, we should consider them in relation to each other. The idea of externality of the state to market was a false assumption in the first place (Wood, 1993).

Classical political economists, on the other hand, did not assign such a supreme role to states. In fact, Smith proposed the retreat of the state to a very basic mode, which was called the night watchman state.¹ Specialization via deepening the division of labor was supposed to solve the problems in the field of production, and then, the exchange in the market would benefit all participants. Unlike Hegel, they did not anticipate any problems resulting from the process of exchange unless it is intervened by the State. Marx disagreed with classical political economists as he believed *the noisy sphere of exchange* is nothing but one aspect of a totality. Without addressing the conflict in the field of production and the ways in which it is related to other modes of social conduct, it would be impossible to understand the problem of poverty or wealth for that matter. Finally, Marx disagreed with French physiocrats who regarded nature as the source of all value and subordinated labor and labor processes to the human beings' relation with nature. For Marx, French physiocrats did have a quite old-fashioned understanding of production and value, and no ability to

¹ One should remember that this was how Marx interpreted classical political economists. However, there is a counter literature on Adam Smith and his perception of states in a market economy. Scholars with quite diverse backgrounds —such as Giovanni Arrighi and Amartya Sen—invite us to reexamine the social philosophy Smith proposed and recognize the differences between him and Ricardo. See, (Arrighi, 2007; Sen, 2009). Smith, in these re-readings, resemble Hegel as he advocates for more government involvement to cure the extremities caused by market relations.

appreciate the transformation of production especially in manufacturing (Torrance, 1995, pp. 376–377).

Marx transformed his early and sporadic efforts of critique into a systematic assessment of capitalist mode of production in his later works. Starting from the *Grundrisse*, where he first revealed the method of political economy in a comprehensive fashion, he distinguished the fields of production, consumption, exchange and distribution from one another, yet he argued that they constitute an organic whole. Without reducing one sphere to another, he argued that production is central since everything started and ended in the sphere of production because it “predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. The process always returns to production to begin anew (Marx, 1993, p. 99).”²

In *Capital*, he further invited us to abandon the noisy sphere of exchange “where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the *hidden abode of production*, on whose threshold there hangs the notice ‘No admittance except on business’. Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced. The *secret* of profit-making must at last be laid bare (Marx, 1990, pp. 279–280 italics are mine).” Marx persistently underlined that exploitation in the capitalist mode of production was a political entity. By inviting us to focus exclusively on the processes of commodity production and labor process, Marx aimed to unravel the political struggle between classes. He believed that the appearance of singularity of the relationship, which is secured by the wage relation, concealed the universal characteristic of exploitation. Thereby, he argued that labor process is a political matter so are the place it happens and the actors who participate. Marx did not reduce politics to the process of production but inherently related the two to each other.

Marx is critiqued and challenged by a wide range of thinkers in his later life for his persistence on this link. Among others, leading figures of social democratic parties, which became major actors in politics in Europe—especially in Germany, distanced themselves the most from Marxist views (Eley, 2002 chapter 2). His call for the analysis of universal characteristics of exploitation fell

² Marx’s view of organic whole and totality in the *Grundrisse* is replicated by many Marxists after. For a recent example, see David Harvey who calls these fields as “differentiations within a totality.” See, (Harvey, 2006, p. 42). One should also note that *Grundrisse* was not known to anybody until its first publication in 1939 by the Soviet Academy of Sciences. This makes it a historical document rather than a text that was reacted to by its contemporaries.

on to deaf ears even amongst his comrades. Under the guidance of LaSalleian ideas German Social Democratic Party put out the controversial Gotha Program of which Marx was quite critical. Marx critiqued the program on three grounds: 1. it reduced exploitation to the problem of wages; 2. it addressed individual nation states as the foci of political struggle; 3. It argued labor as the creator of all value which is far from truth, according to Marx, since there are other sources of value such as nature.³ His three-legged critique was based on one major point: the focus shifts away from the hidden abodes of production to other spheres of conduct. The conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie is articulated as a problem of redistribution, and that shifts the focus of politics from the process of production to state. Social democracy was a retreat from socialism back to Hegelian statism. But what does it mean to perceive problem of labor process as a political problem? More importantly how did his followers and critics respond to that invitation?

Marx's invitation to concentrate on the process of exploitation in the hidden abodes of production did not attract much attention until the 1960s (Arrighi, 2007, pp. 19–20). In the meantime the relationship between the processes of production and politics were hardly scrutinized. The new focus for Marxists was the organization of nation-states and inter-state rivalry –i.e., imperialism. All major figures in the Marxist tradition in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had a theory of imperialism of their own. These theories relied on the conviction that monopolization eliminated the competition –or it is in the process of elimination—within nation-states. The conflict is translated into geographical terms where states struggle with each other over limited resources. The implication was that the mystification of the process of commodity production is no longer a key factor, since imperialist states –i.e., the political superstructure—collapsed the difference between states and the national bourgeoisie.⁴ Lenin infamously called the process of inter-state rivalry as the final stage of capitalism. Theories of imperialism indicate an apparent shift from Marxian effort to scrutinize the process of production to capitalism in general. The deep split within different theories of imperialism –such as the differences between Lenin-Bukharin line and Kautsky⁵—did not make much

³ According to Marx, third point was a natural outcome of the alliance between the party and landed aristocracy against the industrial bourgeoisie: (Marx and Engels, 1978, pp. 525–530).

⁴ For an historical survey of Marxist theories of imperialism, see, (Brewer, 1999).

⁵ Lenin and Bukharin argued that inter-state rivalry will lead to an imperialist war; while Kautsky argued that bourgeoisie of different countries have the ability to establish coalitions among themselves to avoid the war consolidate their hegemony over

difference because of their reluctance to identify the process of production separately.

Non-Marxist efforts to theorize work mainly took place in the Anglo-Saxon parts of the world with a specific focus on improving efficiency. After a series of sporadic *philosophies* of work such as Taylorism and Fordism, we witnessed the rise of industrial sociology and human relations disciplines in the industrial heartland of the U.S. in the 1920s. The concept of exploitation diminished in importance, this new and dominant school of thought turned the field of production, which was inherently problematic to Marx, into a field of constant improvement of efficiency.

Weber's Theory of Work without Exploitation: Rationalization

Weber was contemporaneous to the rise of industrial sociology in the U.S. His theory of rationalization in economic sociology share a great deal with the North American variant, which, similarly, did not have any concern about the problem of exploitation in the process of production. However, it is misleading to assume any dialogue between the two as Weber was unknown to U.S. academics until Parsons' translation of the Protestant Ethic appeared in 1930 (Weber, 2001). Even then, Weber's economic sociology remained enigmatic if not completely unknown until the appearance of *Economy and Society* well after the Second World War in 1968 (Weber, 1978). Today, Weber's latter work, not the former, is considered as his major contribution to the field of economic sociology by many (Swedberg, 2011). However, Weber's theory of work, in which any theoretical understanding of exploitation was missing if not completely absent, is a nice entry point to understand the shift of epicenter of the debate on work and politics in the 1920s.

According to Erik Olin Wright, Weber did not even perceive exploitation as a problem in itself. In fact, "one of the defining characteristics of class analysis in the Weberian tradition is the virtual absence of a systematic concept of exploitation. Nothing better captures the central contrast between the Marxist and Weberian traditions of class analysis than the difference between a class concept centered on the problem of *life chances* in Weber and a concept rooted in the problem of *exploitation* in Marx (Wright, 2002, p. 832)." The problem in

proletariat in a worldwide scale, a process called ultra-imperialism. Imperialists world wars vindicated Lenin-Bukharin line; however, some contemporary theories of globalization among Marxists rediscovered Kautskyian line to explain globalization as a class alliance going beyond nation states in a transnational fashion that Kautsky anticipated. For an example, see, (Robinson, 2004).

the process of production was not the structural inequality between the employer and employee or the reproduction of inequality through production, but the gap between the formal rationality and the substantive rationality. In other words, the problem about the capitalist system was not the structural inequality resulting from the uneven class locations of the parties prior to entering to the process of production –i.e. parties position towards the ownership of the means of production—but the system-wide problem of rationalization: “For Weber, the problem of the performance and appropriation of work effort is, thus, above all a question of the degree and forms of rationality in economic organization (Wright, 2002, p. 849).”

Weber does not deny the existence of domination or discipline imposed on labor during the labor process, yet “he does not integrate these concerns into the general concept of class but treats them primarily as *issues in the technical efficiency* of systems of production (Wright, 2002, p. 850 italics are mine).” The conflict in the process of production does not engender a system-wide problem, but the lack of technical efficiency does. This automatically eliminates the connection between work and politics, which, according to Wright, paradoxically situates Weber in line with neoclassical economics (Wright, 2002, p. 849).

Whether Weber anticipates or informs in any way a neoclassical understanding of class and politics is a matter of another debate. For our purposes here, it is important to observe the separation of *work* and the *political* in Weberian sociology. Problems in the process of production are assessed from the perspective of efficiency which could only be solved through improving mechanisms of formal rationality. That said, Weber also contends that the system in general embodied a destructive nature because of its *irrational* rationality. Therefore, *capitalist modernity* had a destructive logic of its own, not capital. As Foucault argues, Max Weber moved the focus from *capital* to *capitalism*, from the logic of contradiction to the division between the rational and irrational. This marks a clear transition from Marx’s problematic –the mystification of the labor process and the contradictory logic of capital—to the irrational rationality of the system (Foucault, 2008, p. 105). Marx’s effort to unveil the political domination in the process of domination is thereby bypassed via depoliticizing labor process—by reducing it to a problem of efficiency—and relocating politics at a different level as a systemic problematic.⁶

⁶ Evgenii Pashukanis, a Soviet legal scholar, was probably the only person who took Marx’s persistence on the mystification of the labor process as a serious theoretical question. He argued that the concealment in the process of capitalist exploitation was

Arendt's Theory of Work without Politics: Action Needed!

Weber's impact on the generations to follow was substantial. As Foucault maintains, he impacted quite diverse schools of thought from German Ordoliberals—major source of inspiration of neoliberalism—to Frankfurt School (Foucault, 2008, p. 106). However, instead of exploring his impact in general, in this section, I want to concentrate on Hannah Arendt's thought because of two reasons: i) Arendt speaks from within that tradition as she was influenced immensely by Weber and Heidegger, and had always been in dialogue with the Frankfurt School and liberalism; ii) she was the only one who directly addressed Marx's preoccupation with the process of production in terms of its political implications. In other words, she is probably the first thinker who fully engaged with Marx's claims about the political nature of labor and labor process.

Hannah Arendt divided human conduct into three interrelated yet distinct categories: labor, work and action. Together they formed *vita activa*: "With the term *vita activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man. (...) Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body. (...) Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence. (...) Work provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. (...) Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the

secured by the bourgeois legal form which identified labor as a private property which is to be sold and bought in the market. The false appearance of equality of the buyer and seller of labor power ensured the concealment and enabled a system of commodity fetishism. Pashukanis translated Marx's theory of fetishism into a legal theory of fetishism where bourgeois law generated the false image of equality in the market. He advocated for overcoming this dilemma not by instituting socialist law but by abolishing the law itself. Instead of law, he proposed planning as a central institution which would nullify the process of concealment altogether. See, (Evgenii Bronislavovich Pashukanis, 1978). There are many unclear points in Pashukanis' theory including the dynamics of planning. However, his work is dismissed long before being critiqued by the Stalinist ultra-industrialism which intensified the labor process instead of *removing the veil* in the capitalist labor process. Stalin believed that the October Revolution solved the problem of exploitation once and for all, which automatically removed the problems of fetish as well as politics.

condition—not only *the* condition sine qua non, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life (Arendt, 1958, p. 7 italics original).” The productive capacity of man and his transformative activity belongs to the field of work, and it is categorically different from politics. In other words, work is not political.

This is where her criticism of Marx unfolds. According to Arendt, Marx, by appropriating labor as the key human conduct and value in itself, dismissed politics via equating it to mere contemplation. Marx’s dismissal of politics – action in Arendt’s terminology—goes back to his disdain from Ancient Greek cosmology which despises work and privileges contemplation and leisure. Marx’s –and Adam Smith’s—inversion of the Ancient Greek cosmology was an indication of the transition to modernity. The inversion happened sometime around the 17th century and resulted with the victory of *homo faber* (simply worker) over action, and the suppression of politics (Arendt, 1958, pp. 289–295). According to Arendt, the product of *homo faber* could only be a by-product for human societies, not a purpose in itself, thus the elevation of *homo faber* to the highest range of human possibilities is simply wrong and misses the essence of politics (Arendt, 1958, p. 305).

Marx’s fascination with labor, for Arendt, was partly because the way it was approached with contempt until modernity. It has not only been disdained but also subordinated to politics and even leisure. It was identified with slavery, compulsion and subordination. Its perception with glor was not until the rise of modern capitalism (Arendt, 1958, p. 93). Arendt puts Locke, Smith and Marx in the same tradition which turns classical tradition upside down: “The sudden, spectacular rise of labor from the lowest, most despised position to the highest rank, as the most esteemed of all human activities, began when Locke discovered that labor is the source of all property. It followed its course when Adam Smith asserted that labor was the source of all wealth and founds its climax in Marx’s ‘system of labor,’ where labor became the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man. *Of the three, however, only Marx was interested in labor as such*; Locke was concerned with the institution of private property as the root of society and Smith wished to explain and to secure the unhampered progress of a limitless accumulation of wealth. But all three, though Marx with greatest force and consistency, held that labor was considered to be the supreme world-building capacity of man, and since labor actually is the most natural and least worldly of man’s activities, each of them, and again none more than Marx, found himself in the grip of certain genuine contradictions (Arendt, 1958, p. 101 italics are mine).”

Marx was also different from Locke and Smith because of his project of emancipation from labor which he equated with the emancipation from necessity (Arendt, 1958, p. 104). "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 (Arendt, 1958, p. 131)." The second part of this assumption was logically flawed according to Arendt. For her, this utopian thinking had a fixed idea of progress which is eclipsed by the belief in machines and technology. In other words, Arendt critiques Marx of being technological determinist since he connects the elimination of labor and necessity to the rise of machines that would take over what labor does. "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 (Arendt, 1958, p. 132)." Thus, Marx was not only reducing politics to work, but also, by associating it to necessity, proposing an agenda to emancipate from it. Arendt believed such emancipation was impossible simply because it would mean the rejection of human nature.

Another problem with reducing politics to work and workplace, for Arendt, lies in the misconception of plurality. For Arendt, workers' association in the workplace does never guarantee political action, because despite the association, work is an act that happens in isolation from each other: "The activity of work, for which isolation from others is necessary prerequisite although it may not be able to establish an autonomous public realm in which men *qua* men can appear, still is connected with this space of appearances in many ways; at the very least, it remains related to the tangible world of things it produced. Workmanship, therefore, may be an unpolitical way of life, but it certainly is not an antipolitical one (Arendt, 1958, p. 212)." The association of workers may be a value in itself but certainly not political according to Arendt. What was extremely crucial for Marx for any chance to raise consciousness via the gathering of workers in large-scale factories, was just a contingency for Arendt. Workers' ability to assemble, chance to interact with each other, realize the similarities of their conditions of exploitation, and more importantly have the logistical ability to transform their consciousness from class in itself –an objective condition—to the class for itself—subjective condition were not elements of politics. Arendt completely dismisses this line of argument.

On the contrary, for Arendt, labor movements –an instance of *class for itself*—lost their original spirit to challenge the system and are incorporated to

the system since Marx's time. According to Arendt, labor movements of the early stages of capitalism –for Arendt this corresponds to the period between 1848 and 1918—were strong and effective just because they fought against bourgeois society as a whole and promoted an alternative social imagination. The class society they developed within allowed them to express themselves in such antagonistic ways. However, the transformation of *class society* into a *mass society* via the introduction of guaranteed annual wage instead of daily or weekly pay altered the qualitative position of the worker: “The workers today are no longer outside of society; they are its members, and they are jobholders like everybody else. The political significance of the labor movement is now the same as that of any other *pressure group*; the time is past when, as for nearly a hundred years, it could represent the people as a whole (Arendt, 1958, p. 219 italics are mine).”

Therefore, identifying labor process as a political subject matter and expecting a political movement from the collective on the shop floor is nothing but an instrumentalization of action and degradation of politics (Arendt, 1958, p. 230). Neither work nor worker represents politically significant categories. Arendt absolutely rejects Marx's effort to examine labor process as a political problem. She accuses him by collapsing the difference between work and politics and separates the two realms ontologically. Politics, for Arendt, is a matter public realm, of which workplace is not a medium of.

Polanyi's Dismissal: Labor as a Fictitious Commodity but not a Political Act

Anthropology as a discipline is interested in the act and the relationship between the action and the bearer of that action. Meanings attributed to these relationships and the ways in which others perceive these actions are of great importance to the field. However, economic anthropology as a sub-field is less interested in the process than the institutional environment it is surrounded by. In the immediate postwar era this sub-field was characterized by the debate between formalists, who relied on the idea of rational and needful man that was derived from neoclassical economic theory, and substantivists, who embedded the individual in a larger social framework and evaluated its rationality according to the level relationship s/he is involved in –i.e., the family, the market, or the state. Karl Polanyi was the main point of reference for the substantivist school (Herzfeld, 2001, p. 96). With his idea of economy as an embedded process, he still inspires scholars from diverse backgrounds, specifically those who work on social movements. Polanyi is relevant to our investigation for two reasons: the

assessment of labor as a fictitious commodity, and the relationship between labor and the scale of politics.

Polanyi's critique targeted the self-regulating market, not the market *per se*. He found the idea of self-regulating market unnatural and even utopian with destructive effects on the world politics and economy since the 19th century. According to Polanyi, progressive commodification of land, labor and money under a self-regulating market are three interrelated yet problematic aspects of this utopianism. Land, labor and money are unlike other goods in the market and their status as commodities is a fiction; a term suggests that their sale and purchase in the market for wage, rent and interest is against the *nature* of social interaction (Polanyi, 2001, p. 72). In order to make his case for labor as a fictitious commodity, Polanyi explains the ways in which labor was surrounded by or embedded in social institutions in the previous social systems: "Under the guild system, as under every other economic system in previous history, the motives and circumstances of productive activities were embedded in the general organization of society (Polanyi, 2001, p. 73)." Even in the mercantilist era, when commercialization of assets was considered to be the key motive of economic action, labor remained separate (Polanyi, 2001, pp. 73–74). This started to change in the late 18th century and institutionalized with the rise of liberalism in the 19th century.

The idea of a self-regulating market relied on the principle of separation of politics from economics, a separation which delegated the problem of labor to the realm of economics: "Nineteenth-century society, in which economic activity was isolated and imputed to a distinctive economic motive, was a singular departure. (...) Such an institutional pattern could not have functioned unless society is somehow subordinated to its requirements (Polanyi, 2001, p. 74)." Self-regulating market subordinated the society to a part of its own. Under normal circumstances, societies are comprised of three interrelated forms of conduct: exchange, redistribution and reciprocity. They correspond to market, state and the complex network of kinship-neighborhood-profession respectively. Self-regulating market utopianism reduces the last two to the market and universalizes the logic of market as the only rational logic of human conduct.⁷

Polanyi's account of the formation of fictitious commodities under self-regulating market utopianism and of the pressure it creates over *the society* is

⁷ This proposition makes it clear why Polanyi was such a key figure for the substantivist school which critiqued the formalist claim for the universalist logic of human action. For Polanyi, identifying the logic of market as the universal logic was the origin of utopianism in the 19th century.

completed with the concept of double movement. Double movement refers to a way in which *the society* protects itself from the expansion of market. The mechanisms of this movement are not clear, nor the actors.⁸ Yet, it is significant for us to detect the location of politics. For Polanyi, market economy is a political project, but it is not clear if the reaction to the market economy that aims to reestablish the balance is a political project or not. Commodification is a problem insofar as it spills over other spheres of conduct and plagues land, labor and money. For Polanyi, the realm of redistribution –i.e., the state—is a locus of such a reaction that guarantees decommodification via regulation. Simply put, the political dynamic in a Polanyian matrix is determined by the tension between deregulation (unrestricted market expansion) and regulation.⁹

Therefore, one can argue that in Polanyi's framework, there is nothing particularly problematic about the labor process if it is overtly regulated by the state. Like Weber, Polanyi dismissed the process of exploitation as a source of inequality. The main problem was not exploitation during labor process but the ways in which workers are dislocated from their social environment: "In economic terms the worker was certainly exploited: he did not get in exchange that which was his due. But important though this was, it was far from all. Despite exploitation, he might have been financially better off than before. But a principle quite unfavorable to individual and general happiness was wreaking havoc with his social environment, his neighborhood, his standing in the community, his craft; in a word, with those relationships to *nature and man* in which his economic existence was formerly embedded (Polanyi, 2001, pp. 134–135 italics are mine)."

Finally, Polanyi criticizes Marx's theory of exploitation by saying the following: "Not economic exploitation, as often assumed, but the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim is then the cause of the degradation (Polanyi, 2001, p. 164)." Polanyi's remarks on the disintegration of the cultural environment and its reintegration via state's protective measures reminds us, at least in terms of the scale of politics, the Hegelian framework where inequalities are created in the civil society and reconciled by the State. Labor process in the Polanyian framework, therefore, is not a moment of politics. In fact, it is not even political. What is political is the way in which it is de/regulated in the

⁸ Even the followers of Polanyi did mention the ambiguity of concepts of *double movement* and *the society*. For a recent example, see Andrew Sayer's foreword to (Buğra and Ağartan, 2007).

⁹ Fred Block, in his introduction to the 2001 edition of the *Great Transformation*, acknowledges Scandinavian social democratic model as a successful example of regulation. See, (Polanyi, 2001, p. xxxvii).

sphere of redistribution. Thereby, the political is defined within the limits of the state. Workers could get politicized via taking parts in labor movements which are, invoking Arendt, nothing more than pressure groups.

Foucault and Re-Establishing the Link Between Work and the Political

Foucault's late work on neoliberalism and bio-politics say little about the political characteristics of labor process. In fact, he did not even have any such concern. Rather, he was interested in the ways in which laboring body was regulated across space and time. His early works focus more on the problems of body and the creation of the discourse of productivity in relation to body via exploring the tension between idleness and confinement. The emerging logic of the late eighteenth century, "brings together a new sensibility to poverty and the duty to relieve it, new forms of reaction to the economic problems of unemployment and idleness, a new work ethic, and the dream of a city where moral obligations go hand in hand with civic duties, all held together by the authoritarian forms of constraint (Foucault, 2006, p. 55)."

This "complex unity", as Foucault calls, was an outcome of a new era and marked a new organization of confinement (Foucault, 2006, pp. 55–56). Madness was regarded as a problem to be solved via confinement, however, the practices of confinement, which originates in the 17th century, started to take different shape in the late 18th century and turned into a totally distinct practice in 19th century with the rise of psychiatry (Foucault, 2006, p. 47). In other words, mass confinement systems of the 17th century were not designed to classify these people as unemployed, insane or criminal. Contrarily, this was a central motive in the 19th century practices of confinement while it was mostly a police matter in the 17th century. The main motivation before was to underline the work imperative. Idleness was morally condemned, thus work was promoted and praised. Unemployment and begging were seen as moral corruption (Foucault, 2006, p. 62). However there was no certain policy towards unemployment despite the fact that it was addressed as a focal issue (Foucault, 2006, p. 63).

Foucault's reflections on the 'classical age' focus more on the connection between 'work imperative' and confinement. They are proven ineffectual and disappeared towards the end of the 18th century and re-appeared in a completely different form in the 19th century. The emphasis on work ethic, in this context, was the biggest accomplishment and taken over by the 19th century institutional framework. "What to modern eyes appears as a clumsy dialectic between prices and production took its real significance from an ethical consciousness of work, where the complexities of economic

mechanisms were less important than the assertion of value (Foucault, 2006, p. 63).” This was proven to be central in the first period of industrialization, where workers were key actors of the economic process. Economy was seen as a process and thus economics was the science of this process, while workers were the objects of the analysis.

Foucault argues that the reception of work and worker –and their regulation—has changed drastically under neoliberalism because the idea of economy as a process is abandoned. The worker was formerly understood as the objects of the economic analysis. But, with neoliberalism: “Economics is not (...) the analysis of processes; it is the analysis of an activity. So, it is no longer the analysis of the historical logic of processes; it is the analysis of the internal rationality, the strategic programming of individual’s activity (Foucault, 2008, p. 223).” In this novel context where individual activity assumes a central role, worker needs to be reconsidered as an actor which brought labor back into economic analysis: “What does bringing labor back into economic analysis mean? (...) The fundamental, essential problem, anyway the first problem which arises when one wants to analyze labor in economic terms, is how the person who works uses the means available to him. To bring labor into the field of economic analysis, we must put ourselves in the position of the person who works; we will have to study work as economic conduct practiced, implemented, rationalized, and calculated by the person who works. What does working mean for the person who works? (...) So we adopt the point of view of the worker and, for the first time, ensure that the worker is not present in the economic analysis as an object—the object of supply and demand in the form of labor power—but as an active economic subject (Foucault, 2008, p. 223).” Biopolitics refers to the self-regulation of this economic subject.

Workers are now economic subjects owning their own human capital. Wage is not the price of work but an income, which is nothing but a return on a capital. From the worker’s point of view: “labor is not a commodity reduced by abstraction to labor power and the time, (...) [labor] is an ability, a skill, (...) labor is capital” and income is a return on that capital investment by the laborer (Foucault, 2008, p. 224). In fact, worker is an enterprise in an enterprise society: “This is not a conception of labor power; it is a conception of capital-ability which (...) receives a certain income that is a wage, an income-wage, so that worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise himself (Foucault, 2008, p. 225).” Consumption is also an enterprise activity; in fact it signifies an investment in one’s own human capital. Even buying health care, i.e., investing in one’s health and public hygiene are considered as investments improving the human capital. Similarly, migration has become an investment while migrant is the investor

(Foucault, 2008, pp. 229–230). For Foucault, such redefinition of economic conduct as a rational and individual conduct is best observed in American neoliberalism where rationality spills over every other fields which were not thought economic before: “[A]merican neo-liberalism seeks (...) to extend the rationality of the market, the schemas of analysis it offers and the decision-making criteria it suggests, to domains which are not exclusively or not primarily economic: the family and the birth rate, for example, or delinquency and penal policy (Foucault, 2008, p. 323).”

Foucault’s contribution is tricky for one main reason: he does bring labor back yet simultaneously dismissing labor process as a realm of inquiry. This decision is made consciously as he argues that this was in fact the key inversion neoliberalism accomplished. By redefining economic activity as an individual act rather than a process which involves many, neoliberalism accomplishes to speculate on human capital without touching upon labor process. Since worker is an investor, labor process is nothing but an encounter and interaction of investment. For Foucault, neoliberalism accomplished such bypassing by applying the Weberian inversion of the Marxian problematic. The economic activity does not possess an irrationality of its own, but the system in general does. The problem is to assign a rationality that would nullify the problem of systemic irrationality. For proponents of neoliberalism, this was economic rationality where labor as an economic actor assumed a central role (Foucault, 2008, p. 106). Key moment here is the escape from the connection between politics and labor, and labor process. Labor process is not a political matter but a problem of economic action. Problems concerning labor process, therefore, are concerns of technical efficiency not political choice or domination.¹⁰

Conclusion

These are not the only studies reflecting on labor and labor process under capitalism, yet I believe, this selection provides an opportunity to consider the relationship between politics and labor process in a way that animates further discussion. Starting from Hegel, civil society and market are often seen as a field of conduct that leads polarization. Hegel assigned a specific role to the state –as the unfolding of the Spirit of the world history—to reconcile conflicts arise in the civil society and cure the problems of the market. Marx

¹⁰ Aage Sorensen calls any such intervention in the wage relation in the market as rent-seeking activity. Unions, for instance, manipulate the price of the wage as they seek rents for their members. Rent basically refers to an act of eliminating market dynamics from the relation. See, (Sorensen, 2000).

rejected the externality of the idea of the state and disinterestedness of the rational bureaucracy. Instead, he invited us to see state(s) as part of the larger problem which is best crystalized in the capitalist labor process and commodity production as a process of concealing exploitation.

Commodity fetishism, a phrase he coined in the *Capital*, and the process of production are identified as spaces of inequality within the capitalist society. The conflict between the labor and capital arose from the contradictory logic of capital and cannot be reconciled by the state. The process of commodity production concealed the political nature of production, which should be perceived as a manifestation of the class conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie, who are considered the main political actors. Thus, Marx invited us to unveil the political essence of labor process which basically indicates political a conflict between labor and capital. What seemingly economic was in fact political.

Marx's fascination with the social and political characteristic of the exploitation is criticized by many from many different aspects.¹¹ In this article, we only covered three of them. Weber's critique dismissed the process of exploitation as a political subject matter. There was nothing politically significant in the nature of capitalist production.¹² The conflicts in the process of production are matters of formal rationality and efficiency since the systemic contradiction stems from the gap between formal rationality and substantive rationality. Instrumental rationality –a concept later popularized by the Frankfurt School—constituted the main problem of capitalism. Arendt's critique took Weber's to its logical conclusion. She saw labor process ontologically distinct from politics, and un-political field in its nature if not anti-political. In addition, workers are no longer members of class societies but mass societies; labor movements do not represent society in general nor they can assume a leadership role. They are nothing but pressure groups among many others in the public realm. In mass societies, workers do not bear strong collective identities either; on the contrary they are nothing but jobholders whose identity as a consumer suppresses all other identities. Finally, Polanyi reassumed the Hegelian framework via attributing a central role to the state –the field of redistribution—to regulate the extremities of market. He declined the Marxian invitation to explore the labor

¹¹ For a brief summary of critiques and defense of Marx, see, (Sayers, 2007).

¹² As Ellen Wood argues, unlike Marx, Weber does not see capitalism as a completely new mode of production; instead, capitalism, which is defined as the production of goods for the market, has always existed throughout human history. However, it only became hegemonic with the rise of capitalist modernity. See, (Wood, 1995).

process as an exclusively political problem and replaced it with the idea of regulation which is able to re-embed market in its social framework.¹³

Stating that the relationship of exploitation has a political characteristic—the class conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie—does not automatically provide a blueprint for how political movements occur. For Marx, the tricky point was the dynamics of transition from the *class in itself* and *class for itself*. Yet, it is not secret that the way in which class consciousness is formed and translated into action has remained unclear in Marx's oeuvre. Perhaps it is the most controversial legacy of Marxism; however, two things were clear: the process of commodity production is deep down a political relation and class interests of proletariat are common.¹⁴ As Foucault argues, neoliberalism cut this final connection between labor process as a political subject matter and the idea of class with common interests. Marx's legacy was completely abandoned by the introduction of concepts such as human capital and worker as entrepreneur. Workers in neoliberal times are not even members of pressure groups —as opposed to what Arendt said—but individual investors who seek increasing returns on their investments. Foucault, perhaps paradoxically, brought the political characteristic of labor into discussion while at the same time rendered any debate on labor process in Marxian understanding meaningless. This is the real reason why, “work, in today's society, is a mystery.”

¹³ Unlike Hegel, Polanyi discussed characteristics of the State in a very limited fashion. The absence of such a debate of *the State* in Polanyi is critiqued by many including major followers of his agenda. Most recently, Nancy Fraser, who adopts Polanyi's critique of self-regulating market, rejected his normative appropriation of the state as a superintending agent that resolves all society-wide conflicts. She argued that such a perspective misled Polanyians to misjudge the inequalities embedded in the field of state. She then rejected his concept of double movement and suggested triple movement which simultaneously addresses the inequalities embedded within the state. Fraser has not published her work on triple movement yet, but she has been presenting her ideas with the public in a series of lectures for a while. For an example, see, <http://www.normativeorders.net/en/news/headlines/415-frankfurt-lecture-ii-nancy-fraser>

¹⁴ Whether that commonality can be universalized is an issue of another investigation. Moishe Postone rejects the idea of proletarian standpoint, which basically means that proletarian interests could be universalized simply because proletariat is the universal class. See, (Postone, 1993).

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