

# Labor and Freedom—Comment on Arendt's Critique of Marx's Labor View

Luo Hao

Marxism School of Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu 611756, Sichuan, China

**Abstract:** As a common concern of Arendt and Marx, labor is of fundamental significance in their respective studies. Arendt criticizes Marx's view of labor and thinks that although it is made from the emphasis on freedom, the labor associated with inevitability must not be free in the end. She pursues the road of freedom to political action, advocate "political return "; Marx believes that free labor is dynamic, creative, only free labor can make people achieve free and all-round development, thus on the "beyond politics "pursuit of freedom. Arendt criticizes Marx's view of labor from the perspective of "tradition ", can not see the meaning of his concept based on the present and pointing to the future, and can not understand the true meaning of Marx's view of labor.

**Keywords:** Marx, Arendt, labor, freedom

## 1. Introduction

The tradition of western political philosophy advocates "contemplative life" and believes that only it is the only truly free way of life, while it is indifferent to the field of human affairs. As a result, philosophers indulge in questioning and exploring the truth and origin of the world and try to "explain the world ". As Marx put it : " Philosophers explain the world in different ways. The problem is changing it ." And his exposition on labor is the key to changing the world. Although Arendt affirmed Marx's criticism of "contemplative life" in the tradition of western political philosophy, she also criticized Marx's praise of labor. What is worth thinking here is: does Arendt really understand Marx's thought? To what extent does Marx demonstrate that his view of labor can realize human freedom?

## 2. Arendt's ancient Greek interpretation of labor

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt believes that labor is an activity that human beings have to engage in in order to survive and be subject to necessity. It is a naturally imposed activity with compulsion, repetition and hardship, and labor leaves nothing but the maintenance of the basic survival of mankind, "that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. "

In ancient Greece, labor was lowly. People's contempt for labor stems from a strong desire to escape from the necessity of survival and pursue freedom, as well as from activities that leave no trace and cannot be remembered. In order to better participate in public affairs and strive to make themselves outstanding, people have to gradually give up other activities and devote themselves to political affairs. Thus, " labor covered everything that demanded an effort." It is in order to allow citizens to better participate in public affairs and undertake labor. The slaves at that time were generally captured by the defeat of the enemy, and the winner brought home to serve him and his master's life. In this sense, labor has the meaning of punishment. At the same time, such activities, which are subject to the necessity of survival, have no new possibilities. Labor is only repeated, that is, driven by the biological cycle, and naturally there is no sense of freedom. Therefore, Arendt was unbelievable to Marx's thinking about labor, and she thought that Marx forgot the traditional annotation of labor, and put labor in the first important position in his thought. Arendt points out that Marx's view of labor has promoted labor from the lowest position in tradition to the most respected position in human activities, but this does not change the essential attribute of labor.

Arendt criticized Marx see labor as a way to liberate human beings. The liberation of labor in modern society can only alleviate the pain of labor to the greatest extent, and make labor become a "natural cycle that repeats itself without pain." And labor remains in the private sphere, which has not changed. Marx's idea of "labor creates man himself" makes people more keen on property

accumulation through labor in the private sphere, and labor is driven by materialism. People's judgment on self and the value of other things will also be based on material interests. People in the consumer society, everything will become the object of consumption. As Arendt put it: "The spare time of labor animals will only be spent on consumption, the more free time left to him, the more greedy his desire is." Ultimately, "no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption." It can be said that in Arendt's view, Marx's view of labor is one of the theoretical sources of the growing problem of material supremacy in modern society.

Action in the public sphere is a concept opposed to labor in the private sphere. It is essential that people have the ability to think critically, which can make people act in the public domain, pursue true freedom. "Labor animals" advocate the pursuit of material interests, and the satisfaction of material desires can make them feel happy. In order to achieve this happiness, they only need to repeat their work in the private sphere and accumulate property. People who are satisfied with the necessity of life can not obtain, do not need to obtain the ability of "judgment thinking", they do not essentially need to enter the public sphere to participate in political life, they do not have the ability and willingness to take responsibility, At the same time has been accustomed to the private sector labor causality arrangements.

Arendt defines labor as "pre-political" activity, and the property acquired by labor is also the property of the private sphere. In her view, the topic of the private sphere should not be included in the discussion of the public sphere, in other words, the economic-related issue should not be a political concern, so the problem of the difference between the rich and the poor belongs to the "pre-political" problem. But how do people take care of their own affairs when they do not get rid of the necessity of life? Under this logic, the elite who can enter the public sphere for political action will to a large extent be the possessor of a large amount of material property. Ultimately, it remains the political freedom of the minority. The different interpretation of labor is the starting point for their political thoughts to go to different roads.

### **3. Marx's Reveal of the Internal Logic of Labor and Freedom**

In Marx, the meaning of labor is broader, including his history and background. First of all, Marx did not deny that labor is an activity to maintain people's survival, as he said, Labor is a life activity, this kind of production activity itself is only a means to meet a need, that is, to maintain the needs of physical survival. In this sense, Marx's understanding of labor has not completely deviated from tradition. But more importantly, Marx also believes that labor is not just activities that people have to carry out in order to satisfy their own survival. In his view, labor is the essential embodiment of the difference between man and other animals, which contains the ability to innovate and the power to change the world. People create themselves in the process of labor. People are different from animals because people can live through labor. Labor is the proof of its free essence and kind of existence.

In Marx's view, the human class characteristic is the free conscious activity. In the process of transforming the world, people really prove that they are like beings. Marx's definition of labor is very different from that of Arendt: Arendt regards labor as a "pre-political" activity subject to natural necessity, without freedom; Marx believes that people create themselves through labor. The process of labor is full of innovation, which enables people to realize themselves and even change the world.

However, Arendt noted that Marx promoted labor to such a high position, while proposing to liberate people from labor. Isn't that contradictory? Since labor creates people themselves, labor contains the innovative ability to "change the world", why cancel labor? Once labor is abolished, how should the essence of man be embodied? Where does freedom begin?

Marx put forward alienated labor in *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. This kind of labor is not voluntary labor, but forced compulsory labor. Thus, such labor is not a means of satisfying a need, but a need other than labor. Although the workers in the process of alienated labor produce products, they cannot have products, and they have nothing except their own labor force. Workers involved in production are unable to consume, but are controlled by their own products. Laborer cannot get self-realization in alienated labor, but gradually lose oneself in this process, which deviates completely from human nature. In this sense, alienated labor, like the labor criticized by Arendt, is a compulsory and repetitive activity. Marx held a critical attitude towards alienated labor and further revealed the essence behind labor alienation. In his view, If we want to realize real freedom, we must abolish alienated labor, and fundamentally overthrow the capitalist system. Only by eliminating this exploitative political system and transforming alienated labor into free labor can labor really become

the way for people to pursue freedom. Through the liberation from alienated labor to free labor, the communist "return of man" is finally realized, and the overall freedom of man is realized. At this time, labor is no longer compulsory, repetitive hard work, but a means of liberating people; labor is no longer a slave productive activity, but provides people with an opportunity to develop themselves.

Marx's understanding of human freedom always revolves around labor. He jumped out of the inherent cognition of labor in the tradition of western political philosophy and put forward his own opinions under the social and historical conditions of capitalist system. He believes that the ability of "changing the world" contained in labor is difficult to appear because labor appears in a distorted form of alienation, and the emergence of alienated labor is attributed to the restriction of real system on the development of people's initiative. Labor becomes the accomplice of instrumental rationality, and people themselves become commodities. Under this living condition, man deviates from his own essence. Only by breaking through the restriction of human's living condition, free labor can appear, and human's free and all-round development will be realized.

#### 4. Conclusion

It can be seen that Marx's attention to labor is essentially the "relationship" between workers and production. By criticizing the dominant relationship between products and workers, and finally criticizing the restriction of the system on labor at that time, it is concluded that the feasible path of freedom is still to give full play to the initiative and innovation of people's labor and to transform the object world. Marx's view of labor was rooted in the social and historical environment at that time. He made a theoretical, historical and dialectical interpretation of labor, and then drew the blueprint of "free world" in the future. But Arendt thinks that Marx's view of labor is only a simple theoretical analysis, and does not pay attention to his dual construction understanding of the theory and reality of labor. To some extent, it leads to a one-sided interpretation of Marx's view of labor and neglects its realistic meaning of "surpassing tradition" for the future.

#### References

- [1] Hannah Arendt. *The human condition* [M]. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1998.
- [2] Hannah Arendt. *The origins of totalitarianism* [M]. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958.
- [3] Marx and Engels. *Collected works of Marx and Engels: Volume 1* [M]. Beijing: People's publishing house, 2009.
- [4] Marx and Engels. *Collected works of Marx and Engels: Volume 5* [M]. Beijing: People's publishing house, 2009.