

Time Background and Theoretical Pursuit: Comparison of Arendt's and Marx's views of labor

Congyu Liu

School of Public Administration, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610065, China.

Abstract

Marx's and Arendt's views of labor are rooted in different contexts. Marx's theory originated in the 19th century during the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism in Europe, and by inheriting Hegel's dialectic, he developed a historical materialist approach, focusing on the elimination of exploitation under capitalism and the struggle for the emancipation of the working class. Arendt's view of labor was formed in the twentieth century during the crisis of modernity in the West, and, drawing from the European tradition of political philosophy, attempted to rebuild the community and reestablish the freedom of the individual through a call to political action. Although the two thinkers had different theoretical aims, together they demonstrated a deep reflection on human labor and social institutions.

Keywords

Arendt, Marx, labor, human condition.

1. Introduction

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt offers an unabashed critique of Marx's view of labor, arguing that if people in modern societies see themselves only as laborers, labor activity is destructive and becomes a devouring presence. Arendt divides active human life into labor, work, and action, with labor at the bottom of the list, while Marx liberates labor activity from the European philosophical tradition, and labor becomes the basis for the formation and development of all human social relations. Arendt and Marx mention labor at the same time, but have very different views of it. Arendt believed that Marx overemphasized the development of the material productive forces and neglected the spiritual needs of man, whereas Marx believed that the development of the material productive forces was the key to the advancement of society. Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt, as two thinkers of great significance in the history of political philosophy, gave their own interpretations of human labor activities. Established studies have analyzed Arendt's criticism of Marxist labor theory in depth and refuted it from a Marxist standpoint. However, to understand Arendt's and Marx's labor theory, it is also necessary to examine the context of their times and theoretical pursuits in terms of the background, path of thought, and purpose for which they put forward this idea. Then, what is the difference between the backgrounds in which they put forward the concept of labor? What are the respective ideological paths of the two in putting forward the view of labor? What are their purposes?

2. Literature review

Arendt and Marx, as important political thinkers in the 20th century, both have their own opinions on the labor issue, and there are certain differences between the two men in their conception of labor. There has been extensive academic discussion on the comparison of the two men's views on labor. Arendt distinguishes labor into three levels: labor, work and action, and believes that labor is only a mechanical activity to satisfy physiological needs and does not

have the significance of realizing man's freedom; whereas Marx believes that labor is man's free conscious activity and is the way for man to realize his freedom. To address this issue, existing research has been conducted from three main perspectives: first, to refute Arendt's criticism of Marx's view of labor from a Marxist standpoint, second, to interpret Arendt's understanding and evaluation of Marx, and third, to analyze the commonalities in the two views of labor.

Arendt's understanding of Marx's theory of labor represents one of two representative views in contemporary Western scholarship. Arendt argues that Marx was concerned only with the separation between human capacity for labor and the fruits of that labor, i.e., the alienation of the product of labor, and that Marx clearly critiqued capitalism in the context of accepting the way in which modernity unfolds in capitalism. Arendt's criticism of Marx is that she believes that Marx failed to see that the emergence of the "labor society" coincided with the emergence of a modern sense of process history. This is because the labor society is constantly indulging itself in an unlimited expansion of material production, thus moving man more and more towards the cult of labor and its attendant unfreedom, and thus making history more and more inevitable. In Arendt's view, political action is the only way to achieve human freedom, and Marx's affirmation of labor is a denial of politics as well as human freedom. Indeed, Arendt fails to recognize the close correlation that exists between Marx's concept of labor and freedom, nor does he perceive the unreality of political action to achieve freedom under the capitalist system. Arendt misunderstands Marx's labor theory in two ways. The first is a misunderstanding of the objectifying activity of labor; Arendt misinterprets Marx's concept of labor as a survival activity in the biological sense and fails to understand Marx's view of labor as an objectifying activity of making products. Second is the misunderstanding of the socio-historical process in which labor actually occurs, Arendt wrongly regards the concept of labor discussed by Marx as abstract labor, while ignoring its concern with the process in which labor actually occurs, i.e., the concrete manifestation of labor under specific socio-historical conditions. Some studies have even analyzed four fundamental misunderstandings of Marx in Arendt's view: first, that there are unbridgeable logical and ideological contradictions in Marx's political philosophy, second, that Marx's glorification of labor fundamentally violates the principle of freedom, third, that Marx should be held accountable for the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, and fourth, that Marx's idea of "realizing philosophy" puts an end to the concept of "labor". and that Marx's idea of "philosophy of realization" put an end to the tradition of political philosophy.

A reading of Arendt argues that she recognizes the sophistication of Marx's views. She argues that Marx lived in turbulent times and that he was great because he pinpointed and deeply understood the central elements of change in these times. At the same time, Marx's ideas subverted the traditional ideas that had been circulating in Western philosophy since Plato. Arendt argues that Marx actually returned to the pre-Platonic tradition of political thought, reversed the suppression of "rational truth" over "popular opinion" in social reality in Plato's theory, and resisted "rational truth" in the political sphere. The dictatorship of "rational truth" was resisted in the political sphere. Since the beginning of Marx, "popular opinion" has been given a chance to revive, and there is hope that the politics of truth can be revitalized. Arendt argues that Marx did realize that the essence of labor is "the metabolism between man and nature," but his interpretation of labor fails to accurately distinguish between "labor" and "production. ". From her point of view, if, according to Marx, labor activity "is a metabolism between man and nature," then labor would follow an endless cycle of natural metabolic processes, just as natural life does, and would lack purpose. This monotonous and repetitive labor process is subject to the laws of nature and thus to necessity.

While to a large extent Arendt's and Marx's views of labor are incompatible, there is still no lack of similarities. On the one hand both Arendt and Marx show an aversion to labor in the service of necessity, where the life of the worker is reduced to an animal-like cycle of survival and spontaneous physiology. Marx's extreme distaste for this is in some ways similar to Arendt's

contempt for purely biological nature. However, unlike Arendt, Marx argues that only the conscious control of production and creation by the worker can make labor a truly "human" activity, regardless of what it produces. The reduction of the worker to an integral part of the capitalist "means of production" in a mechanically repetitive activity was unacceptable to both Marx and Arendt. On the other hand both Arendt and Marx were concerned with alienation. "It transforms human dignity into exchange value, and replaces the innumerable licensed and self-earned freedoms with a freedom of trade without conscience" Under capitalism, the individual becomes an instrument for the growth of capital, and lives only for the accumulation of capital, without freedom and individuality. Instead of liberating the producers, capitalism binds them with a more inhumane system. In modern capitalist society, human existence is still alienated. Marx believed that bourgeois society is thoroughly alienated: from religion to the state to labor, money, relationships, and even language, alienation is everywhere. Arendt argues that "the world has become more precarious, less permanent, and therefore less dependable than it was in the Christian era". The world is the true habitat of human beings, the place where we live together, and where our meaning and sense of reality are intimately tied to the world. In her view, the most important thing is to be integrated into the world through speech and action, and this "worldliness" is inseparable as the condition and state of human existence, and the loss of the world means the loss of the most important part of being a human being. However, in modern society, the rapid development of technology and the control of the world have led to the alienation of the world, the gradual alienation of human beings from the world of their own existence, and the gradual weakening of their connection with the world.

Scholarly comparison of Arendt and Marx's labor theories has produced a wealth of scholarship, and many scholars have expressed different insights into Arendt's interpretation of Marx, which provides a rich perspective for understanding the two's view of labor. The human condition that Arendt and Marx were concerned about and worried about had commonalities, but Marx and Arendt were separated by two centuries in time, and they faced different backgrounds and characteristics of the times and had different life experiences, which determined that their theories embodied and responded to the problems of their respective times. The comparison of the two labor views can be analyzed in terms of the background of their theoretical emergence, the path and purpose of putting forward their views, enriching the understanding of Arendt's and Marx's labor theories.

3. Comparison of Arendt's and Marx's labor theories

In the history of Western thought, the focus on and interpretation of labor continues to this day. During the Ancient Greek period, labor was viewed as a life-sustaining, animalistic activity, characterized by repetition, servitude, and necessity. Nor were those who engaged in labor considered truly human; Aristotle, for example, excluded slaves from the category of human beings. The Western philosophical tradition devalues labor as a detraction from freedom, and for the ancient Greeks, labor had a wholly negative connotation, a realm beyond which free men should transcend. In modern times, with the rise of the industrial revolution and the accumulation of social wealth, the status of labor has gradually been elevated, and it has first been valued and praised by economists. Standing in the perspective of wealth accumulation, political economists such as Smith regarded labor as the source and intrinsic essence of wealth, endowed it with the instrumental value of wealth creation, and made labor a basic provision of social life. The views of thinkers of different times on labor are deeply influenced by the characteristics of their times and are also closely related to their personal life experiences.

3.1. Context of the times

Marx's view of labor is rooted in the historical background of the industrial revolution and capitalist development in 19th century Europe. Marx paid great attention to the fate of the

working class, criticized the alienated labor under the capitalist system, and put forward the theoretical proposition of realizing the emancipation of workers. The Industrial Revolution, marked by the emergence of the steam engine, first unfolded in Britain and rapidly changed the face of all sectors of production in the country. The rapid development of productive forces made Britain the "factory of the world" at that time, as the traditional handicraft industry was replaced by the mechanized large-scale industry. Under the influence of Britain's successful experience, France, Germany and other countries also carried out the Industrial Revolution one after another, causing great changes in their own productive forces and modes of production. The development of the capitalist economy provided the economic and socio-historical conditions for the emergence of Marxism. The early industrial revolution greatly increased the productivity of labor, promoted the productive forces and economic development of capitalist society, and pushed capitalism to a new stage. The widespread use of machines in industrial production accelerated the development of the capitalist economy and marked the advent of the period of the Industrial Revolution. This rapid development of the productive forces not only contributed to the establishment and consolidation of the emerging capitalist system, but also began to reveal the profound nature of the contradictions inherent in this system. This contradiction was manifested not only in the rapid progress of production technology, but also in the replacement of the old feudal social mode of production by mechanized mass production and the system of wage labor. Workers, as an important resource of industrialized production, began to become important players on the stage of history, while poor labor conditions, exploitation and oppression gradually triggered workers' discontent and protest. The advancement of the industrial revolution did not bring about the well-being of the working class; on the contrary, laborers faced inferior working conditions and difficult living conditions. These injustices gave rise to the rise of the workers' movement, where workers began to organize and form trade unions and workers' organizations to fight for better working conditions and living conditions through strikes, demonstrations, and protests. The Industrial Revolution triggered an escalation of class struggle and a deepening contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. It was against this social background that Marx's labor theory gradually took shape. He gained a deep insight into the nature of the capitalist relations of production, and recognized the reality of the exploitation and oppression of the workers, as well as the profound contradictions existing in capitalist society. Marx advocated starting from the economic base, revealing the position and role of labor in capitalist society, and emphasizing the relationship between laborers and the means of production, as well as the nature of the value of labor. He was concerned about the plight of the working class and put forward the theory of proletarian emancipation, arguing that only through class struggle, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a socialist system can laborers be truly emancipated and free.

Arendt's view of labor was formed in the context of the crisis of modernity in Western society in the 20th century. She pays more attention to the inner freedom of the individual and hopes to save the dilemma of labor alienation in modern society through the pursuit of politics. In the 20th century, the modernization process of industrialization, urbanization, scientific and technological development, and ideological conflict swept through the whole Western society. In the process, individual and social relations, political structures, and values underwent tremendous changes. Arendt argues that modern society, driven by technological progress, especially the development of automation, has liberated many workers from the heavy, mechanical labor of the Industrial Revolution. However, this has not freed them from the psychological bondage of forced labor, and they remain unable to freely engage in thought or judgment. Arendt emphasizes that we live in an age marked by the "thoughtlessness" that results from modern technological control. In the modern world, people are subjected to all possible technological manipulations that may even put them in danger, so they need artificial

machines to replace thinking and expression, which makes them slaves to machines and "thoughtless creatures". This situation has led to a modern technology-dominated society where people have little choice, where the worship of technology trumps the promotion of purpose and ideals, where even political decision-making is regarded as scientific calculation, and where statistics is no longer a hidden political ideal. However, when "calculation" replaces "judgment", human thinking becomes subordinate to technology, and life moves away from politics. This situation ruthlessly challenged and eroded people's original moral norms and sense of the sublime, causing life to become more and more flat, formal and hollow, and even further towards nihilism, which aggravated the crisis of modernity. At the same time, the first half of the 20th century was also a period of frequent wars and disasters, especially the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust that affected the whole world. This tumultuous context had a profound impact on Arendt's thought. As a child, Arendt's Jewish identity was discriminated against by anti-Semites, leading her to recognize the "extreme evil" of totalitarian rule. The concentration camps of the Holocaust allowed her to witness the futility of terror and the totalitarian genocide of the Jews. In the depraved system of Nazi totalitarianism, historical and philosophical traditions and norms of value were broken, and the meaning and responsibility of existence were lost. She tries to examine modernity from a historical and philosophical perspective, exploring how to find new values and possibilities in this modern world full of crises and dilemmas. Arendt's reflection and contemplation are both influenced by her personal experience and inspired by the context of her time, giving her theories a deep emotional and political significance.

3.2. Path to the formulation of a labor theory

While inheriting the Hegelian dialectic, Marx combined it with British economics to develop his own historical materialist approach as a means of critiquing exploitation and alienation under the capitalist system. One of the initial forms of Marx's view of labor was the theory of alienated labor, which was primarily embodied in his work, the 1844 Philosophical Manuscripts of Economics. In these manuscripts, Marx analyzed the phenomena of alienation such as wages, capital profits, and ground rent to reveal the nature of labor in capitalist society. He argued that the products of labor should be owned by the laborers, but under capitalism, only a small part of the fruits of labor are returned to the laborers in the form of wages to maintain their basic survival. Whereas capitalist profits are formed, capitalists are able to possess the fruits of labor because they have the privilege, i.e., the ownership of capital. In order to maximize profits, capitalists reduce costs and minimize the wages paid to workers. Landowners receive their income through land rent, and in a capitalist society, the gradual centralization of estates leads to the creation of land rent. In *The German Ideology*, Marx developed his theory of labor. Marx delved into the economic system of capitalist society through the materialistic view of history while painting a picture of the future communist society. He believed that a communist society would be based on highly developed productive forces, eliminating private ownership and realizing people's true self-worth. In this new society, labor would be transformed from a mandatory task to one in which individuals acted consciously, and society as a whole would be transformed into an association of free individuals. This view highlights the transformation of the way labor is performed in a communist society so that each individual can develop himself or herself to the fullest and be free from the oppression and restrictions that exist under the capitalist system. Marx inherited the results of Hegel's phenomenology of spirit in his concept of labor, but also transformed it. He emphasized that the existence of the result of the labor process has long existed in the representation of the worker, i.e., in the conception.

Marx embodied the "political realization of philosophy" in his theory of labor, which is a kind of "anti-political politics" or a path beyond politics with a strong concern for reality, while Arendt's theory of "political realization of philosophy" also has a concern for reality, which is to

return to politics through the criticism of philosophy. Arendt's "political realization of philosophy" is a path of "anti-political politics" or transcendence of politics with strong practical concern, while Arendt's "political realization of philosophy" is also a path of returning to politics through criticism of philosophy. Arendt's thought has a wide range of influence, not only covering ancient Greek political philosophy, but also touching on German classical philosophy and modern Western philosophy. She lived in a time when the "public good" was gradually lost, so she deeply studied the history of Western political thought and ancient political traditions, even back to the era of classical republicanism. Against this background, she argues for a degree of Aristotelianism. Arendt takes a cautious view of labor, especially the idea of "labor emancipation," and she proposes her own theory of labor based on a critique of the Western philosophical tradition and of Marx's theory of labor. In ancient times, people held labor in low esteem, viewing it as a means of satisfying the most basic needs of life. Fundamentally, labor was viewed as an "enslaving" act that seemed to apply only to people called slaves (those who were treated like animals). This view led to the existence of slavery, with Aristotle going so far as to consider the occupations of farmers and sculptors to be the lowest of the low, and considered "most harmful to the human body". This view clearly shows that Aristotle defines human beings as "rational creatures", emphasizing "political being" and "eloquent being", rather than merely "laboring creatures". "creatures of labor." Arendt further criticizes labor activities in contemporary society, stressing that the need to go beyond the instrumentalization of human beings and to break out of the bondage of labor in order to save human existence and make human beings the "supreme goal" or the "measure of the whole" requires a break with the "ends and means". "This requires breaking the infinite cycle of ends and means. Only human activity that is not limited by necessity and that is purposeless can truly save practice. Arendt argues that Marx's conception of labor overemphasizes the role of the mediator or material object, leading to the objectification of the laboring subject and the repetition of labor activity as the realization of an end. On the contrary, it is only through action that the true nature of human activity can be rescued, since action is purposeless, unbound by necessity, and occurs directly between human beings without having to depend on material objects or intermediaries. Whereas in Marx's concept of labor, people shape subject-object relations as well as their social relations in the course of their labor, Arendt's concept of action is more concerned with the network of interpersonal relations in human activity, and she emphasizes transcending the subject-object relationship by directly exploring the interactions between subjects.

3.3. Purpose of the labor theory

Marx's theory of the emancipation of labor aimed to eliminate capitalist private ownership and to achieve the emancipation of workers through the elimination of alienation. Marx was concerned that the core of capitalist modernity was to reinforce the never-ending domination of capital. In this context, capital is not a "sensible object" but a "sensible and supersensible" social relation. It is a social relation that reproduces, through the production of commodities, the bonds of life of the whole society, and it is full of "metaphysical subtleties and theological grotesqueries". In this vast network of relations, in which each of us is deeply involved, capital has become an almost omnipresent force in social life, a sublime and supreme being. It is against this background that Marx pointed out that "capital, while constantly promoting the unlimited growth of the productive forces, also leads to some extent to the one-sidedness of the main productive force, that is, of man himself." Marx's goal was to restore human nature to labor in order to break the abstract rule of capital over politics. Within the capitalist economy, Marx discusses productive labor and states that it has become a coercive activity external to man. Under capitalism, the purpose of productive labor is the multiplication of capital, and all production is transformed into the pursuit of exchange-value production, no longer aimed at use-value. Thus the real existence of man is denied. He held a critical attitude towards the status

quo of labor under capitalism, arguing that capitalism strips the laborer's labor of its essence and dignity, making it a means purely for the proliferation of capital. In the Syllabus on Feuerbach Marx states that "the essence of man is not an abstraction possessed by the individual alone, but in its reality contains the synthesis of all social relations." In Marx's vision of communism, people share the means of production, creating a new system of individual ownership. This entails transforming labor itself by changing social existence so as to eliminate its alienation. Only under such conditions could people's capacities be fully developed, and personal change would naturally drive social change. Marx's theory of labor is based on the "political realization of philosophy," and through an in-depth analysis of the capitalist mode of production, it reveals that the transformation of capitalist private ownership to socialist public ownership is an inevitable trend of historical development, and provides scientific theoretical support for the formulation of the strategy of the proletarian revolution.

Arendt attempts to reconstruct the political community in the context of the crisis of modernity and to re-establish the possibility of individual freedom through political action. Her definition of active life and her critique of Marx aim at a return to classical, authentic political life in order to rescue the domination of ideas over people and the decline of the public good in modern political society. After reflecting deeply on the proposition of the "totalitarian element in Marxism," Arendt analyzes how labor has risen to prominence in modern societies and opened up possibilities for totalitarian domination. She argues that with the rise of labor and the mass society it engenders, the conditions necessary for the conceptual legitimacy of the reign of terror are created. She states, "With the birth of labor and its attendant mass society, the necessary conditions for the successful implementation of a conceptually legitimized reign of terror arose, and ideological thinking prevailed in contemporary society." In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle categorizes human activities as contemplative, political, and productive, yet labor is not even included here as a basic human activity. Inheriting the ancient philosophical tradition, Arendt categorizes the basic human activities into three: labor, work, and action, placing labor in the lowest and most elementary position. Labor is closely related to the pure survival instinct, which makes it a constantly repetitive activity. By contrast, action, which produces no external results and whose goal is to create and maintain the body politic and to create the conditions for the development of history, is the political activity par excellence. Freedom is action, and the two are interrelated; insofar as people act, they embody freedom. However, this freedom must be based on emancipation, because to be a free individual, one must first be liberated from the necessity of existence. Furthermore, the realization of freedom requires coexistence with others of equal status and the sharing of a public space for mutual exchange. It is only by co-existing with others that action can take place and can be directed towards public matters of common interest in a public space. Arendt further states that it is only through the ability to act that people can construct a common world, a common world that can save people from their human predicament, and therefore action is the fundamental way for people to achieve true freedom and happiness. And her definition of labor from tradition reinforces the necessity of action side by side.

4. Conclusion

Based on different backgrounds of the times, the labor theories of Marx and Arendt differ in their theoretical pursuits, but together they demonstrate profound thinking about human labor and social institutions, providing important ideological insights for our understanding of modern society and the path to the pursuit of human freedom. Marx's labor theory profoundly reveals the alienation and exploitation of labor in the capitalist system, emphasizing the fact that workers are deprived of control over the production process, which leads to labor oppression and human poverty. He focuses on the nature of labor as the interaction between

human beings and the natural world, the basis of human existence and the embodiment of value. However, capitalism's private ownership and profit-seeking turned labor into a commodity, depriving workers of their creativity and autonomy and turning them into passive, monolithic factors of production. Marx's theory of labor aims to establish a socialist or communist society by overthrowing the capitalist system so that workers can truly take control of the production process and achieve their full development and self-realization. In contrast, Arendt's labor theory returns to the devaluation of labor in the Western philosophical tradition and emphasizes the importance of action by critiquing Marx's emancipation of labor. She advocates the realization of freedom and dignity through political action, the reconstruction of a common system among people, and the establishment of a political community concerned with public affairs. Arendt argued that labor is only a cyclical process to satisfy physiological needs and that action is the only way to truly realize value and become an active participant in a political community. Both thinkers' theories of labor call for concern for human dignity, freedom, and social justice. Both Marx's socialist ideals and Arendt's political action reflect a deep understanding of the relationship between labor and human beings in modern society, concerns and reflections on the human condition, and explorations and visions of paths for human beings to realize their self-worth.

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