
The (de)politicization of work – An inquiry into the political function of work

Helena Lopes*¹

¹Instituto Universitário de Lisboa – Portugal

Résumé

The debate about the political function of work, defined as the contribution of work to the production and transformation of social relations (Cukier, 2017), had been opened by Karl Marx's claim that the consciousness rising capacity of wage labour would result in emancipation through collective action but abruptly cancelled by, among others, Hannah Arendt, for whom work is an essentially apolitical activity. In fact, the conceptual discussion in social philosophy about the political function of work appears to be closely connected with the forms that work content and work organization took historically (Honneth, 1982). Indeed, the type of work Marx had in mind was craft work but with the generalization of Tayloristic modes of work organization, critical theorists expressly dismissed the idea that work can have any emancipatory potential.

At the conceptual level, the aim of the communication is to re-examine the concept of wage work. We argue, following, *inter alii*, Cukier (2017), Lopes (2016), Fischbach (2015), Dejours (2009), that since work always involves a collective dimension and hence cooperation, it is not solely instrumental and apolitical. The collective dimension of work requires workers to enter into several type of interpersonal interactions which activate sympathy/empathy, which has been shown by social psychology and neuroscience to ground cooperation. The extent to which sympathy/empathy is undermined versus promoted in firms is assigned a critical role in our analysis of the political function of work.

As for the historical level, we examine the specific forms that characterize the contemporary world of work, namely individualization and quantification, i.e. work is undergoing a powerful de-politicization process. This state of affairs is generated by the extant financialization process, which is theoretically grounded on and normatively promoted by the agency theory of the firm.

The communication ends by proposing a way to re-politicize work.

Mots-Clés: concept of work, the political function of work, sympathy/empathy, agency theory

*Intervenant