

**PHILO  
SOPHY &  
SOCIAL  
CRITICI  
SM**

vol 30 no 3 2004

 **SAGE Publications**  
ISSN 0191-4537

EDITOR

David M. Rasmussen  
Boston College

BOARD OF  
CONSULTING  
EDITORS

Douglas Allen  
James Bernauer  
Oliva Blanchette  
Remo Bodei  
James Bohman  
Hauke Brunkhorst  
Jean Cohen  
Robert Cohen  
Drucilla Cornell  
Simon Critchley  
Jodi Dean  
Maurizio Passerin  
d'Entrèves  
Alessandro Ferrara

Joseph Flanagan  
Bernard Flynn  
Rainer Forst  
William C. Gay  
Helga Geyer-Ryan  
Garth Gillan  
William Griffith  
Agnes Heller  
Axel Honneth  
Dick Howard  
Robert Innis  
Richard Kearney  
Peter Kemp  
Gertrude Koch  
Michiel Korthals  
Ernesto Laclau  
Cristina Lafont  
Thomas McCarthy

Christoph Menke  
Chantal Mouffe  
Lucius Outlaw  
Thomas Owens  
W. Creighton Peden  
Jacques Poulain  
Paul Ricoeur  
Yves Sintomer  
Tracey Stark  
Svetozar Stojanovic  
James Swindal  
Jacques Taminiaux  
Carlos Thiebaut  
Ivan Vejvoda  
Arne Johan Vetlesen  
Stephen White  
Kurt Wolff

*Philosophy & Social Criticism* (ISSN 0191-4537) will be published seven times in 2004 (in January, March, May, June, July, September and November – issues 1–7) by SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi).

Annual Subscription Rates (7 issues) 2004: full rate (includes electronic version) £552/US\$911; reduced individual rate: £49/US\$79. Full rate subscriptions include the right for members of the subscribing institution to access the electronic content of the journal at no extra charge from Sage. The content can be accessed online through a number of electronic journal intermediaries, who may charge for access. Full details available on our website: [www.sagepublications.com/ejournals](http://www.sagepublications.com/ejournals).

Student discounts, single issue rates and advertising details are available from SAGE Publications, 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP, UK. Tel: +44 (0)20 7324 8500; fax: +44 (0)20 7324 8600 [email: [subscription@sagepub.co.uk](mailto:subscription@sagepub.co.uk); website: [www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)]; and in North America from SAGE Publications, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320, USA.

Copyright © 2004 SAGE Publications. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, and only as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers at the above-mentioned address.

Typeset by Type Study, Scarborough.

Printed in the UK by The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire, on acid-free paper (conforming to ANSI Z39.48-1984).

Periodicals postage is paid at Rahway, NJ. *Postmaster*, send address corrections to *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, c/o Mercury Airfreight International Ltd, 365 Blair Road, Avenel, NJ 07001, USA.

Information for contributors is to be found on the inside back cover.

Anne O'Byrne

## Symbol, exchange and birth

### Towards a theory of labour and relation

**Abstract** In this article I use Baudrillard's claim that systems of exchange are ontologically and historically prior to systems of production, and Arendt's understanding of birth as the arrival of something both quite familiar and quite new into the world as the starting-points for a theory of labour as relation. Such a theory has the virtue of avoiding the problem, found in Marx, Arendt and elsewhere, that labour is both a vital feature of being human and yet a drudgery that will be absent from post-revolutionary society (in the case of Marx) or strictly relegated to the private realm (for Arendt). It also involves repositioning the work of social reproduction – of which women's labour in giving birth is exemplary – as paradigmatic.

**Key words** Hannah Arendt · Jean Baudrillard · labour · natality · production · symbol

The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes.<sup>1</sup> (Nietzsche)

Describing the human being as *animal laborans* indicates, on the one hand, that we are subject to nature and necessity; we must labour for our living. On the other, it acknowledges the need we feel to see ourselves objectified – through our labour – in the world. If it were only a matter of the former, Marx's post-revolution society where no one would have to labour or toil would be simply desirable; given the latter, life in such a society seems at worst monstrous, at best tedious, and in either case not enough to inspire a revolution. This is a difficulty for theories of labour that find their source in Marx, a difficulty to which Arendt drew attention in *The Human Condition* and sought to resolve using her famous (and in turn famously troublesome) distinction between labour, work and action.<sup>2</sup> I will argue here that the attempt

was ultimately unsuccessful because the analysis left in place Marx's commitment to production as the end of human labour, and that only once that commitment had been displaced by post-Marxist theorists such as Jean Baudrillard could Arendt's most valuable insight come into its own. After all, that insight is not that there is a distinction between labour, work and action but rather that human natality has as yet unacknowledged implications for the human condition in general and for labour theory in particular; each of us was born, and our birth – not to mention our nurturing, raising and education – required a specific form of labour whose result is not a product but rather a quite new and unpredictable set of relations.<sup>3</sup>

What Baudrillard performs when, in *The Mirror of Production*,<sup>4</sup> he grants priority to exchange rather than production is a shift in emphasis that yields a world of relation rather than a world of subjects and/or objects, and this is precisely what I wish to draw attention to by using the term 'symbolic exchange'. In ancient Greece, the *symbolon* was the shard of pottery that was broken in two by friends when they parted and that would serve as a token of recognition when they met again; that is to say, the symbol, like exchange, is always what is or happens between us. Theories of labour that privilege the concept of production take as their starting-point presumably independent, individual subjects and the objects they produce, and such theories privilege one relation – the relation of the producer to the product – above all others. While this has been fruitful (not to say productive) it has the result of forcing us to view each of the myriad relations in which that subject is in fact embedded either as or through the producer-product relation: I am alienated from the product of my labour, therefore I am alienated from my fellow humans; these belongings are mine because I laboured for them; this is my child because I produced her life. Baudrillard's claim that systems of exchange are ontologically and historically prior to systems of production, paired with Arendt's appreciation of birth as the arrival of something both quite familiar and quite new into the world, provides the beginning of a theory of labour as relation.

In what follows I will outline an understanding of labour that can take appropriate account of human natality and provide a fresh focus on relation, and I will do so by re-examining three vital elements – production, surplus and exchange – in the work of Arendt and Baudrillard. Despite the fact that her characterization of the contradiction within Marx's understanding of labour makes possible the reading of productivity that I will pursue, and the fact that her work on natality marks the turning-point towards a new theory, Arendt remains too firmly convinced of the necessity of productivity and therefore too thoroughly convinced of the futility of labour (as distinct from work). In addition, despite her attention to the classical, Christian and ancient Hebrew

worlds, and, more surprisingly, despite her insistence on plurality as the characteristic of the human condition, she remains too firmly bound by the Kantian conception of autonomous subjects inhabiting a world of objects, a conception specifically circumvented when Baudrillard turns our attention to the primitive practices of symbolic exchange. Each of us was born into such a system, and each of us came to be as a node of a specific network of relations.

### Productivity as fertility

In both early and late writings, Marx maintains two opposed accounts of human labour. On the one hand, humankind is the *animal laborans* and labour is the 'eternal necessity imposed by nature';<sup>5</sup> the process of labouring is the 'metabolism between man and nature'. Like any animals, we are constantly beset by physical needs, but it is the fact that those needs are satisfied by means of labour that separates us from animals. That is to say, the term *animal laborans* creates a category apart from that of animal as such rather than a sub-category under the heading *animal*. Animals merely consume what nature has to offer while we labour to produce what we need to live, making productivity a distinctively human attribute.<sup>6</sup> However, it is also the case that we can only properly speak of productivity when the product of labour is reified – which is to say, when what is produced is an object – because every human also has a need to see himself or herself objectified in the world.

On the other hand, Marx frequently sets the need to labour in contrast to the condition of freedom; nature may require us to labour, but freedom means precisely freedom from that necessity. Indeed, the purpose of the communist revolution is to free humankind from labour and when, in the communist state, each of us spends our days tending poultry in the morning, harvesting peas in the afternoon, knitting socks in the evening and writing poetry after dinner, none of those activities will have the character of labour; rather, as Arendt reads this passage, we will be trying to enjoy our unproductive freedom (the mirror image of our current productive slavery) by engaging in a series of amusing hobbies.<sup>7</sup> As she goes on to point out, the choice between drudgery and this version of freedom is distressing and hardly enough to inspire one to revolt.

She proceeds to identify the source of the contradiction – which is most thoroughly and clearly set out in Marx's work but also afflicts the theories of labour of Locke and Smith – as the mistaken conflation of work and labour. To find our way out of these contradictions, she argues, we must reclaim this long-forgotten distinction and understand what separates the two activities: work is fabrication, the production of

objects that have some measure of solidity and durability and which go to make up our world, while labour is the struggle to wrest from nature what we need to survive. The reified products of work last for some length of time; the result of labour is consumable goods that are necessarily soon destroyed either by the process of consumption or the process of putrefaction. The worker, while taking his raw material from nature, is engaged in the process of creating the human artifice over against nature; the labourer is at one with a natural process. As a result, when Marx speaks of the productivity of labour, he is for the most part in fact speaking of work and the objects that it produces. In the terminology Arendt will use, work – properly understood – is of tremendous existential significance because we can envision an existence other than one utterly bound by the cycles of the natural world only once we have produced a world of objects which itself is independent (to whatever small degree) of the natural pattern of growth and destruction.

The problem is this: why should Marx grant labour productivity (that is, make it a hallmark of the human being) and at the same time plan the abolition of labour? Arendt's response is to look for the roots of Marx's understanding of productivity, and she discovers them in the pre-modern conception of fertility. Labour is productive in a distinctive way, one that makes it possible for us to experience the 'sheer bliss of being alive'.<sup>8</sup> Marx recognized that talk of abstract labour could achieve nothing (being no more than another philosophical description of the world) and that we must, rather, talk in terms of the labouring of living organisms. The point is made explicitly in the *German Ideology*: productivity is equivalent to fertility, and labouring secures one's personal survival just as begetting (*sic*) secures the survival of the species.

People, who produce their own lives anew each day, begin to make other people, to reproduce. . . . [It is a matter of] the production of life, both one's own life through labour and foreign life by begetting.<sup>9</sup>

The theme emerges again much later, in *Capital*, Vol. I:

Labour is therefore not the only source of use values produced by labour, of material wealth. As William Petty puts it, labour is its father and earth its mother.<sup>10</sup>

Though hardly promising – implying as it does that 'woman' and 'nature' are interchangeable terms – this formulation provides one of the vital pieces for a new theory. Baudrillard has criticized Marx's insistence on using the modern – indeed, he claims, exclusively capitalist – concept of productive labour as the mirror in which to see all of society, but here Arendt sets productivity in an older tradition, establishing a link between the modern concept and the classical and Hebrew

traditions' understanding of the fertility of labour. Since productivity is a form of fertility, the tremendous increase in human productivity in modern times – often offered as testimony to modernity's particular newness – is nothing more than a particularly diligent obedience to the command of the book of Genesis: 'Be ye fruitful and multiply'.<sup>11</sup> In this way, labour acquires a value independent of any confusion with work and independent of the process of reification. We experience the joy of life not just when we sit down to consume a meal, but in the entire cycle that includes tiring ourselves in producing it and being gratified in the consumption of it, and this is something apart from the gratification we feel when we stand back and look at a piece of work we have finished. Labour and consumption are hardly separated in time, and are hardly different in kind. Together they provide the elemental happiness of being alive, Arendt writes, and whatever upsets the stages of that cycle – whether poverty giving rise to grinding misery, or great wealth leading to idleness and grinding boredom – destroys that happiness.<sup>12</sup>

Two objections arise, however. First, is that balance not thoroughly disrupted by the production of surplus? That is to say, does capitalism, which depends on the production of surplus, not destroy any possibility of such happiness? Second, if the cycle *is* kept in balance, is there not a limit to the appeal of the happiness it produces? Is this not still a merely natural cycle, one that enslaves us, and is the happiness it produces little more than a basic (even base) animal gratification? Imagine, for instance, the pains of giving birth and the daily round of feeding and changing but *without* the accompanying experience of getting to know a new person, or seeing a new human coming to be. To use Kant's example, would a human society replete with this happiness be at all distinguishable from a society of contented sheep?<sup>13</sup> Arendt provides the tools for responding to both these concerns. First, she identifies a place for surplus within – though not wholly or merely within – the cycle: 'The living organism is not exhausted when it has provided for its own reproduction, and its "surplus" lies in its potential multiplication'.<sup>14</sup> Because the birth of a child is the arrival of a being quite like its parents but at the same time wholly new, this is never a matter of mere replication but rather the beginning of something different. It is an event that is both natural and potentially historical. Second, Arendt's account of natality and plurality make it clear that, where the labour of giving birth is concerned, the product is no mere product of nature but also a new beginning, a possible tangent to any circle, a historical as well as a natural being.<sup>15</sup> Value, I will argue, lies at this conjunction of the natural cycle and the peculiarly spontaneous character of the beings that join this cycle by birth.

### Surplus, natality, plurality

The philosophical preoccupation with death and human mortality has a long history. Plato's Socrates presented dying as the philosopher's lifelong task; Christian philosophers struggled to produce an understanding of the human being that would, above all, allow the individual soul to survive death; Heidegger saw being-towards-death as the defining feature of *Da-sein*. Arendt's response is to ensure that, from the earliest moments of *The Human Condition*, birth, and not death, occupies the primary position.<sup>16</sup> Death carries us out of the world (as Plato would have it) or (in Heidegger's language) gives us having-been [*Gewesenheit*] as our mode of being: birth, in contrast, introduces us to the world. Arendt points out that it is a scheme of things familiar to the Romans, as is indicated by the fact that, for them, 'to be among men' (*inter homines esse*) was synonymous with 'to live' and 'to cease to be among men' (*inter homines esse desinere*) was synonymous with 'to die'. That is to say, with this shift in focus comes a shift from the individual human being to the plurality of humans. Heidegger holds that death 'individualises *Da-sein* down to itself':<sup>17</sup> birth, Arendt points out, demonstrates that humans are necessarily plural.

It is the very concrete circumstances of birth and death that signal the necessity of an accompanying theoretical shift from individuality to plurality. The claim that each of us goes to her or his death alone is commonplace, and it is certainly true that it is possible to die when no one else is around. In contrast, there had to be at least one other person present when each of us was born, and indeed two had to be there (or at least, given the state of fertility technology, two had to exist or have existed somewhere) for conception to happen. The fact that we all have mothers is the concrete clue that we belong to a plurality: the fact that we all have mothers and fathers indicates that this is not mere numerical plurality. In Arendt's language, in begetting and bearing children Man does not reproduce himself (which should, of course, be clear from the fact that no man reproduces himself) but, rather, humans multiply, producing other humans. Specifically, she notes in a key passage, we are produced 'all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live'.<sup>18</sup> This is the human condition of plurality.

This analysis makes it possible to develop the earlier insight into the surplus of fertility. On one level, the living organism must provide not so much for reproduction as for the production of its own life and, according to such a scheme of things, surplus is produced as soon as one's own subsistence is secured. On the next level, it is a matter of securing one's own life and that of an offspring, though 'offspring' could refer to a new amoeba, produced by simple mitosis, or a new organism



produced by parthenogenesis, or a clone, an offspring merely numerically different from its progenitor; this is reproduction in the literal sense of producing oneself again. In any case, subsistence now means the survival of more than oneself.<sup>19</sup> On a third level, the level of sexual reproduction, subsistence means producing two offspring, but, given that there are now two parents involved, these offspring are no longer simply reproductions of oneself. They are, instead, new and unpredictable strangers. These are not products, but beings with whom we are necessarily immediately in relation. It is an intimate relation, and they are familiar strangers, but strangers nonetheless.

By sustaining this dialectic of sameness and difference Arendt can respond to both the concern about production of surplus and the worry about the meagreness of the happiness gained within the natural cycle. However, as I will show, the response to one problem increases the difficulty of the other. Surplus does not arise on this understanding of productivity because the product, being quite the same as its producers, remains firmly bound within the cycle of labour and consumption: the product of the labour of childbirth is itself a consumer/labourer. In addition, it is perishable, subject to ageing and death, and, as a result, its value is not of a sort that can be accumulated. Finally, a new human, insofar as it is just like those who came before it, can only embark on another turn of the cycle in which it was born. However, this solution serves to compound the second concern, suggesting as it does that the experience of the sheer bliss of being alive that we have as participants in the cycle is preserved only at the price of limiting human experience to labour and consumption. Yet we are born not simply like other humans but like them in our capacity for difference. The human child is quite different from both its parents and from all other humans, and this difference rests in the potential it has to do something that has never been done before, the potential to perform an action that will, as it were, form a tangent to the repetitive cycle of natural life. The capacity for action – understood as setting something in motion, beginning, taking an initiative – is Arendt's description of human freedom,<sup>20</sup> and this is what makes it possible to comprehend the bodily labour of a woman about to give birth as the labour that gives birth to freedom.

This amounts to a correction of several current interpretations of Arendt's conceptual triad of human activities – labour, work and action – in relation to the three elements that condition them – life, worldliness and plurality – as well as the most general condition of human existence – natality and mortality.<sup>21</sup> Several feminist writers have read Arendt as emphasizing the relation of labour to life and natality, and have understood her, for better or worse, as identifying the *animal laborans* as feminine.<sup>22</sup> For some, such as Mary O'Brien, this represents the consignment of women to nature and the private realm, thus

depriving them of freedom:<sup>23</sup> for others, such as Sarah Ruddick, it allows us to establish and celebrate a maternal history and a maternal way of thinking.<sup>24</sup> Yet, as Mary Dietz points out in her comprehensive and well-argued essay, 'Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt', Arendt is quite explicit: 'Action, of all the three [labour, work, action], has the closest connection with natality'.<sup>25</sup>

While this adequately demonstrates Dietz's claim that Arendt is neither a phallogocentric nor a gynocentric theorist but rather one who presents the figure of the acting human as beyond the gendered distinction of *animal laborans*/woman and *homo faber*/man, my argument requires a further development. For the reconfiguration of the concept of labour it is necessary to show not only that action has the closest connection with natality, but that – reversing the relation – natality is in turn most intimately bound to action *and* labour. If, as Arendt says, we work to produce a world of objects that has some measure of permanence, then we work in the face of our mortality and work is an attempt to overcome mortality by making. Mortality determines us as *homo faber*. In contrast, natality determines us both as *animal laborans* and, given our newness, as beings who can act independently of nature, that is to say, as beings who engage in doing. Both labour and action stand as forms of doing in contrast to work and its preoccupation with making.<sup>26</sup>

Just as death is our leaving the world and is understood – by Socrates, for example – as demanding that we withdraw, birth is our arrival – ushered by our mothers' labour – into the world, and the demand that it makes is that we go on to distinguish ourselves, to make actual the potential distinctness with which we are born. Arendt explains:

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance . . . [this insertion's] impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.<sup>27</sup>

We respond to birth specifically by acting; only an action emerges, like a newborn, into the world in such a way that, as a result, the world is never quite the same again. At the same time, an action – since it originates in my capacity for spontaneity – is quite singular, but – occurring in the human world – its outcome can never be determined in advance. We all share the capacity for spontaneity and, as a result, I cannot predict what others will make of my action, how they will understand it, how they will respond to it, how they might ignore it and how it might be redirected again and again to serve others' ends. As regards

my children, I can predict neither their actions nor the fate of those actions, neither their contribution to the world nor the fate of that contribution.<sup>28</sup> That is to say, the structure of action complements the structure of plurality which is determined, in turn, by the fact of natality.

The labour of childbirth makes freedom possible in yet another respect: it opens up a world in which action can happen. Although she will later deny this private space the status of world, Arendt does identify the birth of a child to a pair of lovers as the re-establishing of a distance which was collapsed when the two fell in love. She writes:

Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others. As long as its spell lasts, the only in-between which can insert itself between two lovers is the child, love's own product. The child, this in-between to which the lovers now are related and which they hold in common, is representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world.<sup>29</sup>

As Christopher Long has pointed out, this reinforces the position of natality as the root of action, and, in terms of my concerns here, the role of the labour of childbirth as the root of freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, the clarity of these insights is soon clouded by the recurrence in Arendt's work of a concern with the durability of action, a concern that is, despite claims to the contrary, a version of the old concern with death and immortality. It would hardly be of interest here were it not for the fact that it revives the worry that the life of labour and consumption has no value, and the fact that Arendt's response involves introducing precisely the sort of value that can be accumulated and that quickly makes impossible the simple joy of being alive. The concern is expressed at the conclusion of the chapter on labour in *The Human Condition*, a passage which includes a quotation from Adam Smith:

The danger is that such a society [of labourers/consumers], dazzled by the abundance of its growing fertility and caught in the smooth functioning of a never-ending process, would no longer be able to recognise its own futility – the futility of a life which 'does not fix or realise itself in any permanent subject which endures after [its] labour is past'.<sup>31</sup>

Her solution comes in the following chapter, devoted to work. Only the work of human hands creates an objective world.<sup>32</sup> Only work produces objects, individual things that have some permanence, the sort of things that were here before I was born and can be expected to be here after I die. Such durability makes it possible for our actions – the only things that can be thought of as making a straight trajectory through and beyond the cycles of nature – to have any degree of permanence. That is to say, only the existence of an objective world allows us to imagine

a modicum of immortality for ourselves. Yet it is precisely the durability of that world that makes the artefacts produced by work repositories of value, opening the way to accumulation, expropriation and alienation. As a result, Arendt's insights into our birth to freedom and the spontaneity of action are lost in an attempt to resolve a problem determined by the unspoken axiom that it is production that makes us human. Action is expected to have duration because it is expected to be a product.

In the next section I will argue for an alternative path, one that demonstrates the mistake in assuming production as primary. I will appeal to Baudrillard's work as identifying another way of thinking about circulation in human affairs, that is, thinking of it on the level of symbolic exchange. This serves to bring more sharply into focus Arendt's concern with relation, while her conception of action makes it possible to avoid the fatalism and preoccupation with death that eventually beset Baudrillard's work. Together, they finally make possible an understanding of the complexity of labour, occupying as it does a vital position in an order that is primarily neither natural nor artificial but symbolic.

### **Symbolic exchange and birth**

In his 1973 work, *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard – like Arendt – is concerned with the contradiction at the heart of Marx's understanding of labour; unlike Arendt, who regards it as one of the life-giving paradoxes that is the hallmark of a great thinker, Baudrillard sees it as an indication of the mistake Marx made in analysing all of society in terms of production and all human activity in terms of productivity. Where Arendt drew attention to the connection in Marx between productivity and fertility, Baudrillard – also referring to *The German Ideology* – points out that Marx's very basic claim that 'the first historical act is the production of the means to satisfy [the needs of material life]<sup>33</sup> is not a simple assumption but a theoretical conclusion that is as open to question as the concept of labour that flows from it. The assumption that we are primarily engaged in producing our own existence has, he argues, produced a system and a concept of labour that allow us to conceive of human freedom only in terms of freeing our productive capacities, and what is needed is an investigation of the theoretical apparatus that sustains this supposed axiom. The mirror of production, he argues, must be broken to reveal the system of symbolic exchange.

The argument is most clearly stated and illustrated in his critique of a strand of contemporary Marxist anthropology and its misreading of

so-called primitive societies. Such anthropology is predicated upon the version of historical materialism outlined in Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* where, in the earliest stage of history, the value humans produce is primarily use-value and only the surplus of production is available to be exchanged; later, with the advent of industrial production, everything produced is subject to exchange and therefore alienation. Baudrillard goes on to describe the third phase which then follows:

Even what is considered inalienable (shared, but not exchanged) – virtue, love, knowledge, consciousness – also falls into the sphere of exchange value. This is the era of 'general corruption', of 'universal venality', 'the time when each object, physical or moral, is brought to market as a commodity value in order to be priced at its exact value'.<sup>34</sup>

Marxist anthropologists study primitive societies as instances of the first stage, and are then surprised when these societies, once they reach the level of subsistence, fail to produce a surplus. Baudrillard quotes from Godelier's *L'anthropologie, science des sociétés primitives?*: '[I]n nearly every case, primitives could produce a surplus, but they do not. . . . [T]his surplus remains in a potential state. . . . It seems that they have no reason to produce it'.<sup>35</sup> The implication is that the savages are understood as natural, not yet capable of envisioning the potential for development inherent in surplus; when they have satisfied their needs, that is, reached the level of subsistence, they stop producing.

Nature, need, subsistence, production: Baudrillard directs his critical gaze upon each concept in turn. Nature, even in the 17th century, was very broadly understood as the set of laws that made the world – not the human world or the natural world but the totality of all that is – intelligible. In Spinoza's formulation, Nature was God, '*Deus sive natura*'. Only with the Enlightenment did the concept of Nature both as a vast source of life and as a vast object of exploitation and technological domination appear; it became both what gives us our animal existence and that over against which we establish our human existence. Yet even as this deep ambivalence became clear, Baudrillard argues, it was overshadowed by the technological revolution and its tendency to entrench its exploitation of Nature by couching it in terms of human progress, and Nature thus became the cycle of life through which we would cut our productive linear human path. The necessary repetition of *natural* cycles determines our existence until the point where our material needs have been satisfied; at that point, escape from those cycles becomes possible.

From this point of view, the primitive society's apparent refusal to produce a surplus is tantamount to a refusal of freedom and, as such, is incomprehensible. Baudrillard writes:

What is not recognised here . . . is that in his symbolic exchanges primitive

man *does not gauge himself in relation to Nature*. He is not aware of Necessity, a Law that takes effect only with the objectification of Nature.<sup>36</sup>

So-called primitive man certainly does not have the same conception of needs. After all, the concept of need has no particular justification in economics and springs instead from a *moral* understanding of the superfluous that has its roots in an ethic of asceticism and suffering, and that stresses effort and merit.<sup>37</sup> What economic reason would a pre-capitalist society have to limit need to the level of subsistence? What reason would it have to produce a surplus? Baudrillard's argument is that such questions cannot even make sense in a society not formed under the Enlightenment conception of nature and the capitalist conception of production, a society which instead understands itself first and foremost as engaged in exchange.

Importantly, such societies are not to be confused with Marx's third stage of capitalism. Rather than consisting of a set of subjects engaging in *economic* exchange based on production and a method for establishing the value of everything, these societies are predicated upon the continuous practice of *symbolic* exchange between positions that cannot be understood as autonomous.<sup>38</sup> Remembering the earliest meaning of *symbol*, this is to say that the most basic element in this way of understanding societies is not the subject but relation. While Godelier examined primitive societies as though their members first secured the means of their survival and then began to develop social structures, Baudrillard points out the absurdity of trying to think of the social as a separate function. Rather, he writes, 'primitive "society" did not exist as an instance apart from symbolic exchange'.<sup>39</sup> That is to say relation comes before all else, even before the supposedly basic needs of material life. He continues: 'for the primitives, eating, drinking and living are first of all acts that are exchanged: if they are not exchanged, they do not occur'.<sup>40</sup>

In Marx's third phase, the fact that love and virtue have fallen into the realm of (economic) exchange means that they can now be bought and sold and their value converted into a form that can be accumulated. This is the most significant difference between this and the realm of symbolic circulation; the latter specifically resists accumulation. Baudrillard offers this definition:

The symbolic social relation is the uninterrupted cycle of giving and receiving, which, in primitive exchange, includes the consumption of 'surplus' and deliberate anti-production whenever accumulation . . . risks breaking the reciprocity and begins to generate power.<sup>41</sup>

This makes it appear to Godelier as though the objects of his research instituted scarcity in their societies. It is more accurate to describe them as having ruled out accumulation since any measure of accumulation

would break the pattern of gift and counter-gift; it would stop the movement of circulation. Such societies do limit the goods exchanged (for example, by importing them from far away under strict rules of distribution) precisely in order to keep circulation in motion, but this has nothing to do with privation. Rather, scarcity, like abundance, loses its market-place meaning outside our linear understanding of the production and accumulation of goods.<sup>42</sup> In Arendt's terminology, it loses meaning outside the objective world created by human work.

This is not to say, however, that the Arendtian conception of action must lose all meaning in a society understood in terms of symbolic exchange. It is true that there is no longer any assurance that my action will endure over time, but it is important to remember why such duration was important for Arendt; it represented the hope of escaping the futile, merely natural, cycle of life. Yet, now that the notion of natural cycles opposed to the linear trajectories of human lives has been replaced by the thought of a symbolic cycle that is neither natural nor human but both natural *and* human, giving up freedom understood as an escape from necessity through the production of enduring acts does not amount to giving up freedom or giving in to necessity. Rather, the most vital element of Arendt's concept of freedom – that is, the capacity to act spontaneously in front of one's fellows – remains. In fact, abandoning the model of productivity and the hankering after lasting acts finally gives full play to the characteristic of action most intimately bound up with the human condition of plurality, that is, to its unpredictability.

After all, although symbolic exchange is a circular process, the event of birth itself reminds us that it is not hermetic, nor does it describe a single circle.<sup>43</sup> While economics operates on the assumption of a closed system – the value of inputs (labour and raw material) must equal the value of the product, credits must balance debts, expenditure must balance income – where accumulation at one point in the system is directly related to scarcity elsewhere, symbolic exchange has no such concern. According to the economic scheme, I invest my labour power in a piece of land in order later to reap the harvest in return; in contrast, according to Baudrillard, 'primitive man does not chop down one tree or trace one furrow without "appeasing the spirits" with a counter-gift or sacrifice'.<sup>44</sup> While the economic demands an equivalence of value, the symbolic is concerned rather with the movement – in this case, ritualistic movement – of exchange, in this case between members of the primitive community, the gods and the fields. In the economic scheme of things, spontaneous action could figure as an input that would then need to be balanced by a result or product; in symbolic exchange it is the form of activity that keeps circulation in motion. In addition, labour, as a concept of economics, identifies just one level of a complex human

activity; in Baudrillard's words, this understanding 'disinvests the body and social exchange of all ambivalent and symbolic qualities, reducing them to a rational, positive, unilateral investment'.<sup>45</sup> Examining labour in terms of symbolic exchange will mean once again granting this activity its complexity.

### **Towards a new theory of labour**

Taken in concert with recent work by certain feminist, Marxist and post-Marxist theorists, this opens the way to an understanding of labour that involves a fresh recognition of the significance of natality, a new focus on the labour that was involved in bringing us each to be and the realization that labour is above all a matter of relation. For obvious reasons, feminist theorists have largely devoted their energies to developing the second of these elements and I have already mentioned the work of Sarah Ruddick, who pursues a maternalist line. While it is not necessary here to follow them in claiming privilege for an exclusively maternal way of being, their work has been helpful in drawing attention to maternal labour and Ruddick in particular has emphasized the corporeal nature of that labour.

Feminist writers on Marxism have demonstrated the narrowness of Marx's definition of productive labour and sought to extend it to all the various sorts of activity involved in reproductive labour. As Mary O'Brien puts it, 'Feminism insists that value is not an exclusively economic category, but an ethical, affective and genetic one'.<sup>46</sup> Beginning with a different but related difficulty within Marx's work – i.e., the problem of mediating history and progress on the one hand and the cycles of nature on the other, given Marx's concern with continuity – she argues that reproductive labour is the mediating power that could have allowed Marx to posit a dialectic between historical and biological time 'without lapsing into the trap of an infinitely regressive and crude causality'.<sup>47</sup> He was, however, incapable of recognizing it as such and instead reproductive power and sociability were transformed into characteristics of productive relations.

Yet simply valorizing reproductive labour leaves intact the primary definition of labour as productive activity and Iris Marion Young criticizes this position for continuing to mask the way in which gender functions within production.<sup>48</sup> My objection is that it stands in the way of a reassessment of it in terms of relation. This becomes possible only when Linda Nicholson, following Baudrillard, turns our attention to exchange as the mechanism in capitalist societies that takes the place occupied by kinship in earlier societies.<sup>49</sup> Nicholson's work is particularly valuable as part of a turn towards relation, but the turn cannot be



completed without making the more radical shift away from both production and reproduction; Nicholson seeks rather to integrate the two.<sup>50</sup>

Birth is in fact more than a reminder of the openness of the symbolic cycle; it is that cycle's openness, the event that ensures that new positions and new relations are constantly created. It is true that, at the same time, death ensures that positions and relations also constantly disappear, but what is important is that there is in no sense a relation of equivalence between the two; only in economics need the numbers be balanced and the scales of value kept at equilibrium. In addition, birth is an immensely complex moment in the system of symbolic exchange; it is the arrival of a new material life, a new mouth to feed, a new set of physical, emotional, economic, libidinal demands, and it draws into being a wholly new set of relations whether *between* the child and those around it or *between* the lovers to whom the child is born or *within* the family and *among* the members of the community into which it emerges. Finally, as Arendt demonstrated, a new child is both quite familiar – it is anticipated, and a place for it is ordained in advance within the flow of exchange – and radically new, an arrival that might fit snugly into its place but might also become a force that comes to direct and redirect the pattern of circulation. Above all, making one's new mark on the world is not a matter of destroying the cycle or bringing it to a halt, because to do so would be to destroy the most basic level on which we exist, the level of the social. After all, while Baudrillard could claim to break the mirror of production, what lies behind – that is, the social – cannot itself be broken without the destruction of our very mode of being.

If social being is our originary mode of being, then the labour that brings about relation is an originary mode of labour. I have argued that the labour of childbirth brings about birth; that is to say, it breaches the circle of symbolic circulation, it gives new impetus to the movement of all levels of exchange, it starts something the repercussions of which can never be predicted, it generates our experience of freedom. Above all, however, this labour creates relation. Certainly, every form of labour brings about a relation, whether to the earth as raw material, to the consumer, or to those with whom one labours, but only this particular labour consists wholly in relation. If the labour of childbirth can be thought of as producing anything, its product is relation; if it can be thought of as having an end (in the sense of *telos*), its end is relation; if it can be thought of as having a purpose, its purpose is relation. A theory of labour which takes this as its starting-point has the advantage of plumbing the ontological depths hidden by the dominant concern with production. It opens a way to understanding labour as something other than merely natural, merely private or futile, or of interest chiefly as the method for instituting private property,

allowing it instead to be determined on a level that precedes and makes possible each of these distinctions.<sup>51</sup>

*Department of Philosophy,  
Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, USA*

**PSC**

## Notes

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1961), p. 21.
- 2 The claim that there is such a conflict within Marx's opus is not uncontroversial. For example, W. A. Suchting has argued that Marx 'did not mean that Communism would do away with labour in general . . . but that it would abolish a certain sort of labour', supporting his argument with a quotation from the *Critique of the Gotha Program* in which Marx and Engels describe a higher phase of communist society where labour would become 'life's prime want' (W. A. Suchting, 'Marx and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*', *Ethics* 73 (1962): 47–55). However, Suchting misses Arendt's point that while those activities might still be called labour, they will have the character of merely diverting hobbies. For a reading of Marx that is more careful than either Arendt's or Suchting's, see Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 158–84.
- 3 The physical labour of childbirth is of course one small part of the labour involved in bringing a fully fledged human into being (see Arendt's 'Crisis in Education', in *Between Past and Future* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, pp. 173–96), and much work has been done on the economic, political and philosophical significance of all of the labour involved in social reproduction; for example, see Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2000). I concentrate on the labour of childbirth as an example because it is where Arendt's thinking on labour and her thinking on natality converge, and in order to emphasize the ontological significance of material life. While it is the labour exclusively of women, a fact that grounds a certain maternalist strand of feminist theory exemplified by Sarah Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989) or Jean Bethke Elshtain's *Meditations on Modern Political Thought* (New York: Praeger, 1986) – I am more interested here in its being the labour by which each of us came to be.
- 4 Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St Louis: Telos Press, 1975). See also his *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993).
- 5 Karl Marx, *Kapital Dritter Band*, in *Werke*, vol. XXXV (Berlin: Dietz, 1969), p. 873. Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1958), p. 104.

- 6 See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, in *Werke*, vol. III (Berlin: Dietz, 1969), p. 21.
- 7 Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 118.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 106.
- 9 '[D]ie Menschen, die ihr eignes Leben taeglich neu machen, anfangen, andre Menschen zu machen, sich fortzupflanzen . . . Die Production des Lebens, sowohl des eignen in der Arbeit, wie des fremden in der Zeugung.' Karl Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band*, in *Werke*, vol. XXIII (Berlin: Dietz, 1969), p. 29; my translation.
- 10 'Arbeit ist also nicht die einzige Quelle der von ihr produzierten Gebrauchswerte, des stofflichen Reichtums. Die Arbeit is sein Vater, wie William Petty sagt, und die Erde seine Mutter.' (Marx and Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, p. 58.)
- 11 See Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 106.
- 12 See *ibid.*, p. 108.
- 13 See Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: a Philosophical Sketch', in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 93–130, where the first human society consists of men as contented as the sheep they tend. Kant, of course, never did give happiness its due.
- 14 Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 108.
- 15 Together, these insights resolve what Mary O'Brien describes as an ambiguity in Marx's understanding both of necessity and reproduction. While O'Brien retains a strict distinction between production and reproduction and resorts to the troubling concept of an essentially female reproductive consciousness as the mediator between our natural and historical being, Arendt shows the relation of production and reproduction to be more complex and more intimate. For O'Brien's particularly hostile reading of Arendt, see *Politics*, pp. 99–110; for a critical assessment of that reading, see Mary Dietz, 'Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt', in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 17–51.
- 16 Other feminist writers have examined this shift. For instance, see Virginia Held, 'Birth and Death', in *Feminism and Political Theory*, ed. C. Sunstein (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990).
- 17 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 263.
- 18 Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 8.
- 19 For Marx, these levels were chronologically successive: first one secured one's own existence, then one began to produce other lives. It is clear from the same passage in *The German Ideology* that this second level was understood in terms of reproducing oneself (*sich fortzupflanzen*), so the third level did not enter his thinking at all. As I point out later, Baudrillard will reject any notion of these levels occurring in sequence. See Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 119.
- 20 Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 177.
- 21 *ibid.*, pp. 7–9.
- 22 Mary O'Brien describes Arendt as a woman who 'accepts the normality and

- even the necessity of male supremacy' by consigning women to the task of labouring, animal-like, in the private realm (*Politics*, pp. 100–1).
- 23 *ibid.*
- 24 Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*, pp. 209–11.
- 25 Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 9. See Dietz, 'Feminist Receptions', p. 27.
- 26 Dietz warns against collapsing action and labour and thereby confusing political and metaphysical thinking, rendering Arendt unrecognizable. It involves 'taking natality as a central category of politics (as Arendt does) and then configuring it literally as women's experience in giving birth and mothering, or figuratively as a feminist concept derived from women's life activity (as Arendt does not)' (Dietz, 'Feminist Receptions', p. 28). Dietz is partly correct in insisting that Arendt does not envisage natality as a woman's concern. After all, what is significant is the fact that each of us was born, not that some of us have given or can give birth. However, Dietz does Arendt a disservice by narrowing the category of natality to the point where it is relevant only to our historical being and not also to our natural being. In fact, this is a moment of unacknowledged agreement between O'Brien and Arendt. See O'Brien, *Politics*, p. 167.
- 27 Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 176–7.
- 28 It is important to point out – particularly at this juncture – that I am concerned here with the ontological and not the psychological implications of natality.
- 29 Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 242.
- 30 Christopher Long, 'A Fissure in the Distinction: Hannah Arendt, the Family and the Public/Private Dichotomy', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24 (1998): 94–5.
- 31 Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 135.
- 32 Arendt refers here to Marx's acknowledgement of the necessity of the world of things: 'Even Marx, who actually defined man as an *animal laborans*, had to admit that productivity of labour, properly speaking, begins only with reification (*Vergegenstaendlichung*), with "the erection of an objective world of things" (*Erzeugung einer gegenstaendlichen Welt*' (Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 102).
- 33 Marx and Engels, *Deutsche Ideologie*, p. 28.
- 34 Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 119.
- 35 *ibid.*, p. 70.
- 36 *ibid.*, p. 59.
- 37 See *ibid.*, pp. 63–74.
- 38 *ibid.*, p. 103.
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 78. This is a version of the point O'Brien makes when she reminds us that reproductive labour is a necessarily social activity. See *Politics*, p. 167.
- 40 Baudrillard, *Mirror*, p. 79.
- 41 *ibid.*, p. 143.
- 42 See *ibid.*, p. 83.
- 43 At the same time, this is not to say that a birth is simply excessive to all economy, that it is, in terms Julia Kristeva applies to Marx's theory of value, a matter just of bodies and discharge. Such a Bataillan reading goes a long

way towards eliminating the matter of relation, but it is precisely the attention to relation that makes Baudrillard's work interesting. See Baudrillard, *Mirror*, pp. 41-7.

- 44 *ibid.*, p. 83.
- 45 *ibid.*, p. 46.
- 46 O'Brien, *Politics of Reproduction*, p. 166.
- 47 *ibid.*, p. 183.
- 48 Iris Marion Young, 'Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of Dual Systems Theory', in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), p. 52.
- 49 Linda Nicholson, *Gender and History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 167-200.
- 50 Linda Nicholson, 'Feminism and Marx: Integrating Kinship with the Economic', *Praxis International* 5 (January 1986): 367-80.
- 51 Baudrillard's reassessment of the labour of the slave and of the artisan might be read as a preliminary glimpse of what such a theory might look like (*Mirror*, pp. 93-106).

# PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM

vol 30 no 3 may 2004 contents

JANE DURAN

Sartre, gender theory and the possibility of  
transcendence

MATTHEW CALARCO

Reading Derrida's own conscience: from the question  
to the call

GIORGIO BARUCHELLO

Cesare Beccaria and the cruelty of liberalism: an  
essay on liberalism of fear and its limits

DENNIS BEACH

History and the Other: Dussel's challenge to Levinas

JOHN S. BRADY

No contest? Assessing the agonistic critiques of  
Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere

ANNE O'BYRNE

Symbol, exchange and birth: towards a theory of  
labour and relation

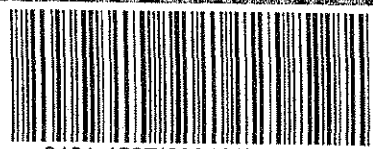
JOHANNA MEEHAN

Feminism, critical theory, and power

PAUL HENDRICKSON

Reflexivity as dialogue and distanciation:  
Kögler's project of a critical hermeneutics

[www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)



0191-4537(200405)30:3;1-4

#### EDITORIAL STATEMENT

In modern industrial society reason cannot be separated from practical life. At their interface a critical attitude is forged. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* wishes to foster this attitude through the publication of essays in philosophy and politics, philosophy and social theory, socio-economic thought, critique of science, theory and praxis. We provide a forum for open scholarly discussion of these issues from a critical-historical point of view.

*Philosophy & Social Criticism* presents an international range of theory and critique, emphasizing the contribution of continental scholarship as it affects major contemporary debates.

#### COPYRIGHT

Before publication authors are requested to assign copyright to SAGE Publications, retaining their right to reuse the material in other publications written or edited by themselves and due to be published no earlier than one year after initial publication in the Journal.

#### INDEXING/ABSTRACTING SERVICES:

*Philosophy & Social Criticism* is indexed/abstracted in Academic Search – Ebsco, Alternative Press Index, Bulletin Signaletique: Philosophie No. 519, Business Source, CSA Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, Current Legal Sociology, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, FRANCIS database, International Bibliography of Book Reviews of Scholarly Literature in the Humanities and Social Sciences (online and CD-ROM), IBZ: International Bibliography of Periodical Literature, International Bibliography of Periodical Literature in the Humanities and Social Sciences (online and CD-ROM), International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, International Political Science Abstracts, MasterFILE full NET, Men's Studies Database, Political Science Abstracts, Sexual Diversity Studies (formerly Gay & Lesbian Abstracts), Sociofile, Sociological Abstracts, The Left Index and The Philosopher's Index.

#### PAPER SUBMISSION

*Philosophy & Social Criticism* encourages the submission of unsolicited manuscripts. Please attach to every submission a letter confirming that all authors have agreed to the submission and that the article is not currently being considered for publication by any other journal. Authors are requested to provide three copies of each manuscript. On acceptance of your manuscript for publication, you will be asked to supply a diskette (preferably PC-compatible) of the final version.

Please note that manuscripts should be cleanly typed, double-spaced throughout, on one side only of the page. Authors should provide an abstract of 100 to 150 words and up to 10 key words. Notes should be numbered consecutively and also typed double-spaced at the end of the manuscript. Authors are urged to check that the bibliographical information contained in their notes is accurate and comprehensive.

The Editor wishes to remind authors that all manuscripts are published in gender neutral form.

On publication, authors receive 25 free offprints of their article, plus a printed copy of the journal.

Manuscripts and books for review should be sent to:

**David M. Rasmussen, Editor**  
*Philosophy & Social Criticism*  
Department of Philosophy  
Boston College, Chestnut Hill  
MA 02467, USA  
[email: PSC@bc.edu]

Journal Coordinator (Boston College):  
**Julia M. Legas**

Editorial Assistant (Boston College):  
**Adam Konopka**