

**THE POLITICAL AND PUBLIC  
DIMENSION OF WORK:  
TOWARDS THE DEMOCRATISATION OF WORK**

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Work is being devalorised today as never before, and the quality of working life is deteriorating almost everywhere. Despite this, work issues are addressed by a decreasing number of economists, even heterodox economists. Normative claims about how work should be organised are increasingly handed over to managerial sciences, a process that contributes to legitimatising the long-standing liberal contention that work governance is an exclusively private matter. It is as if economists had renounced the study of the world of work and the furthering of changes that would bring about desirable social and economic outcomes.

This state of affairs is explained not only by historical and ideological factors but also by the way in which work is conceptualised by most economists and social philosophers. For mainstream economists, work is an instrumental activity in which socially dis-embedded individuals engage for the sole reason of having access to consumption. Leading philosophers, like Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas, also view work as an instrumental activity in which workers relate with nature and enter into strategic relations with each other. Since the public sphere is defined by non-strategic interaction among equal individuals, work is relegated to the private, non-political domain. In our view, this instrumental, depoliticised, conception of work and its consequent exclusion from the public sphere has contributed to underrating work and is progressively removing it from 'elevated' academic matters.

The aim of the present article is to argue that workplaces are political (in the Arendtian sense) arenas and that work has an irreducible political and public dimension. Although this approach runs against the dominant contention, we are not alone in our endeavour. Authors such as Pateman

(1970), Honneth (1982) and Ferreras (2007) have also been advocating the recognition of the public character of work. We develop our argument in three steps that go from an analytical to a normative stance.

Firstly, we point out that the instrumental conception regards work as a relationship between workers and nature, not a relationship with each other. In economics, the instrumental conception of work had been forged by the marginalists, the very economists that removed the relations between people from the domain of economic analysis. Yet work activities are almost always undertaken within a network of social interactions, many of which, *pace* Habermas, are not of a strategic nature. Institutional economics and sociological approaches have long assumed that work is a collective, cooperative venture enduringly permeated by normative concerns and aspirations for justice – the concerns and aspirations considered constitutive of the public and political sphere. It is the recognition of the cooperative character of work that allows its public dimension to be unveiled.

The second part of the article examines the extent to which the conditions for a public sphere, as conceived by Habermas and Arendt, are met in private business workplaces, and whether these conditions are effectively required for an arena to be considered public. Our conception of work leads us to question the private/public distinction in contemporary societies and discuss equality as a criterion for a public sphere.

The third part argues that the ‘publicness’ of work is not solely a theoretical matter but also a political issue. Some of the normative counterparts of the recognition of the public character of work are explored. Firstly, if an issue is public it must be accessible to debate and public scrutiny. We point out that the opposite is currently observed: the demands of competitiveness are used to render the changes undertaken in the world of work almost invisible and, most importantly, unquestioned. For instance, there is almost no censure of the current intensification of work (Green, 2006). Secondly, if work is recognised as having a public dimension, policies aimed at promoting the democratisation of work become necessary and legitimate. Indeed, workplaces should then be subject to the same principle that applies to the public sphere, namely the maximum possible participation of all those involved.

The next section briefly presents the relevant conceptions of work for our purposes and argues, *contra* Arendt (1958), that work is a political

activity. The following section builds on Arendt (1958) and Habermas (1989) to examine the extent to which work can be regarded as embodying a public dimension. The penultimate section develops the normative corollaries generated by the acknowledgement of work as public, namely the need to democratise various aspects of work. We conclude by highlighting that re-politicising and re-dignifying the concept of work would help its emancipatory potential to be retrieved.

## **Recognising the Political Character of Work**

### **Work as an Instrumental and Solitary Activity**

Mainstream economists portray work as a production factor for firms and a source of disutility for workers, an unpleasant activity which people would avoid if they could. It is assumed that workers entertain an instrumental relationship with work, seen as merely a means to the ‘real’ end, *i.e.* consumption<sup>1</sup>. Non-incidentally, the authors who formalised this vision of work, the early marginalists, are also those who restricted the object of economics to the study of the relations between people and nature. For them, economics would deal exclusively with the ‘lower elements of human nature’ (Edgeworth, 1881), that is, self-interest and the search for material wealth.

Although mainstream economics meanwhile reintroduced the study of social interactions, by inserting social preferences into utility functions, economic agents’ behaviour remains basically instrumental. Social relations are just means by which, or constraints within which, individuals pursue utility-maximisation; the individualistic grounds of rational choice theory are left untouched. The worker as a producer embedded in a social productive context has no place in mainstream economic theory, in which the worker is seen as a consumer. For example, in the theory of compensating wage differentials, workers buy the positive attributes of their jobs.

In turn, contemporary social philosophy is marked by the under-rating of work, which contributed to dismantling the emancipatory status of the

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1 Institutional economists, by contrast, have always challenged this view, highlighting the fact that work could also be a privileged means for human flourishing (Spencer, 2009; Lopes, 2011).

19<sup>th</sup>-century concept of work (Honneth, 1982 and Ferreras, 2007). The theoretical milestones along this path are Arendt and Habermas, for whom work involves the relations between people and nature like in mainstream economics.

For Habermas, work broadly refers to the way individuals control and manipulate their environment. Work is regulated by the technical rules that govern the interactions between people and nature; it is hence typically and necessarily an externally regulated type of behaviour. Though he recognises that work activity is immersed in social interactions, he makes a sharp distinction between *work* and *interaction* (Habermas, 1968). *Work* as an activity and the relations in which individuals enter while at work belong to the domain of instrumental/strategic action. Work is an instrumental action which consists of finding the best technical means in the pursuit of predefined goals. In turn, relationships established at work are regarded as strategic action - consisting of choosing the right strategy for one's goals while knowing that others are also pursuing their own goals. In workplaces then, it is assumed that individuals view their co-workers as if they were objects or organisational resources, likely to be manipulated when necessary. For Habermas, workplaces are governed by the *diktats* of instrumental reason, as are all other economic affairs.

In contrast to work, *interaction* is oriented by the mutual search for understanding and is associated to communicative action. The latter is governed by social norms shared by the interacting individuals and is characterised by the absence of coercive force. While individuals at work relate primarily with nature, communicative action is a fundamentally dialogic activity, marked by authentic rather than strategic interaction. For Habermas, communicative action is the cement of social order; a society would not hold together with instrumental action alone. But he sees communicative action as being possible only among free and equal individuals, that is, outside of work, in the public sphere.

Habermas' framework meets Arendt's theorisation of the human condition as constituted by three activities: labour, work and (political) action. Labour and work are instrumental activities - they are directed to a goal other than themselves - in contrast to action, which lies outside the category of means and ends because the end lies in the activity itself - political action. *Labour* refers to the repetitive and never-ending activities in which humans must engage to sustain the physiological

requirements of life. Individuals as labourers are bound to necessity and produce things that are by definition perishable. *Work* refers to the activities through which humans transform the physical world in which they live. While the products of labour are designed to be consumed, those of work are characterised by permanence and durability. But in labour, as in work, individuals relate only with nature and not with each other.

With regard to the way social interactions are envisaged at work, Arendt's position is even more radical than Habermas':

Laboring is an activity in which man is neither together with the world nor with other people, but alone with his body, facing the naked necessity to keep himself alive. [...] It is indeed in the nature of laboring to bring men together in the form of a labor gang where any number of individuals 'labor together as if they were one'. [...] But this 'collective nature of labor', far from establishing a recognizable, identifiable, reality for each member of the labor gang, requires on the contrary the actual loss of all awareness of individuality and identity. [...] The sociability arising out of [labor] rests not on equality but on sameness (Arendt, 1958: 212-213).

That is, in the realm of labour, human beings are all alike because they are mere living organisms, stuck to materiality; they are thus interchangeable rather than unique and distinct individuals. Likewise, in the realm of work, human beings fabricate 'the man-made-world' in solitude. The two concepts do not differ significantly in what concerns relations between people.

In contrast, Arendt understands that action, like Habermas with communicative action, goes on directly between individuals without the intermediary of things, and this enables individuals to disclose 'who' they are. Only through action, *i.e.*, through interacting with others through words and deeds, can individuals reveal their individuality and display their virtue and character. Only action takes place among a plurality of people; hence, only in the realm of action can individuals be equals and distinct. Action refers specifically and exclusively to the activities involved in our living together; it excludes 'everything merely necessary or useful', that is, labour and work.

### **Beyond Instrumentality**

So Arendt and Habermas, like mainstream economics, make two distinct but related contentions: i) work is an instrumental activity; and ii) workplaces are inhabited by indistinct, un-individuated, people who only relate instrumentally to each other. Regarding the first assertion, it is important to recall that prominent thinkers, one of whom is Marx, believed work to be valuable in itself rather than an instrument to something else, because work allows human beings to exercise their creative powers and hence achieve self-realisation (Spencer, 2009). For Marx, contrary to Arendt and Habermas, work is not in itself an alienating activity. Rather, it is the capitalist system of work that impedes the potential for work to become a positive and creative activity. Within capitalism, the hallmark of human work, *i.e.* to simultaneously conceive and execute, is dissolved because capitalists control the labour process and render work a purely functional activity performed to earn wages.

But the focus of the present article is to counter the second assertion by arguing that social interactions at work go beyond instrumentality. Our argument rests on two claims: first that workers today aspire to egalitarian, democratic interactions, and second that work entails cooperative behaviour.

The first claim consists of acknowledging that the egalitarian interaction regime specific to our democracies pervades all interpersonal exchanges, including interactions at work. Indeed, since the concepts of work are always informed by their historical contexts, the conception of work today must situate it in the contemporary context of democratic societies. Even though democracy stops at the firms' doors, hierarchical decisions do not go unquestioned. Democracy does not abolish the existence of bosses and employees, but it alters the rationale underlying human interactions and creates a tension between the norm of equal status in the wider polity and that of subject status in the workplace which must be acknowledged. Even when the interaction context is hierarchical, there is an inescapable aspiration to relational horizontality (Martucelli, 2002) and fair treatment. Workers expect to be treated and recognised as distinct and morally able individuals (McGann, 2012). Expecting interactions at work to be egalitarian, or at least respectful of integrity and dignity, means expecting behaviours to be driven by social norms rather than by exclusively instrumental concerns. Treating others and being treated according to such norms imply the endorsement of justice

principles, which by definition goes beyond instrumentality.

The second claim and decisive theoretical point is the acknowledgement of the cooperative character of work. Because Arendt conceives workplaces as inhabited by indistinct and interchangeable individuals, she explicitly rejects that work entails some form of cooperation:

Division of labor is based on the fact that two men can put their labor power together and behave toward each other as though they were one. This one-ness is the exact opposite of co-operation, it indicates the unity of the species with regard to which every single member is the same and exchangeable (Arendt, 1958: 123).

However, while well-defined tasks can be efficiently coordinated by hierarchical mechanisms, most modern productive activities require a high level of interdependence between workers. The workers' goals and effort levels cannot be defined independently; instead, the workers must together develop a common understanding of the problem to be solved and how this can be done. In collective endeavours, the definition of each member's contribution is endogenous to the group; it can only be arrived at by communicative and cooperative processes. Cooperation means that (a) the workers commit to certain behaviour and (b) compliance with commitments take on crucial importance. Cooperating implies giving up on one's desire to cheat or exploit cooperative partners; it instead entails respecting others as unique persons and treating them fairly. This amounts to going beyond what is 'merely necessary or useful' and ceasing to behave instrumentally.

Acknowledging that workers do cooperate therefore means recognising that they relate with each other as distinct, unique, moral individuals. In fact, the very abilities required to sustain cooperation, namely, making promises and fulfilling commitments, are assigned exclusively to (political) action by Arendt and communicative action by Habermas. But once we recognise that work is permeated by egalitarian aspirations and cooperative behaviour, it follows that the processes assigned to the political sphere, *i.e.* individuation and distinctiveness, can also take place in workplaces. Arendt's distinctions between labour, work and action are undoubtedly illuminating. They allowed her to brilliantly show how modern societies became societies of labourers/consumers in which men and women endlessly produce in order to consume, and consume in order to produce. But Arendt built her argument about the overwhelming place

of labour and consequent decline of action in modernity by elaborating abstract categories that led her to sidestep the practical circumstances in which labour and work are actually undertaken.

Neoclassical economists had also resisted recognising the existence and importance of cooperation in economic affairs, but they have been acknowledging it in the last decades. Nevertheless, in mainstream accounts the bed-rock of cooperation is made of calculating the relative costs/benefits of alternative actions – that is, it is assumed that people cooperate for self-interested, instrumental reasons. But while cooperation undoubtedly entails a calculative facet, it also inevitably requires the relational and moral capacity of individuals. The conditions required to sustain cooperation in the formal mainstream models – complete information about others’ past behaviour, endless interaction and sanctioning possibility - are simply not met in real-world contexts (Kotzebue and Wigger, 2010).

The next section briefly presents Arendt’s definition of the ‘political’ and further develops the idea that work has a political dimension. Again, our argument is mostly grounded on the actual experience of work. Sociology of work forcefully shows that work does not consist solely of a series of tasks carried out in an objective world but is also made up of how work is subjectively experienced, perceived and interpreted; however, this perspective is seldom taken in social philosophy and economics, which continue to understand work as separated from subjectivity and, most importantly, intersubjectivity.

### **The Political Dimension of Work**

Arendt explicitly states that labour is an ‘antipolitical way of life’ (Arendt, 1958: 212) because, as mentioned above, she assumes that in the activity of labour, human beings do not relate as unique and distinct persons. For her, it is only through (political) action that individuals can distinguish themselves as distinct and unique beings, that is, only action makes people political beings. Because humans engage in labour and work to fulfil the same biological and material needs, there is no scope for individuality, just for sameness. Individuality would only emerge from interacting with others through ‘words and deeds’. Only through action and speech, that is, political activity, can individuals show who they are and disclose their unique identities. When Arendt speaks of

speech, she is referring to the act of ‘communicating oneself’ rather than communicating to obtain something. Action for her refers to ‘communicative action’, in which words are not strategically used to veil intentions but instead to disclose one’s real self. Indeed, ‘the *polis* [...] is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together’ (Arendt, 1958: 198).

Arendt believes that the organising principle<sup>2</sup> itself derives from the political realm; it is related to people’s capacity to act together. Yet once we recognise that there is an inescapable cooperative dimension in work, it logically follows that the organising principle also permeates work environments. Indeed, as mentioned above, by definition cooperating implies that workers organise themselves; cooperating entails working together, acting, discussing, deciding together and behaving ‘virtuously’ toward each other. The exercise of virtue is precisely the motive underlying action in Arendt’s framework. And virtue stems from human beings’ ability to see things not only from their own point of view but also from the perspective of all those with whom they interact.

In a detailed study of supermarket check-out clerks, Ferreras (2007) documents that, even when work consists of the most repetitive and dull tasks, the workers are confronted with different normativity sources. Although they do not question the legitimacy of the efficiency objective, they strongly aspire to institute an egalitarian dimension in their interactions with colleagues as well as with managers. Workers denounce in particular the fact that managerial decisions often benefit some workers at the expense of others. For instance, they expect performance standards, pay, managerial practices and control procedures to be driven by explicit norms of distributive and procedural justice rather than arbitrarily set, as often seems to be the case (Ferreras, 2007). Evidence has been collected by hundreds of institutional economists, sociologists and social psychologists (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001) on the prevalence of justice motives in behaviour at work – a trait largely explored by managers. It is not because the economic sphere is dominated by the profit rationale that all acts and behaviours in the economic sphere endorse the same instrumental rationality. Workers are

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<sup>2</sup> Arendt distinguishes the division of labour, which is a principle ruling labour and work, from the organising principle, which she exclusively assigns to the public/political sphere

not always the effort-avoiders and opportunistic individuals depicted in mainstream economic models, nor are they the solitary labourers depicted by Hannah Arendt.

In democratic societies, the intersubjective dimension of work cannot be discarded, though caution must be taken so that it does not obscure the objective circumstances of work. All empirical studies report that the workers are deeply subjectively – and hence intersubjectively - engaged at work (Simpson, 2009), even when the engagement takes the negative form of deliberate withdrawal (Dejours, 2009). On one hand, workers value and seek interpersonal interactions for their own sake, not for instrumental reasons (Lopes, 2011). On another, these interpersonal interactions are expected to conform to the egalitarian interaction regime. The workers' claim to interact democratically with co-workers and supervisors as well as the many cooperative facets of work constitutes definite instances of the political dimension of work. It suggests that action, in the Arendtian sense, does or could take place also in workplaces, which would mean that work entails both a public and a political dimension.

### **The Defining Features of the Public Sphere and the Extent to which they apply to the Work Sphere**

Before we can answer our next question - to what extent do workplaces entail a public dimension? – some defining features of what is a public sphere must be outlined. Previous sections have set the stage. For Arendt and Habermas, workplaces are clearly excluded from the public sphere to the extent that they are dominated by instrumental and strategic action. Only action (for Arendt) and communicative action (for Habermas) belong to the public sphere. Notwithstanding the theoretical divergence of the two authors on other aspects, their basic defining characteristic of the public sphere is the type of interaction established therein. For Arendt, the public sphere emerges whenever and wherever 'men act together in concert'. In other words, according to Arendt and Habermas, the extent to which a realm is public depends primarily on the way individuals interact and on the conditions in which interactions take place.

### **The Distinction Between the Public and the Private in Arendt and Habermas**

For Arendt, public is almost synonymous with political (but the relation between the two is a perennial debate in political philosophy; see Frazer, 2009). Therefore, what has been said about work, action and the political also applies to work and the public. Arendt characterises the public sphere as self-government among *distinct* and *equal* individuals freed from the bonds of necessity; it stands in opposition to the private sphere – households and economic units, characterised by relations of domination and governed by necessity. The private is an intimate realm sheltered from external scrutiny which deals with production and reproduction, while the public denotes a collective body, visible and open to all, engaged in deliberating on how one should live with others. There is no particular location or institution associated to the public sphere; a place becomes public whenever common action coordinated through speech and persuasion occurs<sup>3</sup> (Benhabib, 1992).

The preceding sections have sought to argue that there is a political dimension of work, to the extent that workers interact as distinct, individuated persons able and wanting to participate in the organisation of work. It may be inferred from this that work also has a public dimension. However, Arendt defines the public as having two basic constitutive features: distinctness and equality. While the *distinctness* quality of workers has been addressed in previous sections, the second requisite of the public sphere, that of *equality*, has yet to be examined.

Like Arendt, Habermas defines the public sphere as a particular type of interaction between individuals, namely communicative action, an interaction marked by the search for mutual understanding and the non-manipulative use of language. He sees the public sphere as a theatre where citizens debate and deliberate on their common affairs under the constraints of an ‘ideal speech situation’. These constraints include that:

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3 This means that workplaces could also become public depending on the kind of interaction and government that prevails. Indeed, Arendt’s reflections on work councils indicate that she does not exclude workplaces from the public sphere. However, this contradicts her absolute relegation of labour and work – as all economic affairs - to the private sphere. This contradiction raises two issues: the first concerns the separation of politics and economics, an issue largely addressed in the literature (see Sitton, 1987); while the second concerns Arendt’s very conception of work, the issue addressed in the present article

each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and continue communication; each must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations and explanations; all must have equal chances to express their wishes, desires and feelings; and finally, speakers must be free to thematize those power relations that in ordinary contexts would constrain the wholly free articulation of opinions and positions. Together these conditions specify a norm of communication that can be named that of *egalitarian reciprocity* (Benhabib, 1992: 89).

In the public sphere, therefore, competing particular interests are given equal consideration and participants deliberate as peers, in a search for consensus over the common interest. It is more than obvious that private business workplaces do not satisfy these criteria. Even when workers are allowed to express and defend their views, or when they are consulted on organisational matters; even in the most participative work environments, workplaces can rarely be regarded as collective deliberation arenas. Of course, consensus is sometimes reached on given issues but always through deliberative processes marked by subordination, since postulating the existence of a common good shared by firm owners and employees may well be a mystification.

However, one must not overlook the fact that the workers' views and suggestions are based on normative claims that represent a (constrained) thematisation of power relations. Workers have the ability to see things not only from their point of view but from the perspective of all the actors of the firm – which is the fundamental ability of individuals as political beings. Their judgments are not based on 'private' values or opinions with a concern only for their individual, private situation; rather, they are formed by considering the whole collective of workers and grounded on public conceptions of justice (Ferrerias, 2007).

Indeed, contrary to Arendt's assumptions, 'labourers' are not driven merely by necessity, nor are 'workers' exclusively concerned with technical efficiency. Sociological studies show that concerns with justice form an integral part of the contemporary experience of work. And justice is '*the good*' that is pursued in politics and debated in the public sphere, for it 'consists in what tends to promote the common interest'

(Pitkin, 1981: 339)<sup>4</sup>. Justice is precisely about the conflict between profit and right, efficiency and meaning, private claim and public policy; it is the concept ‘that enables us to make this transition from private to public, from ‘I’ to ‘we’’ (Pitkin, 1981: 347). Though perfectly aware of their subordinate condition, workers do not abdicate from being treated with justice. Clinical evidence on work-related psychological diseases testifies the pain and devastation that often result from unfair treatment at work (Dejours, 2009). Work is undoubtedly a normative experience because, to paraphrase Arendt, ‘men, not Man live on the earth and inhabit the world’ (Arendt, 1958: 7) ... of work. Though workers lose most of the rights they have as citizens when entering workplaces, they do not surrender their aspiration to the ‘egalitarian reciprocity’, the interaction regime progressively established in democratic societies.

Yet the existence of an aspiration to equality does not mean that it is effective. Arendt and Habermas were certainly right in saying that the realm of work will never be a sphere of freedom and equality. We may nonetheless hold from the argument developed so far that *potentially* – by which we mean plausibly in analytical terms even though not actually realised or realisable – workplaces are public arenas. If the moral and normative abilities of individuals are the central institution of politics, and indeed of social order, then workplaces have a public dimension too.

It is because the criterion of equality is so ostensibly absent from the world of work that its public character is seldom discussed. But Arendt and Habermas’ assumption of strict equality has been criticised for its illusory or elitist character. The issue deserves further examination.

### **Equality as a Criterion for a Public Sphere**

In the Arendtian world, (political) action seems reserved to especially endowed people. Indeed, action requires perceiving the world and its future from a plurality of standpoints; being trusted by citizens - to the extent that it involves speaking in the name of others; having the ability to persuade others, and having the courage to engage in risky and

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4 It is not a coincidence that Arendt, in contrast to Aristotle, excludes the idea of justice from the political and public realm (Pitkin, 1981). For Arendt, justice cannot be a key political value or principle because it necessarily deals with economic and social, not political, circumstances (Frazer, 2009). What is again at stake here is the separation of economics and politics.

uncertain ventures. So political action is far from easy; as Frazer put it (2009: 221), 'it is a human possibility, not the default setting'. In fact, it seems that most people are not up to it and indeed are excluded from it, which renders the equality criterion somewhat paradoxical.

Habermas, in turn, considers that social, economic or status differences must be held in suspense when entering the public sphere if people are to relate to one another as peers. However, it is illusory to think that the 'bracketing' of inequalities can result in effective equality (Fraser, 1992). Social inequalities might contaminate and pervert deliberation, even when nobody is formally excluded from participation. Furthermore, assuming equality among participants may conceal that they actually have unequal cultural endowments and speech capacities. As rhetorical skills are unevenly distributed and speech is not power-neutral, 'deliberation can function as a mask of domination' (Fraser, 1992: 119).

The very possibility of equality in existing societies is hence questioned, which raises doubts about the possibility of a public sphere in itself (Fraser, 1992).

But we may change perspective and see equality as the potentially equalising outcome of 'going public' rather than an *a priori* requirement. This is paradoxically suggested by Arendt herself for whom equality is not an original condition; human beings are unequal in resources, capacities and status and need to be 'equalised' (Arendt, 1958: 215). For Arendt, the most equalising institution is open access to the public sphere. Equality hence appears as an outcome of action and participation in the public sphere rather than a prerequisite to it, which sheds a new (normative) light on the equality issue. We argue below that in the sphere of work, 'equalisation' may be fostered by the implementation of participatory workplaces.

The adoption of this perspective implies loosening (as feminists do) the public/private boundaries and qualifying as public all arenas where social interactions give rise to experiences of (in)justice and democratic aspirations. Workplaces do satisfy such a requisite. As sustained by Mahajan (2009), in contemporary democratic societies, the public and the private cannot be understood in opposition to each other. Rather, 'the roots of the public are in the private; the public starts when we take others into account' (Kaminski, 1991: 265).

## **Normative Implications of the Recognition of the Public Character of Work**

### **Contesting and Redefining the Public-Private Boundaries**

Defining what is public is not only an analytical or theoretical matter but also a major political issue. In Benhabib's words (1992: 84), 'all struggles against oppression in the world begin by redefining what has previously been considered private, nonpublic, and nonpolitical issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power that need discursive legitimation'. Work began to become the focus of public attention, and a subject of public intervention, after the workers' struggles of the nineteenth century.

Of course, it is the private ownership of the means of production and the strict separation between the public and the private instituted by liberal thought that to a great extent legitimise the private character of work. Private property is at the centre of a rhetoric of privacy that has historically been used to restrict legitimate public contestation (Fraser, 1992: 131). Since the means of production are privately owned, workplaces are assumed to pertain to the private domain and this would protect them from public interference. For liberal thought, the private sphere is not to be assessed from the standpoint of equality and justice and must be placed beyond the scrutiny of the law and the state<sup>5</sup>.

But private ownership is not a legitimate reason for the non-recognition of the rights of workers as citizens. Once one accepts the principle, constitutive of democracies, of equal and fair treatment for all, no domain can be sheltered from the concerns of justice. Yet as Mahajan noted (2009: 139), while it is by now widely accepted that public concerns of justice and equality must apply to all forms of social interaction, there has been little effort to re-articulate the relationship between the private and the public. It is essential to democracy that the public-private boundaries are redrawn and reflection is given to how each sphere complements and interconnects with the other rather than

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5 Feminists have been the most active and effective in criticising the strict separation between the public and the private (see, among others, Benhabib, 1992; Mahajan, 2009). Their argument, according to which the distinction between the private and the public furthers the subordination of women to the family and protects patriarchy, can plainly be extended to workers and firms

considering them as separate and exclusive spheres.

Applied to the sphere of work, this means that the workers should have the right to reflexively question the issues affecting them and challenge what is or should be public and private. The European diversity in workers' collective rights shows that private ownership does not constitute a legitimate factor to prevent workers' participation at different decision-making levels. Competition imperatives, ownership prerogatives and managerial concerns have been advanced to exclude issues like work intensification, among others, from public and political debate. Yet the scope of the public debate must not be restricted by economic privacy. Whenever the consequences of private economic decisions affect public health or local communities, the issues must be opened to public scrutiny.

In fact, firms themselves face a permanent tension between conflicting sets of values, namely values belonging to the public *versus* private realms. Because cooperation is required for the good functioning of productive organisations, firms increasingly call for public values in their managerial discourses and practices to foster workers' involvement. For instance, some firms combine strict hierarchical structures with egalitarian interpersonal relations between workers and managers (Ferreras, 2007: 113-124). Others implement systems of employee voicing and build corporate cultures pervaded by values and principles characteristic of the public sphere. However, the latter stand in blatant contradiction with the values invoked to legitimate privacy and non-interference in management decisions. Normative elements imported from the public sphere - such as the right to have a voice - are hence brought into play, and perversely often prevent work from going public. Indeed, these discourses and practices are sometimes implemented to avoid unionisation and promote the workers' identification with the organisation rather than their emancipation. The result is organisational manipulation and the perpetuation of oppression in the name of overcoming it (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

What we have tried to emphasise is that the denial of the political and public dimension of work and workplaces may conceal the actual intertwining of the public and the private in productive organisations and undermine a sound analysis of both its destructive and constructive potential.

### **Recognizing the Public Dimension of Work - Towards Participatory Workplaces**

Work began to progressively enter the public sphere with the first labour laws at the end of the nineteenth century. In the constitution of the International Labour Organisation of 1944 (ILO, 1994) the aim is that ‘the representatives of workers and employers, enjoying equal status with those of governments, join with them in free discussion and democratic decision with a view to the promotion of the common welfare’. All constitutive features of Arendt and Habermas’ public sphere are present: work is recognized a matter of common interest, subject to public deliberation among participants presumed free and equal. The ILO’s constitution was inspired by the industrial democracy movement which advocates the establishment of institutional mechanisms for worker representation and it gave rise to a broad range of industrial relations systems in the western world<sup>6</sup>.

But in fact, it is not work itself but the conditions of employment (hiring and firing provisions, wages’ levels and evolution, working hours, representation rights) that form the core of what is negotiated in collective bargaining instances. The lack of distinction between *employment* and *work* has narrowed the scope of bargaining and has actually been an obstacle in rendering the conditions of work a public matter. Indeed, in most cases social dialogue ends up compensating workers on a monetary basis for the consequences of alienation at work, considered inevitable by most trade unions because of the rationalization of work occurred in the beginning of the 20th century. Managerial authority in the workplace has been considered legitimate and the transformation of work itself disappeared from political debate (Trentin, 2012). By contrast, what is argued here is that work must be placed back where it belongs, that is, at the core of politics. Like pay, safety at work or working hours, questions related to controlling work intensity, workloads, work tasks and procedures and work organisation should be

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6 It might be noted, however, that the legitimated rights of workers are increasingly being seen as an impediment to economic performance. Indeed, the opinion that labour regulations constrain flexibility and inflate labour costs is now widespread, as is the idea that strikes interfere with other citizens’ exercise of freedom. In other words, the historically established publicness of work is seriously threatened. Union power is declining and work-related decisions are increasingly subjugated to economic concerns

transformed from private business practices to matters of public concern.

The normative counterpart of our analytical argument, that work has a public dimension, is the application of the basic principle of the public sphere, namely the maximum possible participation of *all* those involved, to workplaces. And this entails both direct participation at workplace level and representative participation in high-level decision instances. Direct voicing and participatory schemes have been denounced as an 'integrationist' management agenda (Ramsay, 1983; Hyman and Mason, 1995) on the grounds that they may weaken unions, manipulate workers and break their solidarity. However, participatory workplaces and representative participation systems do not preclude each other. On the contrary, the latter is proven to be an important pre-condition for effective direct participation (Hyman and Mason, 1995).

It should be noted that, for direct participation not to be confused with management techniques aimed at organisational efficiency, the orthodox authority structure must be modified, which in turn implies a shift of power from management to labour. The question then arises of the limits, the pace and the actors involved in the democratisation of work. There are four strategies for easing political constraints so that reforms can be enacted (Roland, 2002: 32): a) compensating losers; b) making only partial reforms; c) creating institutions to make reforms credible; and d) waiting for the deterioration of the *status quo* to make reforms more attractive. In the sphere of work and in present times, only the second and third possibilities seem relevant.

In a first step, a solution for representative participation would be the progressive and timely generalisation of the German *Mitbestimmung* governance structure. Institutional changes in corporate governance law would be required in most countries to give workers an effective say in high-level management decisions, which entails workers' representatives holding around half of the seats on the boards of companies. One must nonetheless bear in mind that such changes are only successful when backed by cultural 'invisible institutions', namely organizational trust, legitimate management and recognised authority (Le Gall, 2011). The role and national culture of trade unions is in this respect a crucial building block.

Of course, co-determination does not make the conflicts of interests disappear; it only ensures that employers understand that it is in their interest to elicit the consent of workers. Co-determination is a

sophisticated and advanced way to manage consent and control of workers.

In a second step, we could imagine an 'economic bicameralism' within firms which would institute two representative bodies to govern firms in the interest of 'labour and capital investors' alike (Ferrerias, 2012). This system would allow the instrumental rationality of the capital investors - focused on economic efficiency - to be articulated with the political rationality of the labour investors - rooted in the standard of democratic justice. It would require a radical change in formal governance rules that would only take place under pressure from powerful political struggles against the degradation of work. This 'bicameralism' would embody the recognition of the existence of two constituent bodies driven by two incommensurable rationalities and the need for these bodies to govern together.

The democratisation of work requires both enhanced representative and direct participation, the aim of which is to give workers more control over what they do. Direct participation has taken many forms in the last decades and across countries and it seems that cultural specificities do shape the extent to which direct participation actually results in enhanced discretion at work and quality of working life (Godard, 2007). But experience shows that the most crucial factor for success is that the form of direct participation is not driven by top-down processes but emerges from the collective of work itself. A basic requirement is that workers understand how their tasks contribute functionally to joint production within and across units. Based on this knowledge, the workers could form 'work collectives', together with their representatives, to decide on the style of cooperation and coordination, on how binding decisions are to be made and on which responsibilities to assign to each worker (Le Gall, 2011). While this implies a weakening of the command and control structures, of reporting procedures and of the established division between conception and execution generally, it cannot entirely eliminate management authority. As noted, such managerial changes can only occur if complemented by the institutional changes in corporate governance and representative participation outlined below.

All these normative recommendations follow from our analytical argument but the beneficial effects of these changes in work organisation on life in society are worth mentioning. Namely, the organisation of work is recognised as having an educative function on civic spirit and

civic skills. The idea that social institutions have a psychological impact on men's character and that participatory institutions provide a major opportunity to acquire political abilities was developed, among others, by John Stuart Mill (1848/1969). Building on Mill's insights, Pateman (1970) argues that direct participation at work is an essential element of democracy to the extent that it contributes to developing the qualities needed for responsible public action - self-confidence, public-spiritedness, disposition to cooperate, which results in enhanced political participation. That is, the more control and influence individuals exercise over their work life, the better equipped and inclined they are to participate in community life. Empirical evidence has been collected that supports this thesis (Karasek and Theorell, 1990; Schur 2003; Godard 2007; Lopes *et al*, 2014) but the study of the articulation between life at work and life in society remains an under-researched topic.

Mill and Pateman's claims are plainly consistent with the argument developed in the present article. Indeed, if work has a political and public dimension, as argued here, it is but logical that workplaces are arenas where workers acquire and 'train' political skills and public spirit. Work plays an educative role in political and civic matters precisely because it has a political and public dimension.

For Pateman, in the absence of the vital training ground of low level participation, only few workers (certainly the best educated) would take up the opportunity offered in a democratised system. That is, participation is cumulative and self-sustaining in effect. Workplaces are essential elements of democracy because they may provide the opportunity to learn what is required for the advent of more advanced democratic societies. Participation at work, *i.e.* the democratisation of authority structures, is a prerequisite for a democratic polity.

Unfortunately, observed trends go precisely against the desired evolution. The strengthening of European social dialogue proposed by the European Union and its legislation on co-determination and works councils contrast with the recommendations to decentralise collective bargaining and the weakening of collective bargaining institutions and rights observed in the last years. Workers, even when consulted, report that their voice is not actually taken into account. Current management criteria lead to the interests of workers being disregarded in favour of those of shareholders, and to the detriment of the common good. Contrary to what would be desirable for democracy, firms are isolating

themselves from society in not attending the legitimate demand for participation at work. Such evolution causes the erosion of the 'elevated' traits of character needed for public action and may well be at the root of the present political desertion and erosion of civic solidarities. The fact is that nowadays work is one of the main socialising agents. As Marx argued, the social ties that people forge in the sphere of production have a major bearing on the way that people think and behave (Spencer, 2009). Likewise, for Cleghorn (2007: 307), 'society itself is produced and reproduced along the lines of relations found at work'. Based on the analysis of the relations between work and democracy, a 'policy of work', concentrated on the organisation of work and based on another vision of work, should be promoted by appropriate public intervention (Dejours, 2009).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The aim of this article has been to argue, *contra* mainstream economists and also *contra* Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas, that work goes beyond instrumentality and has a political and public dimension. Two main arguments ground our claim. Firstly, the conception of work must situate it in contemporary societies and consequently acknowledge that the aspiration to an egalitarian interaction regime permeates all work experience. Secondly, work involves cooperative endeavours which call on the moral ability of individuals, that is, their ability and will to go beyond instrumentality and commit to a shared goal. Behaving according to normative concerns and interacting with others with a view to 'acting in concert' constitute precisely the major features of the public sphere.

However, even though work as experienced by workers entails a public dimension, the domination and inequality that define private business workplaces rule them out of the public sphere as defined by Arendt and Habermas, and are progressively withdrawing work matters from the actual public sphere. Hence the need to contest the boundaries of the public and the private. The normative claims that derive from these analytical arguments point towards the democratisation of work in the form of both more participatory workplaces and strengthened representative participation. In fact, conceiving work as a depoliticised and private activity conceals the various conflictualities it conveys both for workers and firms and undermines a sound analysis of the

constructive potential of the public character of work.

The distinctive methodological feature of our approach is the focus on the intersubjective dimension. This dimension is downplayed by the individualist framework of mainstream economics. In contrast, taking interactions between individuals as the ultimate unit of analysis has long constituted the methodological hallmark of institutional economics. By conceiving work as an activity relating individuals with nature rather than with each other, mainstream economists withdraw it from the political domain. Concentrating on the interpersonal level of analysis, however, allows us to unveil the political dimension of work and relate it to the public sphere. It also shows the limits of the otherwise laudable contributions by Habermas and Arendt. Their theoretical constructions were aimed at denouncing the transformation of contemporary societies into consumer societies in which the public sphere is being taken over by economic concerns and instrumental reason. But in reducing work to necessity and instrumentality, they contributed to condemning the work concept to a subaltern theoretical status, thus involuntarily reinforcing the derogatory mainstream economics approach to work. We are attempting instead to re-dignify the concept of work, so central in the works of the nineteenth century classical economists, and retrieve its emancipatory potential. We thereby seek to show that the study of work warrants a central place and further consideration within modern heterodox economics.

To use Arendt's words against herself, the danger of the instrumental conception of work is that 'the trouble with modern theories is not that they are wrong but that they could become true [... ending ...] in the most sterile passivity history has ever known' (Arendt, 1958: 342). The denial of the political and public dimension of work might well be undermining democracy. It is necessary to make work public to legitimatise and stimulate action towards reversing current trends in the world of work.

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*The author wishes to thank the editor and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions.*

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